

EXT Matters

A Journal of Literature Theory and Culture

No. 16 [2026]

▪ CRIP AND QUEER INTIMACIES

WYDAWNICTWO UNIWERSYTETU ŁÓDZKIEGO



EXT Matters

A Journal of Literature Theory and Culture

No. 16 [2026]

Issue Editors:
Katarzyna Ojrzyńska
Kateřina Kolářová

Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

FOUNDER AND PAST EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
prof. Dorota Filipczak, University of Lodz (1963–2021)

*

Editor-In-Chief
dr Agata Handley, University of Lodz

Managing Editor
dr Tomasz Fisiak, University of Lodz

Content Editor
dr Krzysztof Majer, University of Lodz

Issue Editors
dr Katarzyna Ojrzyńska, University of Lodz
dr hab. Kateřina Kolářová, Charles University, Prague, Czechia

Editorial Assistant & Social Media
dr Piotr Płomiński, Academy of Humanities and Economics in Lodz

Topic Editors
prof. Niklas Salmose, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden
dr hab. Justyna Fruzińska, prof. UŁ, University of Lodz
dr hab. Małgorzata Hołda, prof. UŁ, University of Lodz

Language Editors
Alex Ramon, PhD, British Film Institute

Technical Editor
dr Karolina Goławska-Stachowiak, University of Lodz

Typesetting
mgr inż. Maciej Torz, Munda

Advisory Board
Laurie Anderson Sathe, St. Catherine University, St. Paul/Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA
Mieke Bal, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Kacper Bartczak, University of Lodz, Poland
Michael Davidson, University of California, San Diego, USA
Tomasz Dobrogoszcz, University of Lodz, Poland
Liam Gearon, University of Oxford, UK
Dorota Golańska, University of Lodz, Poland
Jerzy Jarniewicz, University of Lodz, Poland
Alison Jasper, University of Stirling, UK
Jan Jędrzejewski, University of Ulster, UK
Michał Lachman, University of Lodz, Poland
Rod Mengham, University of Cambridge, UK
Stephen Muecke, University of New South Wales, Australia
Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, India
Agnieszka Salska, University of Lodz, Poland
Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, University of Lausanne, Switzerland
Aritha van Herk, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada
Andrzej Wicher, University of Lodz, Poland

Cover And Layout Design
Agnieszka Jarzębowska

Issue Reviewers
For the list of issue reviewers, see *Text Matters* website:
https://czasopisma.uni.lodz.pl/textmatters/reviewers

© Copyright by Lodz University Press

ISSN 2083–2931; e-ISSN 2084-574X

Contents

CRIP AND QUEER INTIMACIES

Katarzyna Ojrzyńska (University of Lodz)
and Kateřina Kolářová (Charles University, Prague) **9**
Freaks for Intimacy. Bonds, Conflicts, and Desires That Make Us Thrive

edited by Kateřina Kolářová (Charles University, Prague)
and Katarzyna Ojrzyńska (University of Lodz) **15**
Intimacies between Crip and Queer World-Makings in the Arts and Academia: A Roundtable

Jen Ham (University of California Santa Cruz)
and Sabrina Ali Jamal-Eddine (University of South Carolina, University of Illinois Chicago) **63**
Cripping Intimacy: Interdependence and Promiscuous Care

Małgorzata Olsza (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań)
Queer and Crip Reproduction as/in Comics: Networks of Belonging in Aminder Dhaliwal's *Woman World* (2018) **74**

S. Proski (Independent Scholar)
Crip Intimacies in Concrete: Polish Post-War Mosaics and the Architecture of Touch **93**

Maricela DeMirjyn (Colorado State University)
Fluid Kinship: Queer, Crip, and More-than-Human Relations in Anna-Marie McLemore's *Lakelore* **111**

Gabriela Kozakiewicz (University of Warsaw)
Queer Vegetal Desires and Monstruous Flourishings: More-than-Human Intimacies in Speculative Plant Fiction **125**

Aleksandra Kamińska (Jagiellonian University, Kraków)
"May the earth heave up to bring us close": Landscaping Bodies in Petra Kuppers and Neil Marcus's *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story* 151

Katarzyna Ostalska (University of Lodz)
ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS: Crip-Queer Rural Intimacies with More-than-Human Worlds 169

Marina Taraskina (Södertörn University)
Tap for Intimacy Potentialities:
The (In)Visible Queer/Crip Worlds of *Romance Club* 196

Hui Peng (The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA)
Staging Social Intimacy by Hand Angel:
A Crip-Queer Infrastructure of Support in Taiwan 216

Laura Sanmiquel-Molinero (Milà i Fontanals Institution (IMF), Spanish National Research Council)
Queer-Cripping Spanish Disability and Feminist Activism:
A Critical Analysis of Andrea García-Santesmases's *El Cuerpo Deseado* 231

Em Gural (Independent Scholar)
Patterning Straightness: Unraveling Compulsory Hetero-Ableism in *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* 252

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska (Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń)
"Hashtag wheels on fire": Crip/Queer Sexualities and Access Intimacies in Michael Southan's *Kerbs* 270

Nora Steiner (University of Bern)
Intimacy as Crip-Queer Interdependence in *The Dan Daw Show* (2021) 289

Katharina Wiedlack (University of Vienna), Anna T. (Interdependent Scholar, Curator, and Artist), and Ema Benčíková (Academy of Fine Arts Vienna)
Dis_ability and Pleasure: Cripistemology, Intra-action, Intercorporeality 307

Denisa Tomková (Charles University, Prague)
Against Crip and Queer Loneliness: Reclaiming the Freak Show in Contemporary Polish Performance Art 322

Monika Kwaśniewska-Mikuła (Jagiellonian University, Kraków)
Crip-Queer Utopias in Theatre: Intimacy, Desire, and Disability **344**

GOTHIC/FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS

Sławomir Studniarz (University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn)
Blighted Children of Bleak Houses: Character and Spatiality in "A Rose for Emily," *Psycho*, and *Red Dragon* **363**

Agnieszka Łowczanin (University of Lodz)
"An elaborate skin show": Embodied Horrors in *The Substance* **385**

Anja Mrak (University of Ljubljana)
Magical Realism and a Feminist Narrative Technique: Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* **408**

Mai Phuc Thinh (Duy Tan University, Vietnam)
"I Wait by the Door Like I'm Just a Kid": Feminist Return in *Jane Eyre* and Taylor Swift's "tolerate it" **426**

Marta Goszczyńska (University of Lodz)
Of Birds, Men, and Carrier Bags: Sympoietic Relationality in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi* **441**

WORLD LITERATURES MATTER

Karolina Kmita (University of Silesia in Katowice)
Queer Relational Ontologies in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* **463**

Rajesh Bharvad (Shri Govind Guru University, Godhra, India)
Matter Matters: (Cloned) Humans as Infrastructure in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* **481**

Yassine Najjar (University of Gabes)
Enclosure and Urban Entropy in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* **502**

Syed Fuzail Kaunsar (B. S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai) and A. Sulochana (B. S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai)
Rational Egoism and Alienation: Reading Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* 522

Assyl Matayeva (L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana), Sagymbay Zhumagul (L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana), Akmaral Dalelbekkyzy (Farabi University, Almaty), Yrysgul Shakaman (Pavlodar Pedagogical University), and Seifitden Sutzhanov (Pavlodar Pedagogical University)
Contemporary Kazakh Literature in Comparative Studies: Current Trends 538

REVIEWS

Weronika Szwebs (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań)
A Review of Kasia Szymanska's *Translation Multiples. From Global Culture to Postcommunist Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2025) 563

Barbara Braid (University of Szczecin)
A Review of *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Andrew Smith (Edinburgh University Press, 2025) 568

A TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR DOROTA FILIPCZAK (1963-2021)

Cathal McCabe (Independent Scholar)
Scattered Nests of Tenderness: A Note on the Poetry of Dorota Filipczak 577

CRIP AND QUEER INTIMACIES

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.01

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Katarzyna Ojrzyńska
University of Lodz

Kateřina Kolářová
Charles University, Prague

Freaks for Intimacy. Bonds, Conflicts, and Desires That Make Us Thrive



Fig. 1. *Freaks for Intimacy*. Photo by Kateřina Kolářová and Alyson Patsavas. Prague, 2013. Courtesy of the authors.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 3 July 2026. Verified: 11 July 2026. Accepted: 13 July 2026.

We open the introduction to this special issue on queer and crip intimacies and cripqueer worldmaking with a photo of a crip double-headed monster—a shadow play of two people hugging, leaning against a walking stick. This spontaneous photo of two lovers was snapped in sunny summer Prague, in front of the DOX gallery, which in 2013 hosted the *Disabled by Normality* (*Postižení Normalitou*) show of local disability history and international takes on disability art. The exhibition coupled material traces of colonial practices, eugenic logic, and institutionalization collected from Czech museums with works by international disabled and queer artists that offered radical re-envisionings of humanity and rejected the ways in which (racialized, gendered, sexed, trans*ed, classed) disability had been used to legitimize violent acts of dehumanization, maiming, and killing. The shadow of a loving hug thus echoes the queercrip knowledge that transpired from that confrontation carried out in the gallery space: embracing, hugging, and desiring beyond the normate give life; monstrosity and freakishness open the door to imagining, loving, desiring, and making the world otherwise.

When we, Katarzyna and Kateřina, talked about how to preface this extensive collection of work exploring cripqueer intimacies, the joyousness, conflicts, desire, hard work, bliss, and impossibility, Kateřina recalled that old picture she and her partner took in Prague. It shows a reflection that becomes something else, superimposed over the hot pavement, its cracks calling up the many overlaid, palimpsestic scars of hurt, pain, and trauma that the bodies held but that only came out and could be lived through in the figure of the freak—an embodiment that is more than one and less than two, an embodiment of interdependence that is built on the recognition of different knowledges and politics of disability, queerness, and situatedness. As the monstrous figure lives on the pavement whose cracks host plants that manage to survive in the inhospitable asphalt- and concrete-scapes, the image holds another layer of intimacies: the interconnectedness and interdependence of the human embodiments with the more-than-human ecologies, entangled and mutually constituted.

As the editors of the issue, we (Kateřina and Katarzyna) share a commitment to transnational disability studies and to offering a space for exchange among various streams of disability studies—with different questions, different emphases, different vocabularies, and different imaginaries and utopias. We have both translated canonical disability studies texts into our respective national languages and attempted to contribute to the scholarly, artistic, and activist exchanges. Here we give space to others who have been part of this expansive more-than-academic journey with us. We proposed the topic of crip and queer intimacies to *Text*

Matters in response to pressing global issues—ongoing military conflicts, humanitarian crises, right-wing populism, neoliberal individualism, and climate destruction. In these challenging times, we believe it is essential to forge alliances, interdependencies, (non-: bio, hetero, cis, white and nationalist, anthropocentric) kinships, and (alter)intimacies. Like many scholars in disability, queer, feminist, and posthuman studies, we see and feel an urgent need to reconnect with the world and ourselves through responseable and care-ful bonds that foster pleasure and intimacy. Hence, by focusing on the subversive and creative energies of queercrip intimacies and their aesthetic and political dimensions, we called for works that would explore a wide range of affects, sensations, pleasures, and vulnerabilities, and the ways of embodying, knowing, and understanding that they produce.

We dedicate this issue to Alice Wong; her note that "[i]ntimacy is more than sex and romantic love. Intimacy is an ever-expanding universe composed of a myriad of heavenly bodies. Intimacy is about relationships within a person's self, with others, with communities, with nature and beyond" (xviii) echoes through many of the articles assembled in this issue. *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, in which Wong created a space where contributors offer insights into forty ways of looking at intimacy, was one of our inspirations. Collaborating with *Text Matters*, we hoped to translate these explorations of cripqueer intimacies into broader transnational contexts. We hoped to draw explorations of intimacy that grows sideways and blooms with stutter in various kinds of relationships and connections based on love, sex, desire, friendship, kinship, partnership, community, and collegiality—but that also can and need to emerge from and amidst conflicts and solidarity, often in spite of war, precarity, dispossession, and other debilitating conditions.

Crip, as used in the title of the issue, refers to the reclaiming of the slur by members of disability/disabled communities as an act of pride, as well as opening up new meanings beyond articulation in the present moment, beyond identity. In this sense, the word shares the history of the term queer and the aspirations of critical queerness. Carrie Sandahl also notes that what both crip and queer, being "fluid and ever-changing, claimed by those whom [they] did not originally define" (27), have in common is a "radical stance toward concepts of normalcy; both argue adamantly against the compulsion to observe norms of all kinds (corporeal, mental, sexual, social, cultural, subcultural, etc.)" (26). This definition of queerness and cripness encourages thinking broadly about different intersections, coalitions, as well as tensions and frictions between various identities, positionalities, ways of being, and diverse political, geographical, and cultural contexts.

We wish to highlight that conflicts play an essential role in building queercrip intimacies. Some such tensions have emerged around crip self-identification, since the term carries a painful history of discrimination and abuse (see, e.g., Kuppers and Marcus 107–12). Most recently, those tensions have also been evident in Eastern European contexts, where the English word, even when translated, has sometimes faced distrust and resistance, as it does not fully capture the complexities and ambiguities of local disability experiences (see, e.g., Żeglicka) and raises questions about Western cultural imperialism. In some instances, it has been appropriated and rewritten so that it resists easy identification within the Anglophone perspective (e.g., in the Czech versions of *kvír* and *krip* or the Polish *kalekowanie*), imbuing the terms with different epistemological histories and archives. However, we strongly believe that the ruptures and dissonances within and between crip and queer, as well as their convergences and alliances, have transformative potential that can help reimagine and remake the world. Thus, we hope that this issue of *Text Matters* will help to keep these often heated and difficult international, intercultural, intersectional, and interspecies multilogues going.

The issue opens with a non-normative cripqueer academic article. It has the form of a roundtable to which we invited scholars, activists, and artists from the so-called Western and Eastern countries to share their perspectives on the basic concepts and ideas that inform this issue. The roundtable is followed by a piece of life-writing where two contributors generously share their racialized and ethnicized experiences of their crip-queer intimacy. In this way, we want to acknowledge the important role that this genre and, more broadly, queercripistemologies, i.e. situated knowledges coming from first-hand experiences of disability and queerness (Johnson and McRuer), have been playing in academia by challenging and subverting fixed models and definitions as well as helping formulate new research questions. The next six articles examine different forms of not only interhuman cripqueer intimacies but also intimate companionship with the more-than-human: comic books, mosaics, the more-than-human environments—both already materialized and imagined. This is followed by reflections on how queercrip intimacies have been serving as interventions into virtual, social, activist, and academic landscapes in Russia, Taiwan, and Spain. The final selection of texts looks at drama, theatre, performance, and film as spaces of forging, (re-)imagining, and expressing cripqueer intimacies across various periods and regions, including contemporary and Elizabethan Britain, Western Europe (Germany and Spain), and Poland, closing with a reflection on how contemporary cripqueer artivism may open new pathways toward queercrip futures.

We are grateful to all who have helped us create this issue, including our human and more-than-human partners and companions. We appreciate the reviewers' time and valuable feedback, as well as the editorial team's caring support. Most importantly, we thank the contributors for their generous engagement with our and the reviewers' remarks and suggestions, and for the depth and rigor of their analyses and arguments. We have learnt a lot from you! Instead of a conclusion to this introduction, we shout out for more explorations of cripqueer intimacies—and/or critiques of the limits of such framing—especially those that reflect on knowledges, experiences, and utopian imaginaries from spaces we could not reach.

Works Cited

Johnson, Merri Lisa, and Robert McRuer. "Cripistemologies. Introduction." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2014, pp. 127–47. https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.12

Kuppers, Petra, and Neil Marcus. *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story*. Homofactus, 2008.

Sandahl, Carrie. "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2003, pp. 25–56. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9-1-2-25

Wong, Alice. Introduction. *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2024, pp. xv–xx.

Żeglicka, Katarzyna. "Kto mi daje prawo do bycia crip." *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, no. 178, 2023, https://didaskalia.pl/pl/artykul/kto-mi-daje-prawo-do-bycia-crip, accessed 1 June 2026.

Katarzyna Ojrzyńska is Assistant Professor at the Department of English Studies in Drama, Theatre, and Film (Institute of English Studies, University of Lodz, Poland). Her research interests mostly oscillate around cultural disability studies. She collaborates with the Theatre 21 Foundation and Warsaw's Downtown Centre of Inclusive Art. She translated Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Staring: How We Look*, Tobin Siebers's *Disability Aesthetics*, and Eli Clare's *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* into Polish, and co-edited (together with Maciej Wieczorek) a collection of essays entitled *Disability and Dissensus: Strategies of Disability Representation and Inclusion in Contemporary Culture* (Brill, 2020).
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4954-8478
katarzyna.ojrzynska@uni.lodz.pl

Kateřina Kolářová is Associate Professor at the Gender Studies Programme, Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, Prague. Her monograph *Rehabilitative Postsocialism: Disability, Sex, and Race* (Michigan University Press, 2025) presents intersectional postsocialism as an analytic that can and should be brought to bear on understanding cultural politics, economic formations, and state politics through the present day. She is also working on a long-term research project into HIV/AIDS in the Czech Republic. She is the co-editor of *Re/imaginations of Disability in State Socialism: Visions, Promises, Frustrations* (Campus Verlag/Chicago University Press, 2021) and an editor of *Otherness-Disability-Criticism* (In Czech, 2012). Her current research brings intersections of disability, sexuality, race, and postsocialism into environmental studies, explorations of the bio-social dimensions of metabolism, the relationship between human and non-human lives, and how we coexist with microorganisms, toxic chemicals, and other "unclean" elements/entities. She regularly collaborates with artists and galleries, and engages in other community-based projects.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9864-2356
katerina.kolarova@fhs.cuni.cz

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.02

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

edited by

Kateřina Kolářová

Charles University, Prague

Katarzyna Ojrzyńska

University of Lodz

Intimacies between Crip and Queer World-Makings in the Arts and Academia: A Roundtable

Abstract

This roundtable brings together scholars, activists, and artists to explore how crip and queer theories, and activist and artistic practices interweave, intersect, and interact in probing, negotiating, expanding, and highlighting limits of how we think, desire, and embrace intimacies. We come together in three posts to—first—situate the intersections of crip and queer in different global locations and contexts; second, to interrogate the ableist, familial, and ideological underpinnings of intimacies and romanticization that conceal underlying hierarchies and conflicts, and—finally—to expand the imaginaries of intimacies beyond the human.

Keywords: cripqueer, d/Deaf, intellectual disability, suicidism, access intimacy, personal assistance, transness, Mad, neurodivergence, more-than-human.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: See details in Acknowledgments. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 26 Mar. 2026. Verified: 7 Aug. 2026. Accepted: 10 Aug. 2026.

We started imagining this roundtable already when writing the call for papers; we envisioned creating a space for a longer multilogue that would host different positionalities, experiences, and ways of imagining, living, and making crip and queer intimacies in various locations and across different spaces and times. The intersection of queer and crip theorizing, and cripqueer cultural and advocacy work has already been explored in the anglophone world. More recently, increased attention has been paid to what this critical juncture could bring about and how it could manifest in other global/transnational locations. What troubles us is how critical work, developed within specific historical and cultural contexts—mainly in North America—is circulated globally. And, due to global power imbalances that significantly affect epistemologies and knowledge production, this circulation causes it to lose some of its original concreteness and become reinscribed within the East/West, South/North, center/(semi)periphery dominance play.

We (Katarzyna and Kateřina), the editors, have both engaged in transnationalizing disability studies and have observed a persistent trend that has upheld anglophone, primarily US-based voices, and, thus, also the very specific articulations of crip theorizing, thinking about (and forging) political alliances and advocacy work, as well as strategies of identity building, resistance, and world-making. As much as we need to draw on each other and as helpful as the (North-American/Western) articulations of crip theory are, we need other voices to be heard and engaged in ongoing conversations; let us dream—with equal strength and resonance. Thus, we imagined this roundtable as a form of doing cripqueer intimacy by sharing experiences and ideas drawn from various intellectual, creative, and political labor, as well as experiences coming from across the East/West divide (we use this as a placeholder, fully aware of its insufficiency to speak to all global injustices and colonial/imperial dynamics at play). We believe that the knowledge articulated from specific historically and culturally situated places will contribute to the critical imaginaries of cripqueer world-making and intimacy work against the global divides.

The roundtable we offer here is still incomplete and unrepresentative; some invited contributors could not participate in all three prompts due to various health crip issues, or, as Merri Lisa Johnson says, "it's always something" (qtd. in Johnson and McRuer 127): some could not contribute at all because they had to give preference to gainful engagement; some we could not reach despite our multiple attempts and our desire to include their voices, and some are disillusioned with the current developments in disability studies and have decided to invest their energies elsewhere. Thus, the silences here carry weight and significance, too; some will reveal our editorial omissions and shortcomings; other silences will speak to barriers

faced by non-white disabled people living in Central and Eastern Europe in accessing academic work, as well as to disability identity, and, thus, to the limits of identity-driven projects, and will also illustrate the difficulties of sustaining radical activist collectives over longer periods.

Despite these silences, which are always part of cripqueer horizons, our collaborators offer an incredible breadth of experience; they speak from arts and cultural work; some are (also) academics, and many combine academic work with activism or public outreach. Most of us speak from parts of the world "known" as Eastern Europe, and our experiences have often been shaped by the aggressive transition to neoliberal capitalism, which, together with the earlier decades of state socialism, heavily influenced the decades that followed; others speak from diverse Western perspectives, and their work resonates in very important ways. The roundtable is organized around prompts that we—Kateřina and Katarzyna—offered as conversation starters. Often, they were not much more than that, serving as openers that the authors reimagined and rephrased in their responses, which determined the multilogue dynamic of the roundtable. After we collected all the responses, the authors had a chance to add to their responses in reaction to the conversation flow.

Let us briefly introduce our contributors:

Hanna Zaremba-Kosovych is a Ukrainian sociologist and disability scholar whose recent academic work has centered on people with disabilities in Ukraine, particularly after the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion;

Natalia Pamuła is a feminist and disability scholar based in Warsaw, Poland. She focuses on the intersections of disability with sex, gender, and nationality under state socialism and in post-socialism;

Filip Pawlak is a Polish queer disabled performance artist whose work explores bodily difference, social prejudice, and artists' precarity on stage and beyond;

Alexandre Baril is a disability scholar based in Ottawa, Canada. He engages with the intersection of gender, queer, trans, and disability/crip/Mad studies;

Justyna Lipko-Konieczna is active in Theatre 21, Poland's first award-winning professional theatre for actors with intellectual disability, and in the Theatre 21 Foundation;

Agnieszka Kołodziejczak is a d/Deaf scholar specializing in d/Deaf art and one of the curators of the groundbreaking 2022 exhibition *Głusza/Deafland* at the Silesian Museum in Katowice, Poland;

Ewelina Jarosz is a scholar and artivist based in Poland, a member of the hydrosexual duo cyber_nymphs, and a keen promoter of the blue humanities;

Magda Szarota is a disability and human rights activist (a board member of Humanity in Action Poland), scholar, and photographer based in the UK and Poland;

Daniela Komanická is a Slovak PhD student and long-term activist based in Prague, Czech Republic, advocating for the rights of extensively physically disadvantaged/disabled people and other discriminated minorities;

Eli Clare is a US-based disability justice and trans liberation grassroots thinker, activist, and storyteller;

Perel is a queer, disabled interdisciplinary artist whose work centers on these identities and ways of being in the world. Originally from the US, they have recently been dividing their time between Berlin, Germany, and New York.

PROMPT 1: QUEERING THE CRIP, CRIPPING THE QUEER: QUIP POTENTIALITIES AND DISCONTENTS

In recent decades, the connection between queerness and cripness has been explored by a number of scholars. Most notably, the link between "the system of compulsory able-bodiedness, which in a sense produces disability," and "the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness" (McRuer, *Crip Theory* 2) provided the foundation for Robert McRuer's formulation of crip theory, which hopefully "will exacerbate, in more productive ways, the crisis of authority that currently besets heterosexual/able-bodied norms" ("Compulsory Ablebodiedness" 375). Key to this approach are resistance, subversion, and dissent. In her seminal article, Carrie Sandahl mentions the shared history of oppression, medical pathologization, demonization in religious discourse, stereotypical representations, social discrimination, and alienation of queer people and people with disabilities. At the same time, she emphasizes that crip and queer people have created "their own enclaves and vibrant subcultural practices," which challenge hegemonic normativity (26).

These intersections and convergences between queer and crip have also been addressed by many other scholars (see e.g., Kafer, *Feminist*; Puar; Chen et al.; Kolářová; Pamuła, Król, and Wołowicz), as well as artists and artivists. In the first prompt, along with such compounds as queercrip, cripqueer, crip-queer, queer-crip, queer/crip, crip/queer, disabled-queer, queer-disabled, which we see as expressions of diverse individual and local identities, we evoke the witty, playfully ambiguous blending of the words queer and crip—*quip*. It is a neologism which was coined by Quiplash, a Sheffield-based queer-crip

couple Amelia and Al Lander-Cavallo. Some of their work was displayed at the 2022–23 exhibition (curated by Kate Brehme, Birgit Bosold, and Kenny Fries) at the Schwules Museum in Berlin, tellingly entitled *Queering the Crip, Cripping the Queer*. Advertised as "the first international exhibit exploring the multiple historical, cultural, and political intersections of queerness and disability," it brought together both archival and contemporary works of crip, queer, and cripqueer artists and artivists, forging a pathway toward future alliances and kinships—a *quip* positionality.

Against this backdrop, we would like to ask you about productive *quip* and other intersections of queer and crip in your life and work (as scholars, artists, activists, and curators). We playfully offer *quip* to underscore how, through the intersection of queer and crip, new materialities, new positions, and new perspectives (might) arise. What new potentialities and opportunities emerge from the convergence of these two perspectives—and what different forms, voices, and shapes do these intersections take at various historical, geopolitical locations, cultural backgrounds, disciplinary orientations, lived experiences, and when approached from other different vantage points? At the same time, such a merging may involve certain challenges, tensions, points of friction, or even specific forms of ignorance. Thus, we would like you to address potential traps and complications that may arise from blending queer and crip perspectives. We invite all of you to complicate the ways in which queer/crip theories and positions are translated/translatable outside of Western/Northern Anglophone contexts.

HANNA ZAREMBA-KOSOVYCH: In 2023, while working on the book *History Is Not Without Us: The Formation of the Movement for the Rights of People with Disabilities in Ukraine*, my colleagues and I set out to examine how inclusive the disability rights movement in Ukraine truly is. In the course of this work, I came across a grassroots initiative created by queer people with disabilities, Queer&Disabled. It was started by Nina Kupenda, Oleksandr Kvak, and Vitalina Koval, who invited others to form a collective and join Pride in Kyiv. More than fifteen people marched under the Queer&Disabled banner for the first time ever. Building such a community, however, proved difficult because many queer people with disabilities have not come out publicly. This is especially true for those who rely on daily support from caregivers: the risk of rejection, neglect, or withdrawal of essential assistance makes the disclosure of their sexuality or gender identity fraught with danger.

Furthermore, the broader queer community struggled with recognizing its own diversity. A telling example occurred on 23 June 2019, during the Equality March in Kyiv (Fig. 1). Members of Queer&Disabled prepared a banner that read "LGBT—people with disabilities" (ЛГБТ—люди з

інвалідністю) (Sachuk, Tekuchova, and Zaremba-Kosovych 250). Other march participants approached them with indignation and accused them of provocation. Supposedly, their banner reinforced the long-standing stigma that pathologizes queerness by conflating disability with "abnormality." Under pressure, the wording on the banner was changed to: "LGBT+ people with disabilities" (ЛГБТ + люди з інвалідністю).

This tension is one of the consequences of the anti-homosexual and disability policies under the USSR, as well as of the trajectories of the LGBTQ movement in postsocialist Ukraine. Emerging initially as a predominantly gay movement (Martsenyuk 135), it carried with it elements of lookism and rejection of non-normative bodies. Disability, in turn, remained overshadowed by entrenched stereotypes; it was associated with bleakness, poverty, sadness, and despair—images that seemed incompatible with the aesthetics and vitality often linked to queerness.



Fig. 1. The Queer&Disabled column at the Kyiv Pride parade, 23 June 2019. The banner in Ukrainian reads: "We also love, but not freely. I want to love freely." Photo by Dmytro Bieliavin. Courtesy of Dmytro Bieliavin.

The Russian-Ukrainian war further complicated and reshaped these dynamics. When the military conflict started in 2014, and then intensified

after the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, segments of the queer community joined the security and defense forces. The Ukrainian LGBT+ Military and Veterans for Equal Rights (NGO) was established, bringing together LGBT+ veterans, some of whom live with disabilities acquired in combat. This veteran community is markedly heterogeneous, and far more inclusive than the earlier groups.

NATALIA PAMUŁA: Engaging with crip in my work has been difficult. What I mean is that I have not encountered many articulations or performances of crip sensibility or aesthetics on the ground in Poland. Perhaps, crip means something else here and should be redefined, but this work has yet to be undertaken. More generally, academia and the disabled people's movement, like every social movement, operate on different timelines and schedules. Academia, due to its lengthy production process, does not always catch up with developments on the ground as they unfold. And, conversely, academia articulates and speculates horizons which have not yet been imagined on the ground. Thus, perhaps, Polish academia has not yet recognized the local iterations and evolutions of crip or quip and has not come up with frameworks and vocabularies that would adequately name the cripness/quipness of disability lived experience in Poland.

On a different note, I wonder to what extent crip theory, as a specific Anglophone approach and methodology, functions as a tool of the imperial knowledge-production process, even if it is invested in exploring what is marginal. From this perspective, thinking of and using crip or quip does not necessarily expand our horizon and does not point to new potentialities and positions, but might limit them. At the same time, the readiness of, and the availability of, a crip theory toolbox make it almost impossible not to use it. Employing tools which come with a rich archive and have been successfully deployed in other locations is economically justifiable.

For me, the question is what purpose research and knowledge on disability, crip, and quip serve. Crip is, to a great extent, still unknown in Polish academia and within disability rights movements. Does it make sense to translate it or offer an adapted translation? Yes, it does, but the thing is that translation, while opening new avenues of exploration, might stall others. In other words, translation—literal or figurative—might be both enabling and restricting. What I sometimes see is an (almost direct) application of Anglophone concepts and theories to the Polish context. Polish disability culture risks becoming a testing ground for the alleged transnational character or, simply, universality. But while the understanding of Polish culture and context changes when confronted by, for example, crip theory, crip theory, in reverse, could also be productively altered by Eastern European specificity.

FILIP PAWLAK: Queer and crip are an integral part of my everyday experience—I embrace both identities and groups as my own. Thus, I try to combine them in my artistic practice. However, they remain distant from each other, rather than united (as in quip). Both serve as points of reference, but they refer to slightly different areas. For me, queer is a social experience—a feeling that I will find a home everywhere, parties until dawn, and a carefree summer fling. I use crip more as a tool for deconstructing the world, a scalpel or magnifying glass that allows a closer look at the *origin of things*. Crip helps me question things, strip them of neutrality, and queer offers the tools and support needed to shout all this out to the world.

Queer is also like an older brother of crip, but although they share common ancestors, they are more like step-siblings. Sometimes queers look down on the crip community and focus on defending their own rights (which, we know, they had to fight hard to earn). They try to help, yet only by sharing kind words and books about queer history.

The crip I feel within myself transcends the physical dimension; it is a deeply emotional and intellectual experience which steers clear of the body around whose image it still circulates. On the other hand, queer cannot completely detach itself from the body—it excites, warms, and tempts with what often obscures questions about the validity of its premises.

PEREL: In 2022, I was fortunate to participate in the *Queering the Crip, Cripping the Queer* exhibition at the Schwules Museum Berlin with video excerpts from two performances, and with a live performance, *Desire Lines and Death Loops*. It was a thrill to be in a community with an interconnected international array of queer and crip artists. The video excerpts were from very different performances, *Pain Threshold* and *Life (Un)Worthy of Life: A Queer Dis/Crip Talkshow*, both created in 2019. It is hard for me to believe I produced two full-length performances within that one year and that they show such different sides of disabled and queer artistry. Clearly, I have been on a journey through crip and queer identities; the journey makes me want to pull apart the complexity of care, violence, access, and desire. In *Pain Threshold*, I invite a volunteer from the audience to follow my direction and massage the scar on my hip while I interview them about care. I proceed by asking the audience about their relationships to consent, and, after that, I reveal a personal story of survival. *Life (Un)Worthy of Life: A Queer Dis/Crip Talkshow* is more like a stand-up routine where I tell stories of antisemitism from my childhood and also the many narratives of Holocaust history that were part of my upbringing. I juxtapose these stories to the silence about disability history

during WWII and to the difficulties for research into it. In this piece, I ask the audience questions about social cohesion, silence, and belonging. We unpack instances of shame and the small and large ways we can betray ourselves in order to belong.

Through my research, I have found that what is incredible about living in a queer crip body is the history of other bodies that exist within us simultaneously. We carry often unacknowledged histories in the things about us that seem anomalous to normative society. With my limp, I carry generations of limping people, my scars echoing back through to theirs, or, in my experience of body dysmorphia; I shape-shift and rub up against the phantoms of previous generations who could never adhere to gendered confines. So, the pain that I carry, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, is actually the connection to my queer crip ancestors. In this sense, the pain is sacred, carries messages, holds wisdom, inhabits my body as a form of protest against normative cohesion. There is a moment from my performance, *Desire Lines and Death Loops*, where I rest my crotch on the handle of my cane (a move I call "tripoding"), and describe waiting for the bus home, standing this way with my hands full of grocery bags. People stare, I don't mind. But if I was doing the same thing in Germany in 1939, I might be swiped off the street for deviant behavior and brought to an Aktion T4 site. I say, "I'm just an average crip doing average crip things," but, of course, these things that are so mundane to me are the most threatening to a normative person's sense of control and power.

I have learned that it is fruitful to lead with the wound; the wound is the mirror, the portal, and it carries a force far greater than perceived strength, efficiency, and dominance.

ALEXANDRE BARIL: Theorizing the intersections of disability/madness and queerness/transness throughout the past decades has deeply impacted younger scholars/activists. When I started doing this work 15 years ago, using the case study of transabled people[1] to demonstrate how sex/gender transitions necessarily impact/involve abilities and how (dis)ability transitions are always already gendered and sexually marked, few scholars were conceptualizing the interlocking dimensions of sex/gender/(dis)ability. As more scholars/activists (some of whom are mentioned in the prompt) have made such links, we see that it is not only generative to theorize these intersections, but it is also impossible to conceptualize them in silos. When we look at statistics about the number of disabled/Mad/

[1] The term refers to individuals who were born without a physical impairment, but feel an intense desire to acquire one. In other words, they experience a dysphoric mismatch between their mental body image and their physical body [editors' note].

neurodivergent/autistic people identifying as trans, nonbinary, or queer, as well as the number of trans, nonbinary, or queer people who self-identify as disabled/Mad/neurodivergent/autistic, we cannot shy away from quipping our research. *Quipping is not a theoretical luxury mobilized by a few niche scholars; it is a necessity founded in empirical reality*. The fact that so many of us experience disability/madness and queerness/transness simultaneously, alongside the compounded effects of cisheterosexism and ableism/sanism, forces us to rethink not only our fundamental theoretical presumptions, but also the way we approach research and knowledge dissemination. As just one example, the strict word count imposed by journals is not conducive to the development of complex and nuanced discussions about intersecting identity categories and oppressions.[2] Queer and crip perspectives can help us reconceptualize the "objects" of our research projects, and their accompanying instruments, tools, and processes.

The disruptive and productive aspects of quipping can also be observed in language. As a French Canadian, I have theorized how anglonormativity[3] is intertwined with ableism/sanism and cisheteronormativity, and how it shapes differently the lives of queer/trans and disabled/Mad people for whom English is not their first language. Interestingly, in the case of the French language, concepts such as queer, crip, queering, or cripping have been kept in their original English, and have been integrated into the French language through my work and that of others who brought queer and crip perspectives into French communities. Twenty years ago, when publishing on queer issues in French, I was asked to italicize queer to signify its foreign origin; it has now become common to use queer without italics. The same is true for crip; while translations have been suggested for concepts such as disability, madness, and bodymind, none have been proposed for crip and cripping. Queer and crip are among the few words (*if not the only words*) that remain untranslated in my work and the work of others in French. Instead of seeing this vestige of English words in French texts as a form of anglonormativity and English dominance (which I strongly critique in my work), I like to believe that it speaks less about

[2] As editors of this roundtable, we admit that the word limit we set for our contributors was very modest (300 words per prompt). At the same time, despite our best efforts, the roundtable significantly exceeded the length of a regular article. Being aware of the financial challenges faced by many university-funded journals, we are, thus, grateful to the journal's editors for granting us the space to include it in this issue in its present form [editors' note].

[3] For Baril, the term, "inspired by . . . 'heteronormativity,' 'homonormativity,' and 'cisnormativity,' is meant to signify that English and first-language English speakers represent the norm against which non-Anglophones are judged and discriminated" ("Doctor" 56, fn. 3) [editors' note].

the hegemony of English or the untranslatability of those terms, and more about the radical anti-assimilationist and disruptive nature of those concepts for our epistemological, methodological, theoretical, but also linguistic paradigms, in the spirit of the "mestiza consciousness" developed by Gloria E. Anzaldúa (80).

JUSTYNA LIPKO-KONIECZNA: I've been working in and with Theatre 21, the first Polish professional theatre company of actors with intellectual disability, since 2012. In 2023, I became the programme director. For many years, Theatre 21 did not have a permanent home in Warsaw. Finally, in 2022, we opened the Centre for Inclusive Arts: Theatre 21, a social and cultural institution whose core mission is to drive social change in how people with disabilities are perceived and represented. Our work focuses on the professionalization of artists with disabilities. Our practice is long-term and deeply rooted in the belief that theatre and the performing arts, understood as public spaces, are uniquely suited to expressing identity, fostering representation, and enabling changes, interventions, and redefinitions. Through our work, we challenge established perceptions of minority groups and confront entrenched stereotypes surrounding health, disability, and gender.

The moment Theatre 21 began co-producing performances with public theatres and collaborating with guest artists, the issues of representation and community on stage took on new significance. When a shared theatrical body is created not only by people with different impairments—those with physical disabilities, learning difficulties, people on the autism spectrum, with Down syndrome, and invisible disabilities—but also individuals of varied, sometimes multiple, identities, including queer and d/Deaf artists, as well as non-disabled performers, the stage becomes a living embodiment of the social fabric we all inhabit. At the same time, our performances present—often in striking, tangible ways—what conservative norms might label as "non-normative" or unsettling. For the duration of each performance, the stage becomes a safe place to reveal this inter-human, non-normative mosaic, which remains largely absent from Polish public space. And it also exposes the fragile, yet subversive, nature of the community that emerges on and beyond the stage—a community based on tenderness, attention to each other's needs, and mutual care. We cherish the fact that we have formed a diverse human ensemble whose members support one another and respect each other's boundaries and needs—including the right to self-representation. Our work quips the Polish cultural landscape by exploring non-normative intimacies, desires, and—more generally—ways of being in the world, which we see as essential in the process of developing new theatre aesthetics and creating more habitable worlds that welcome diversity.

AGNIESZKA KOŁODZIEJCZAK: The ironic and subversive cripping of the word "deaf" or "Deaf" seems to be possible for me as a deaf artist and the curator of the 2022 exhibition *Głusza/Deafland* for the Silesian Museum in Katowice, Poland. To me, cripping the word "deaf" means speaking loudly and proudly: "I am d/Deaf." For many Polish hearing people, the word "deaf"/"Deaf" generally signifies intellectual disability.

The Polish d/Deaf community is very diverse and differs across regions of Poland. The largest group of self-identified d/Deaf people lives and works in Warsaw. For most of them, the Polish disability rights movement does *not* represent or fully embrace deafness and d/Deaf activism as it emerged in Poland in the early 21st century. It gave rise to, for instance, deaf community online forums and a series of conferences titled *Głusi Mają Głos* [*The Deaf Have a Voice*], organized in Warsaw between 2008 and 2016, which inspired the movement to advocate for sign language rights. Polish audism is strongly connected with the lack of accessibility for d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, the lack of respect for Deaf culture and Polish Sign Language. There are also many d/Deaf people who see themselves as individuals with a hearing disability and/or users of Polish Sign Language rather than members of a distinct cultural group.

In the Deaf art movement, it seems very important to work towards collective resistance (cf. McRuer, *Crip Times* 98). Nirmala Erevelles locates such resistance "[a]t the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability" (120). She also argues that "collective resistance is more fruitful than [its] individualized forms" (Erevelles ibid.; McRuer, *Crip Times* 98). Such collective resistance is a form of active opposition against social, cultural, and linguistic colonization. This active resistance can be found in the work of the Group of Deaf Artists in Poland who collaboratively created the first Polish encyclopedia of art in the Polish Sign Language, along with a lexicon of art. The Group of Deaf Artists increase the visibility of d/Deaf arts by exhibiting their own works in museums and galleries. Another example of such collective resistance can be found in the *Głusza/Deafland* exhibition; it is artistic opposition to discrimination, to treating deaf people as incomplete and to cultural disregard for sign language which is often seen as "strange gestures" rather than an autonomous sign system. Deaf Artists show that being d/Deaf does not mean failure; it does not necessitate assimilation.

In her article, Zofia Nierodzińska mentioned that *Głusza/Deafland* goes decisively and boldly beyond the realm of aesthetics and has an activist, even political, character. Indeed, the intended curatorial goal was to raise visibility of the d/Deaf community and increase public awareness of audism and its violent effects, as well as the needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

As for the neologism "quip," I have reservations. With regard to the art of d/Deaf people in Poland, quipping may be a strategy for the future. I believe that the most important thing for the Polish d/Deaf artists' community now is freedom of d/Deaf expression and having their works recognized as art in its own right. This year, the Deaf artist Daniel Kotowski, who also identifies as gay and sometimes incorporates queer elements into his performances, became a rising star in contemporary Polish art after participating in a project shown at Biennale Venezia 2026. However, in general, there is still a lot of discrimination against d/Deaf artists in Poland. Many contests, grants, and open calls are not fully accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing artists—to respond to them, one needs to be proficient in written Polish and experienced in writing project applications. Polish Sign Language is not recognized as an official language.

To challenge the negative perception of deafness and Polish Sign Language, the re-evaluation of the words "deaf" and "Deaf" also needs to take place inside the d/Deaf community itself. For many d/Deaf people in Poland, becoming aware of what deafness is and becoming proud of one's d/Deaf identity require time and education. Redefining d/Deaf identity and fostering respect for sign language are now our main mission.



Fig. 2. Magda Szarota. *Crip From Within: Structures of Self and Society*, 2026. A photo triptych. Courtesy of Magda Szarota.

MAGDA SZAROTA: The photo on the left (Fig. 2) depicts my black shadow on grey pavement, outlined from above by a triangular shadow cast by an unidentified structure. The white inscription on the pavement, "Welcome to the House of F..k," suggests an occlusive ("f....d-up") space with no way out; yet the source and nature of the occlusion seem difficult to identify. The photo on the opposite side of the triptych does not feature any overarching shadow. My shadow rests beside that of a church—a deeply entrenched, powerful patriarchal institution in Poland, where crosses are seen not only on the rooftops of churches, but also on the walls of schoolrooms, inside public buildings, and along the roadsides. . . The Polish Catholic Church is one of the institutions that have long cast

their shadow on the lives of not only women, but also various other groups, including people with disabilities and queer individuals. As disability advocates stress, the so-called *charity model of disability* disempowers disabled people as agents of change and as fully fledged members of society. Strongly propagated and practiced by the Catholic Church, such an approach also contributes to strengthening detrimental and unequal power dynamics between "helpers" and those who are "in need of help," such as disabled people. Furthermore, the Church's perspective tends to further individualize the source of disablement, framing disability as a personal tragedy or a form of victimhood rather than recognizing systemic exclusion and structural impoverishment. Given the complicated relationship between the Polish state and the Church, it often seems that the latter is not truly on the side of people with disabilities.

The intensely yellow middle photo sharply contrasts with the greyish images on either side. Its placement suggests that intimacy can emerge within cracks and gaps—within the spaces between occlusion and oppression. The photo depicts a reflection of half of my face, including my eye looking toward the viewer and my wayward curly hair. The layered, blurry image engages with ways of inhabiting the world shaped by visual impairment. Rather than presenting a singular viewpoint, it draws on accounts shared with me during my research, in which people with sight impairments describe how visual space can at times be experienced and interpreted through shifting intensities of light, shadow, and partial visibility. The image attempts to register points of resonance across these accounts, searching for commonalities among different embodied perspectives (including my own). Within this field of yellow light, my face becomes a point through which the surrounding visual field is mediated, disrupting the shadowed visual logic that frames the images on the left and right.

EWELINA JAROSZ: Thinking about the intersections of queer and crip in my work and life, I feel both shy and honored—perhaps because, in Polish society, I can easily pass as able-bodied. Indeed, I benefit from many privileges described in disability studies. I can walk unaided. My gestures, gaze, and timing in social interactions align with expectations. I rarely need to wonder whether I will fit into a chair, reach a shelf, or use a bathroom—most infrastructure is, by default, tailored to my body. Yet the picture is more nuanced when it comes to sensory experiences. For some time now, my tolerance for light, noise, and crowds has been decreasing, which progressively restricts my access to public and professional spaces. In this sense, I have begun to encounter more and more dissonances while living within a normative society shaped by an ableist, human-centered history and culture, increasingly marked by technological overstimulation. Let me

begin with what I call my *human identity crisis*, which leads to my first response to your call.

Ever since I dipped my toes into blue humanities and critical ocean studies, my long-standing identification as a queer lesbian living and working in semi-peripheral Poland has been seriously—and positively—unsettled by posthuman understandings of embodiment. Hydrofeminism, especially Astrida Neimanis's concepts of bodies of water (*Bodies of Water*) and posthuman gestationality,[4] together with queer ecologies, has helped me to see how terrestrial and landed conceptions of human identity—autonomy, bounded individuality, bodily integrity—intersect with the oppressiveness of ableism. This perspective invites us to sense suffocating rivers and dying seas as kin, to recognize crip not as a metaphor, but as a shared condition of vulnerability across bodies of water and human bodies, beyond species boundaries and beyond compulsory able-bodiedness. Sunaura Taylor's *Disabled Ecologies: Lessons from a Wounded Desert* (2024) offers crucial insights for thinking about such crip ecologies, or, in the Baltic context, through *more-than-wet cripistemology*, a term recently introduced by Katarzyna Ojrzyńska ("Whales, Water, and Disability" and "More-Than-Wet Cripistemology") to describe the sea and its ableist imaginaries.

Hence, the intersection I want to bring forward is my practice as a scholar and artist who, together with Justyna Górowska, launched the hydrosexual movement in the arts—an effort to reframe human understandings of love, sexual pleasures, and our relation to the "Blue Planet." Hydrosexuality emerged out of ecosexuality (see Sprinkle and Stephens), hydrofeminism, and queer feminist posthumanism as a challenge to traditional, extractive ways of relating to water . . . and to our bodies. In this genealogy, hydrosexuality resonates with crip theory by reimagining disability not as lack, but as embodied knowledge: of pleasure, of sensuality in flux, of interdependence, vulnerability, and creative adaptation to challenges, including those shaped by environmental damage. Both crip and queer perspectives encourage us to perceive water not as a passive resource—so often romanticized and commodified—but as an active agent with its own rhythms, relationality, and resistances: a partner worthy of our love, care, and attention. Hydrosexuality, in this sense, makes a splash as it opens a space for emancipatory watery intimacies and imaginaries that affirm life across all different bodies and waters. It reminds us here and now that our evolutionary line remains entwined with the passage from ocean to land, yet, in truth, we have never abandoned the

[4] Astrida Neimanis defines posthuman gestationality as "the facilitative logic of our bodily water for gestating new lives and new forms of life, never fully knowable" (*Bodies of Water* 4). She, thus, reconceptualizes gestation (traditionally seen as a human, female, and biological function) as a capacity shared, through water, across different species and ecosystems [editors' note].

sea. The greatest advantage of this sexuality is that it is accessible to everyone. I believe that crip individuals have enormously much to offer when it comes to developing this identity and sensitivity.

DANIELA KOMANICKÁ: In the Central European post-socialist context, I focus on the intersections of queer and crip that unfold primarily through everyday practices of care, dependency, and their negotiations. Personal assistance (PA) represents an important and valued tool of independence for disabled people; yet it is continuously jeopardized by political decisions. Rather than contributing to a more stable and structurally grounded PA system, these political actions expose PA users to the persistent threat of institutionalization.

The practice of providing and receiving PA reveals a dense network of hidden labor (organizational, affective, and emotional) performed largely—and this is often overlooked—by the PA users themselves. Searching for assistants, training and managing them, coordinating their shifts, navigating bureaucracies, and mediating affective relations constitute an invisible workload that remains unacknowledged as *labor*. This is despite the fact that it sustains the very possibility of living independently—and would be recognized as labor in other contexts.

Slovak legislation further deepens this paradox. While it allows PA users to hire personal assistants, it does not permit a formal labor-law employment relationship between them. Consequently, PA users shoulder managerial responsibilities without possessing the rights, security, or stability of an employer. This legal framework produces significant precarity—high turnover of assistants, emotional strain of PA users, and fragile continuity of care. Against this backdrop, quip offers a conceptual and affective lens through which to read these entanglements—the intersections of legal frameworks, precarious labor, and intimate relations that define PA. While queer theory challenges norms of sexuality and gender, crip theory challenges norms of embodiment, ability, and productivity. Thus, quip is a method of living, creating, and feeling these challenges together, often within systems shaped by material constraints—bodily, legal, or institutional. In the field of PA, quipping becomes both a survival strategy and a mode of critique. It transforms dependence from a site of lack into a space of relational creativity, empathy, and solidarity. Through these queercrip negotiations, PA users and assistants co-produce new forms of intimacy and coagency that unsettle neoliberal understandings of productivity and reimagine interdependence as a political and affective resource.

ELI CLARE: As a community-based writer and activist, I think so much about the material and social conditions and lived experiences of disabled,

Mad, d/Deaf, chronically ill, and neurodivergent queer/trans/non-binary peoples in the settler colonial state of the US during this time of rising fascism. Disabled queer folks are shaped by the ways we're medicalized and deemed disposable. The ways we practice interdependence and survive isolation. The ways we're desexualized and hypersexualized, infantilized, and demonized by the knotted lies of racism, misogyny, capitalism, ableism, transphobia, xenophobia, homophobia, and on and on. Shaped by the ways we resist and the ways we comply. The ways death and joy keep showing up.

We live right now with the real threat of losing health care, housing, the remaining shreds of a government-funded social safety net. We navigate prisons, psych wards, detention centers. Navigate group homes and nursing homes. Navigate special ed, sheltered employment, homelessness. We experience such a lack of access in queer spaces and such homophobia/transphobia in disability spaces. And at the same time, we teach each other how to strut and flirt. We have sex against all the odds. We find each other.

*

My long-time partner S. and I walk down the street. He appears non-disabled; and I, very shaky. Together we look unmistakably queer, except we don't. Mostly strangers read us as caretaker and cripple, not lovers. Repeatedly they gawk at me and tell S. that he's doing a good deed by taking me out. Waitstaff at restaurants ask him what I want to eat. Cashiers hand him my change. This minor bullshit is endless and exhausting.

In places where public displays of affection might not otherwise be safe, we hold hands or walk arm-in-arm, knowing passersby will see a strong non-disabled white man helping a slow disabled white guy. They won't harass us. Their ableism protects us from their homophobia. We call this dynamic "crip privilege."

*

I love queer disabled humor—snarky, loud, insistent. It eases our exhaustion and rage in the face of all the material and social conditions.

PROMPT 2: INTIMACIES

"Intimacy is more than sex or romantic
love. Intimacy is an ever-expanding universe

composed of a myriad of heavenly bodies.
Intimacy is about relationships within
a person's self, with others,
with communities, with nature,
and beyond" (10–11).
Alice Wong (1974–2025), R.I.P.

Often imaginaries of intimacy swerve to partnership, sex/uality, and/or safety. Several contributions of this special issue focus on how sexuality and disability intersect uneasily and in messy, complicated ways in the world structured through and around material, symbolic, and ideological barriers. The short porn film made by Canadian cripqueer scholar Loree Erickson, *Want* (2006), provocatively weaves desire for sex, intimacy, queer community work, and assistance with the desire for access in the public sphere. Mia Mingus's theorizing of intimate access and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's discussion of intimacy embedded in doing grassroots activist solidarity access work seem to resonate meaningfully here. Daniela Komanická and Lucie Hradecká critique the plans for sexual assistance in the Czech Republic for their heteronormative settings, and, even more importantly, point to the ways the self-pay systems for sexual assistance reveal the inadequacies of social welfare in many countries of Eastern Europe where people with disabilities are hit by poverty and extreme economic and social precarity. How can we build on a queercrip redefinition of kinship, family, and friendship to draw out different forms of intimacies that keep crip/disabled/Mad/d(D)eaf people living? How to expand our cripqueer/quip yearnings of intimacies outside or beyond the limited scopes of relationships that are allowed to be recognized as "intimate"? How to broaden spaces that are associated with intimacy and safety, and nurture intimacies that cross lines of normative separation (such as human/nonhuman, animate/inanimate; see, e.g., Ojrzyńska, "Ecorelational Aesthetics")?

As much as we want to gesture to cripqueer/quip intimacies as a form of desiring "crip horizons" (Kolářová), it is essential to acknowledge that many forms and modalities of cripqueer intimacies are not completely devoid of hierarchies and inequalities, but possibly even cannot—structurally—move past them or exist outside of these hierarchies. Conflicts and their negotiations, as Alison Kafer argues, are central for building intersectional collaborations, shared spaces, and solidarity (*Feminist* 150–51). Might embracing conflict and seemingly conflictual positions be a way to reimagine ways of doing intimacies?

Furthermore, given that the state-imposed violence and "right to maim" (Puar; see also Kazemi) have undeniably developed into a genocidal scale

across many global locations (see, e.g., Pamuła, Król, and Hajdarowicz), what are the possibilities of reimagining cripqueer intimacies in spaces of state violence and war? What are these possibilities within and across increasingly polarized and divided communities where fear serves as a powerful weapon that helps justify the state of exception, which easily deprives groups of their civil and human rights, and, indeed, humanness when they do not fit normative and discriminatory models of citizenship? To modify and expand on Sins Invalid's turn of phrase, can crip, queer, and cripqueer/quip expertise and practices help us find and sustain intimacy "in the midst of [multiple: ecological, communal, institutional, political. . .] collapse"?

ELI CLARE: Queer disabled peoples yearn for, dream, practice intimacies so plentiful I wouldn't dare try to name them all.

1. Our bones, hearts, skins ache for touch.

1976, a moment in the schoolyard: I—12 years old, watching my classmates play, no one inviting me to join tetherball or jump rope—become aware of my aloneness. The year before these same kids had hurled *retard* and *lezzie* (long before I knew what that word meant) at me; pummeled me daily with rocks, rubber erasers, wads of gum. The adults at the school had given up trying to protect me. But now, all of us on the cusp of puberty, the bullies ignore me. I realize suddenly how much more I prefer their disdain, their pretending that I do not exist, than their taunting.

I lost myself into books and trees; didn't return to humans for a long time. And still my bones, my heart, my skin ached for touch even as I flinched, twitched, turned away.

2. We dream ways of porousness with wheelchairs, boulders, stardust, crows (Belser et al.), best friends, trusted caregivers. Sometimes interdependence means our bodyminds don't begin or end with the surface of our skins, the warm slick curves of our hearts. I write:

I'd gladly
forgo
opposable thumbs, entice
fingers into feathers,

if only
to dart
on ruby-throated wings. . . .

river of dreams
cold and clear

cast language aside,

if only

to accept
beaver's invitation, she
leading me deep
inside her lodge,

teaching me
to grow
a paddle-shaped tail,

river of sunlight
undammed

surrender
my tender human heart. . . . (Clare, *Unfurl* 79)

3. We practice loving ourselves. And if not love, then acceptance. And if not acceptance, then something different than shame.

Practice access intimacy. Practice negotiating access friction. Practice navigating access failure.

Practice embracing imperfection, ugliness, brokenness, brilliance.

Practice loving clear-cuts, Superfund sites,[5] poisoned and collapsing aquifers, even as we rage against the racist-capitalist-settler colonial environmental violence.[6]

Practice flamboyance and flirtation.[7]

Practice intimacy as one small way of refusing disposability.

---

[5] Superfund sites are heavily contaminated areas in the United States that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has designated for long-term cleanup of hazardous waste [editors' note].

[6] For a powerful history of, and thinking about, loving damaged/disabled ecosystems, particularly aquifers, see Taylor's *Disabled Ecologies*.

[7] For a specific queer/trans disabled flamboyance, see Cubacub.

EWELINA JAROSZ: I want to respond to the intimacy question by continuing my commitment to making blue humanities more diverse and inclusive. Recently, I have been thinking extensively about the Baltic Sea, where I come from, and about contributing my research to bodies of water that remain undeservedly overlooked within the blue humanities. Together with other authors—Karolina Kolenda and Tomasz Sikora—we coined the term *brackish humanities* to provide a framework for thinking about semi-peripheral, liminal seas with an ambivalent ontological status. I will use this opportunity to extend this framework by elaborating on the intimate relationships that humans—whether they perceive themselves as crip, disabled, or not—may form with the Baltic Sea. I ask whether the Baltic Sea itself might be perceived as a more-than-human crip entity.

In our "Cyber Nymphs: Manifesto for the Hydrosexual Movement in Art," Justyna Górowska and I reimagine intimacy as a relational, embodied, and planetary sense of belonging that calls to response-ability: "We are the aquaphiliacs, deeply contaminated bodies of water. We are babies in love with a non-binary, transitional, life-giving substance connecting every sparkle of existence on the 'Blue planet' at risk as never before." Referring these words to the Baltic Sea, I would like to share my intimate relationship with this brackish body of water, that for some has not even been considered a "real" sea (Jarosz, Kolenda, and Sikora). I hope that this response will contribute to thinking about disability as a shared condition (Kafer, "After Crip") and to expanding posthuman discussions on *crip* epistemologies.

As a child growing up during Poland's turbulent period of postsocialist transformation, I used to spend most of my vacations by the sea in Sopot, where I lived with my family. Swimming—and especially going underwater—made me feel organically full, joyful, and happy. The Baltic Sea bathed me in the blurred vision of its greenish-grey-navy blue-brown materiality. Only later did I learn that the sea's "anti-capitalist" color is the result of nutrient overload, which, under both socialism and capitalism, has caused eutrophication and "dead zones," making the Baltic what Alison Kafer would call a "crip kin" ("After Crip"). This is compounded by pollution originating after the Second World War, by a seabed repeatedly ploughed up by fishing trawlers, as well as by ongoing militarization and other factors that continue to threaten its health (Jarosz, Kolenda, and Sikora). The Baltic Sea is full of non/human cripples.

From an early childhood bond through coming of age at forty, I have kept returning to the Baltic Sea as often as I could. I passionately treat this body of water, subjected to multiple scales of violence, as my lover, seeing its wetness and complex ecological condition functioning as a locus of more-than-human home, intimacy, and embodied pleasure. As a queer person, I must add that the Baltic has never refused me access to intimacy,

and that I perceive each and every year when I have been able to feel its water on my skin as a privilege, freeing me from harmful disciplinary regimes of work under capitalism.

Expanding intimacy beyond the human also requires challenging ableist, anthropocentric, and heteronormative norms of relating. Disability and queer theorists at our table highlight how true intimacy flourishes through interdependence, access, and vulnerability. Mia Mingus, a disability justice activist, introduces *access intimacy* as "that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs"—an "eerie comfort" where a disabled person's body "relaxes and opens up" because their needs are met on a fundamental level. This unique closeness is, as Mingus puts it, "interdependence in action." How might we act with the Baltic Sea in ways that enhance its well-being and reduce anthropogenic stress?

In hydrosexual terms, we might imagine access intimacy not only between people but between human and watery environments: the gentle relief when a body finds buoyancy in water, or when adaptive technology enables a disabled swimmer to commune with the waves. Such moments move intimacy "out of the realm of only logistics and into the realm of relationships," valuing disabled people and our ecosystems as partners in solidarity rather than burdens or resources. Kafer's work *Feminist, Queer, Crip* further insists on coalition and connection across movements. This challenges any future that leaves disability or ecological care behind, instead promoting a coalitional intimacy that no longer separates crips, queers, feminists, trans people, environmentalists, environmental justice activists, and reproductive justice activists. All should work in alliance. How about inviting the Baltic to participate in this solidarity coalition?

From this queer/crip standpoint, intimacy is about kinship through difference—much as water brings diverse bodies into contact. Indeed, Astrida Neimanis describes water as a medium that "brings all kinds of bodies into intimate contact, despite and because of our differences. It respects membranes and containers, but it knows that eventually every dam breaks, every bag leaks. It takes a lot of abuse but still keeps going around—for billions of years so far!" ("Bodies of Water").

Within the framework of the *brackish humanities* and through the agenda of the hydrosexual movement in the arts, I invite all humans to sense the Baltic Sea as a sea that embraces interdependency, resilience, and difference, and that helps us imagine forms of intimacy grounded in mutual access, joy, and transformation.

ALEXANDRE BARIL: As Ewelina has already mentioned, in her theorization of *access intimacy*, Mia Mingus notes that this kind of intimacy can occur with strangers who, almost instinctively, understand

your experience and your access needs. From this perspective, intimacy is axiological and political, not just personal. I experience this sort of intimacy with suicidal people, which I would call suicidal intimacy. As a chronically suicidal person who has been theorizing for the past decade the oppression experienced by suicidal people, or what I call suicidism (such as forms of discrimination, stigmatization, exclusion, pathologization, criminalization, and incarceration), I have received hundreds of emails and phone calls from other suicidal individuals reaching out to share their experiences of suicidist violence. This is particularly the case since the publication of my book *Undoing Suicidism*, in which I discuss my personal relationship to suicidism and compulsory aliveness, intertwined with other oppressive systems such as ableism/sanism and compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness, and in which I propose a queercrip (or quip) suicide-affirmative model of suicide.

Suicidal people have told me that they feel comfortable sharing their intimate suicidal feelings and ideations with me because they feel I truly "get it." Suicidal intimacy means that they don't need to provide lengthy explanations about the complexity of their relationship to life and death or to reassure me that they won't complete their suicide. Suicidal intimacy means that they don't fear that I will call emergency services without their consent. Suicidal intimacy means they can simply be and share what they often feel is unsafe to share with others, including their loved ones or their therapists, dreading that their suicidal revelations would lead to non-consensual hospitalization, involuntary treatments, the loss of child custody, or employment, to name only a few impacts of suicidism. Suicidal people who contact me feel an intimacy with me (and vice versa), and this suicidal intimacy often deepens and builds over time, when they continue to contact me about their future suicide plans, their latest suicide attempts, their newest experiences with suicidism, or initiatives to build the antisuicidist movement I call for in my work. Suicidal intimacy is sometimes what keeps us alive as suicidal selves, as we feel supported by others with similar experiences and goals to transform this world to make it a better place to live (and die) for suicidal people.

PEREL: On the subject of intimacy, I want to relate my story about Alice Wong. On Valentine's Day last year, 14 February 2025, I came to her home in San Francisco. It was a visit that had been pending for about a year. It took a lot of careful planning with room for crip capacity and spontaneity—would she be up for it and what would the weather be like? When we had finally found a date in 2024, my mother died, so I could not meet. But the following year, I found myself back in San Francisco, delivering a special red candle and love potion to Alice at her loft. We spent the day together

and our conversation spanned from the personal to the political. She was very present for me in my grief, and while talking with her, I opened up about a desire to write about the history of touch in my own life, starting with my mother, then other carers, nurses, access workers, friends, and lovers. She told me that when I was ready to write that piece, she would publish it on her *Disability Visibility* site. I still have not brought myself to write this the way I imagine it. When Alice passed, it felt like a failure that I never got to send it to her. I don't quite feel the same way now; I feel she will come and help me write it when it's time.

During our visit, we talked about chronic pain and the liberatory effects of palliative care. Alice napped a couple of times, and I watched the light come through her windows, onto her cats lounging on the couch. Then she would wake up and again be on fire, asking questions, theorizing about the state of the world. We talked about the resurgence of eugenicist paradigms in the United States and witnessing the ongoing genocides. While we were sitting together, I started to feel how our bodies were not only holding our own traumas, but the traumas of the world, and not only of our lifetimes, but presciently, for future lifetimes. In the previous prompt, I touched on the scar as a portal to previous lifetimes of disabled people, but it also works as a seam or an opening into seeing the future.

As I think of this future piece I want to write about my body's own archive of touch, I consider including violence in it, too—all of the kinds of touch to which I was subjected without consent, either with intent of harm, exploitation, or correction. I don't think we can talk about intimacy without talking about violence. There is no intimacy that is devoid of harm, but how we show up for each other makes the difference between replicating dynamics in relationships that will continue the cycle of violence or creating change. Violence itself is also intimate: the ways it is learned, ways it shapes one's psyche, is internalized, desired, and (re)enacted. It brings me to the Transformational Justice work of which Mia Mingus is part and has written on her blog, *Leaving Evidence*. When it comes to being in a crip community, I would love for us to be thinking about accountability in this way and be able to undo what has been given to us or enacted on us.

DANIELA KOMANICKÁ: Intimacy is often imagined at the extremes of a spectrum: as something deeply desired and chosen, or, conversely, as something violated or abusive. Yet many forms of intimacy fall between these poles. They are neither longed for nor traumatic, but simply lived.

A scene from my field diary (Komanická 55–56) illustrates this mundane, ambivalent intimacy. On a day of my heavy menstrual bleeding, two personal assistants, both Muslim men, help me to the toilet. One assists

me with changing a tampon—a task neither has done before. I choose Habib over Asad. Sitting face to face in a bathroom—me on the toilet, him on a low plastic stool—I guide him through the process, performing most of the task myself. At one point, I ask him to complete a small but crucial movement I cannot execute due to limited finger strength. We continue talking, including his reflections on the stigma surrounding menstruation in Bangladeshi culture.

What unfolds here is an intimate act that does not fit normative scripts. It is not erotic, nor abusive. It is not voluntarily desired, yet neither is it fully imposed. It is tolerated, negotiated, and pragmatically managed. Such intimacy is part of daily routine for many disabled people relying on personal assistance: bodily exposure, proximity, and trust enacted through necessity rather than desire. Avoiding it might be more comfortable, but being unable to access necessary assistance would be far more distressing.

This complicates "access intimacy" (Mingus): functional but not comfortable, necessary but not desired, negotiated in real time without prior understanding. It also raises conflict as part of intimacy (Kafer, *Feminist* 15, 150). While not dramatic, tension can arise between gendered, cultural, and religious norms and practical necessity, alongside boundary negotiation and possible misalignment between cultural norms and the demands of assistance. Rather than seamless, such intimacies are shaped through small, everyday negotiations of difference, discomfort, and potential conflict.

Even this relatively "good" scenario is structured by constraints. The possibility to express a preference—for instance, choosing one assistant over another—is a limited yet meaningful form of agency, often more restricted in institutional settings. In such contexts, intimacy becomes not only unchosen but also determined by others rather than by the person whose body is exposed.

Rather than locating intimacy solely in desire or violation, we might understand it as a spectrum of embodied interactions shaped by systems of dependency and power—where everyday, tolerated, and necessary forms deserve the same analytical attention as those recognized as intimate in mainstream imaginaries.

AGNIESZKA KOŁODZIEJCZAK: The key aspect of intimacy shared by Deaf people (both deaf and their hearing allies) is their use of sign language. Sign language is not just a communication tool, but also an intimate medium—conveying nuances, emotions, and affection through the entire body. Sign language offers a strong foundation for community building for Deaf people (Solvang and Haualand 3). Deaf intimacy relies on visual cues, presence, and embodied communication, emphasizing

touch, gaze, movement, and spatial awareness to foster closeness. Sign language, which does not have formal titles like Mr./Mrs., is a language of local communities whose members know each other well. Intimacy in Deaf culture often develops through heightened attentiveness to visual cues, facial expressions, and physical proximity. Eye contact communicates trust, touch offers reassurance, and shared silence creates mutual understanding. Emotional bonds are strengthened through expressive storytelling, shared experiences of marginalization, common culture, and a strong sense of community.

Deaf people, as part of society, function in a sensorium shaped by hearing people (Stanosz 10). Deaf intimacy challenges hearing-centric norms by redefining closeness beyond sound. It emphasizes connecting—through visibility, empathy, and embodied presence—and shows intimacy as something lived, seen, and felt, rather than heard.

Central to Deaf intimacy are the concepts of Deaf space and Deaf gain. Most spaces and the ways they function are shaped by hearing individuals, reflecting their hearing- and sound-centric norms, customs, and values. Hearing is often assumed, and this default assumption is reinforced by current practices. Deaf space provides an answer to the question: "how?," highlighting how Deafness influences physical environments.

In 2005, architect Hansel Bauman conducted a study titled *DeafSpace* for Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., to develop a series of guidelines for designing for Deaf individuals. He established that Deaf architecture should be grounded in Deaf culture's visual-tactile qualities, expression, and acoustics. Bauman's guidelines were implemented at Gallaudet University (Charters 21). They, for instance, included the use of light signals, tactile elements, open spaces, and circular rooms where one can see other people's faces.

By accentuating Deaf perspectives and values, Deaf gain offers an answer to the question: "why?" The term, popularized by researchers H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray (*Deaf Gain* and "Deaf Studies"), has gained popularity in academic circles and among Deaf activists. Deaf gain shifts focus from a medical understanding of deafness as a deficit to appreciating it as a cultural, cognitive, and social asset. It enriches human experience by offering alternative communication, perception, and thought. Sign languages, as fully developed, richly structured languages, can generate different ways of thinking and perceiving the space around us, serve as a foundation for a distinct cultural identity, and support technological and social innovations.

Deaf intimacy can flourish in broadly and unconditionally accepted safe and friendly d/Deaf spaces that recognize the value of Deaf gain. It can thrive among d/Deaf individuals and in mixed (hearing-d/Deaf) marriages, partnerships, sexual relationships, friendships, and collegial ties.

HANNA ZAREMBA-KOSOVYCH: No LGBT+ person with a disability in Ukraine has grown up in a truly friendly society. This shapes intimacy not as easy or spontaneous, but as a fragile practice of becoming oneself—with oneself, with others, and in the world. Drawing on an interview with a Ukrainian lesbian woman with a physical disability, I explore intimacy across three interconnected levels: the communal (belonging), the personal (acceptance of intersecting self-identities), and the societal (citizenship).

At the communal level, she experiences intimacy as fragmented belonging. In disability communities, she feels safe to ask for a chair or expressing bodily needs yet often silences her queerness. In LGBT+ spaces, she feels freer to express her sexuality, but must carefully manage the visibility of her disability—fearing that a simple request to be able to sit down will turn into a public spectacle. Belonging, thus, becomes conditional and never fully realized. Intimacy here is not a shared vulnerability, but the struggle for "access intimacy" (Mingus)—access to safety, recognition, and care within communities that claim inclusion, yet reproduce ableist norms.

At a personal level, intimacy unfolds as an ongoing labor of self-acceptance. My interlocutor describes how coming out as lesbian felt easier than naming herself disabled; pride in queerness preceded pride in disability. Claiming both identities required what she calls "fighting for words"—reclaiming lesbianism and disability from stigma and moral panic. This resonates with Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's understanding of intimacy as survival work: a daily practice of staying alive in bodies and identities deemed excessive, inconvenient, or undesirable.

These intimate struggles are inseparable from citizenship. My interlocutor's encounters with a lesbian-friendly, yet ableist, gynecologist expose what Alison Kafer theorizes as the political nature of care: queer safety without disability justice reproduces harm (*Feminist* 161). Access to intimacy, thus, becomes a matter of strategic visibility—revealing one aspect of one's identity while concealing another, depending on what survival demands.

The war further complicates the situation. For some queer Ukrainians, especially soldiers and veterans, military service confirms citizenship and unexpectedly authorizes intimacy—public displays of love and vulnerability, and their recognition. For many people with disabilities, living in relations of dependence, however, intimacy remains risky: disclosure can compromise care, safety, and daily survival.

In this context, research interviews themselves emerge as rare spaces of intimacy—moments when fragmented identities can coexist without immediate sanctions. Cripqueer intimacy is, therefore, not a private realm

of feeling, but a deeply political practice shaped by citizenship, war, and the uneven distribution of whose bodies are allowed to belong, to desire, and to be seen.

JUSTYNA LIPKO-KONIECZNA: The 2019 performance of *PokaZ* [*The Show*] was a significant breakthrough for Theatre 21. Its final form was shaped by the development of a unique queer-crip intimacy during the process. Justyna Wielgus, a choreographer, actress, and director, brought together a diverse group of queer individuals and people with disabilities.[8] This variety of experiences and viewpoints fostered artistic risk-taking, mutual trust, and expanded the boundaries of stage presentation.

On stage stood side by side: Katarzyna Żeglicka, a queer activist with a disability; Helena Urbańska, a recent theatre school graduate, who came out as a lesbian in *PokaZ* (in *Cukry*, another production of the Center for Inclusive Arts, she also came out as a person with ADHD); Maciej Kasprzak, a queer person with a physical disability; Diana Niepce, a Portuguese dancer, feminist, activist, and wheelchair-user; Aleksandra Skotarek, an actress with Down syndrome (Theatre 21); and Michał Pęszyński, an actor with Down syndrome (Theatre 21).

In the process, a queer-disabled community emerged, asserting its right to speak, listen, and perform. Both the creative process and the performance itself were structured around a dramaturgy of conversation—among the performers and with the audience. The actors and the audience came together on equal footing in a non-hierarchical space. I feel that, in that moment, we crossed a Rubicon of freedom. It marked a significant turning point by fostering a sense of intimacy and mutual support among very diverse people. And this community validated itself, both internally and publicly before the audience.

FILIP PAWLAK: I struggle to find a way to respond to the question about intimacy in the context of global problems and conflicts; this task feels overwhelming. For me, intimacy is a fragile, hard-earned sense of freedom from shame, something I try to build on stage. It takes a great deal of effort to maintain it during a performance. Usually, it lasts only a brief moment—a kiss on the cheek from a better imagined world. I wish I could enjoy this moment of honesty with myself and the audience more often, without the fear of being judged afterwards. When

[8] Since then, queer desires and modes of self-expression have frequently appeared in Theatre 21's productions, such as *Libido romantico* (2022), which explores the actors' romantic, erotic, and sexual needs and desires, and *You Can Fail! Porażka Show* (2024), featuring the Polish drag queen Gąsiu [editors' note].

I place this image against the world's troubles, I end up destroying it—and realizing I don't have the strength or power to save it saps me even more.

PROMPT 3: CONFLICTS, DIS-SONANCES, DIS-JUNCTURES

Across the previous prompts, we have been collectively exploring how to build cripqueer intimacies as a platform for political and private solidarities and for world-making, and what such cripqueer—quip—intimacies look like across the different contexts and vantage points from which we speak and gesture. We have also raised the impossibility of detaching theorizing of intimacies from personal, political, and geopolitical conflicts and violence. In the final prompt, we would like to invite you to voice your skepticisms—or an outright critique—of the concept of intimacies itself. Perhaps, even after all this critical work, you are still uneasy about the extent of romanticization, the cruel imperative of happiness attached to it, or the prescriptiveness with which most cultural imaginations of intimacies continue to be infused—so much so that it becomes difficult or even impossible to reorient or reimagine intimacies away from the normative pull? Is the concept of intimacies salvageable for cripqueer world-making?

To counter potential unease, we also wish to gesture toward legacies of posthumanism, new materialism(s), and work on queercrip ecologies and cripqueer kinships. We could invoke Greta Gaard's foundational reflection on queer ecofeminism; Catriona Sandilands's conceptualization of a queer ecology; Alison Kafer's notion of crip kinship ("Crip Kin"); Sunaura Taylor's academic and artistic investigations at the intersection of animal and disability studies (*Beasts of Burden*) and her reflection on disabled ecologies (*Disabled Ecologies*); Eli Clare's discussion of ecological restoration, along with the notion of cure and gender transition (*Brilliant Imperfection*); Katarzyna's work on crip ecorelational aesthetics (Ojrzyńska, "Ecorelational Aesthetics"); the eco- and hydrosexual explorations of queer pleasure and environmental ethics (Sprinkle and Stephens; cyber_nymphs—Jarosz and Górowska); Tabita Rezaire's artistic work centered on disability and healing, linking ecology, biodiversity, and ancestral knowledge (e.g., "Premium Connect" and *Conscience u.terre. ine*); Khairani Barokka's reimagining of human/nonhuman relationality (*Indigenous Species* and *Rope*). . .

Faced with the collapse of ecological systems and networks, and speaking from the Eastern Europes that—like other structurally produced

(semi)peripheries to the imagined Center—have been carrying the ecological costs of late capitalist "transformations" and of the growth drive, we feel the urgency to explore the question of whether and how queer and crip perspectives and practices help build new forms of environmental relationality. How can various entanglements and kinships with the more-than-human help us rethink our being in the world and envision cripqueer futurities? Following Mel Y. Chen's recognition of animacy in what is often considered "insensate, immobile, deathly" (2), we attend to what Julia Watts Belser calls "queer animacies," understood as "practice[s] of living and loving across the human/nonhuman divide" (9). Yet, building queercrip, postanthropocentric, ecorelational allyships may be fraught. For instance, as Taylor notes, "identifying as or claiming animal is just far too dangerous for some people—people who historically have been animalized as a way of justifying their exploitation or murder" ("Disability" 151). We thus also ask about tensions and contexts that make such cripqueer intimacies, identifications, and acts of solidarity risky, difficult, or impossible.

EWELINA JAROSZ: Extending intimacy beyond human relationships can be generative, but it also creates important tensions. Imagining intimate relations with environments such as seas or rivers risks romanticizing wild spaces that are not only deeply shaped by violence, extraction, and ecological damage, but also markedly different from human worlds and modes of relating. Think, for example, of the story of Timothy Treadwell, who believed he had befriended wild bears and treated them like family members.[9] Any attempt to imagine intimacy with such nonhuman entities must acknowledge and respect ontological difference and forms of sociality that are distinct from human intimacy.

Thus, Mia Mingus's concept of "access intimacy," when applied to damaged environments and vulnerable ecosystems, must be critically reworked through the tensions generated by openness and respectful negotiation with them. Working with this concept reminds us that intimacy does not emerge automatically—it requires knowledge, awareness, and labor. But shouldn't this be the case with every type of bond? The question of how humans can respond to the needs of damaged waters in ways that reduce harm, rather than reproducing extractive relationships, should be at the core of hydrosexual awareness.

Intimacy itself may reproduce intersectional dynamics as well as inequalities. As Daniela has already noted, Alison Kafer argues that conflicts, debates, and tensions are central to building coalitions and shared

[9] In 2003, Treadwell and his partner were killed by bears [editors' note].

spaces (*Feminist* 15, 151). Expanding this thinking to environmental relations confirms that intimacy is not always a harmonious connection, but may also involve negotiation, disagreement, and accountability. For me, exploring intimacy in this direction involves learning to carefully inhabit spaces within a world where connection, conflict, vulnerability, and responsibility remain inseparable.

ALEXANDRE BARIL: When I think about forms of intimacy that stretch beyond our normative understandings (e.g., human/nonhuman, animate/inanimate), I think—in the spirit of some of my colleagues on this roundtable who theorized, following Achille Mbembe, the necropolitical forces targeting marginalized groups—about people who experience forms of social death while still alive. Death is often seen as the ultimate end of intimacy. However, despite the fact that many people in our trans-queer-crip communities (among other marginalized groups) are deemed socially dead, less human, or treated as if they are less worthy of living according to current violent laws on assisted death (e.g., physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, medical aid in dying), many, nonetheless, successfully build alternative networks of support, care, and intimacies. Their socially dead status, rather than preventing them from entering forms of intimacies, orients them toward the creation of new affiliations with others who live similar experiences. In that sense, *social death can deepen certain intimacies*.

When I think about non-normative conceptualizations of intimacy, I also think about the intimacy we can have with dead entities, such as people or pets we loved and now mourn. Some authors discuss the social, political, and cultural life of dead entities, as the living maintain relationships with them through discussion, prayer, etc. In this sense, our intimate relationships can be complexified, even deepened, post-death. I consider that queercrip approaches to death and mourning that envision the social existence of dead entities can help us rethink death beyond its dominant interpretation as the ultimate end of relationships and intimacies. In other words, *social or biological death transforms and reconfigures intimacy instead of annihilating it*. Queercrip death studies has the potential to help us conceptualize death less as the antithesis of relationships and intimacies, but as a different modality to connect with those who are gone or who wish to go. Such queercrip perspectives also help us reimagine what departure and death really mean to us, and how we might want to build intimate connections, both during and after someone's life.

In my work on suicidality, I propose a shift from a preventionist, carceral, and curative logic to a logic of accompaniment for suicidal people, one based on deep relational connection that supports people in making

the best decisions regarding their lives and deaths, while simultaneously working tirelessly to end the necropolitical forces that fuel suicidality. This suicide-affirmative approach, which envisions assisted suicide as one option among many for suicidal people, could be both life-affirming and death-affirming. Often wrongly confused with current ableist, sanist, ageist, and capitalist laws on assisted death, my position sometimes elicits criticisms from disability/Mad communities. But I think those conflicts represent a form of connection in which conflictual parties can share their feelings, thoughts, and arguments, and expose their vulnerability by engaging with each other's ideas. While ignoring, distancing, silencing, and estranging our intellectual/activist peers when disagreements occur kills intimacy, I believe that respectful and non-violent conflict can create meaningful forms of intimacies in our communities.

PEREL: In my previous response, I spoke of desire to create an archive of touch; what I did not say was that it is also implicitly an archive of heartbreak. I am speaking of the heartbreak of loss, either from death, separation, or undesired ending. My mother and I were not physically close at the end of her life, but after her death, memories of her touch, of her body, and the intimacy we shared surfaced from where they had been buried inside my disabled, queer survivor's body. As a child, I did not know that she would be the first in a long line of people who would care for me and whom I would lose. So, to talk about intimacy is to talk about grief. To create a space of intimacy, however intentional or liminal, is to create a space that also holds loss.

I think this is something we don't allow for ourselves within activist spaces, and we don't know how to make space for grief in our attempts toward solidarity and allyship. Before making space for conflict, I would open and hold space for grief. I would ask, "Is there space for grief here?," before or alongside talking about harm. Behind every conflict is an unacknowledged grief, and in crip spaces, we might often also be hiding this from ourselves in our striving, in our desire to make up for what we suffer from in the world. Often in crip spaces, I feel simultaneously acute sensitivity and vulnerability of my own bodymind, and those of my peers, and the ways in which our access needs clash, and where our ideologies might also clash. However, we do not have room for this fissure, and this also is a form of heartbreak. I want to know how we can speak to one another's heartbreak[s?], and I also want to know what new forms of heartbreak we anticipate.

I want us to be able to coexist and grieve together; I want us to be able to grieve for what we cannot give to each other, for what we could not receive for ourselves, for future losses that we cannot prevent, and for

ways in which harm had happened, is happening, will happen, no matter the care. This, too, is an act of solidarity. This, too, is part of our collective bodymind.

NATALIA PAMUŁA: In the early 1950s, Irena Kowalczyk, a polio patient, wrote about a fleeting moment in a Polish rehabilitative institution: during a film screening, "Marian often rests his hand on the armrest of my chair. After a while, pretending that I am unaware of his hand, I lean back against the chair. He then removes his hand. For a moment, I regret that his hand is no longer there, but at the same time I am grateful to him for his sensitivity" (75, translation mine). Her memoir, *Poza granicą skargi* [*Beyond the Possibility of Grievance*], depicts an array of these kinds of situations: vulnerable small gestures—overlooked or ignored by the staff. These are rarely grand gestures leading to bigger things, such as kissing; these are instances of microintimacy, micromoments, which might easily remain unrecognized. They might go unnoticed in literature; they often were overlooked in the institution where Kowalczyk stayed at the time. I am not trying to romanticize these moments of microintimacy, especially since Kowalczyk did yearn for bigger emotions and bigger gestures. Yet I want to emphasize the importance of paying attention to intimacies that take place in spaces which are not conventionally associated with safety and pleasure, and which go beyond normative understandings of intimacy.

The quote above describes this kind of "small" gesture—a short moment Kowalczyk shared with another patient, but she also writes about the intimacy she experienced with rehabilitative workers, for example, a massage therapist whose touch was a source of pleasure and who kissed her. The memoir shows that rehabilitation has a potential to generate intimacy. How do we approach this kind of intimacy? As a byproduct of cultural and medical pressure? In Kowalczyk's text, such intimacy is entangled with discourses of normative beauty (people thought she was very beautiful) and heterosexuality; in that sense, it does not escape normative trappings, or, rather, it is enabled by them. However, I am hesitant to state that these entanglements undermine the significance, or the need, to discuss intimacies generated at complicated junctures. Rather, such microintimacies are shaped by normative ideas, and, at the same time, reflect structural inequalities and vulnerability Kowalczyk experienced inside the institution.

JUSTYNA LIPKO-KONIECZNA: Most of the Theatre 21 ensemble are people with Down syndrome, and two actresses are on the autism spectrum. People with Down syndrome are still often treated like *eternal children*. In Poland, few people with Down syndrome undergo training

for independence in assisted-living flats, yet very rarely are they given a genuine opportunity to live autonomously. Particularly strong taboos persist around sexuality. When immediate family, school, and society at large perceive you solely *as a child*, you are deprived of the right to intimacy, relationships, and desire.

Our explorations of corporeality at Theatre 21, driven by the actors' needs, caused unease among their parents. In 2018, in the performance *Rewolucja, której nie było* [*The Revolution That Never Was*], one actress felt a strong need to express her internal conflict and her sole responsibility for her body. She did so in a scene performed in both Polish and English, in dialogue with Polish-English banners from protests by people with disabilities and their carers inside the Polish parliament earlier that year. "This is my body," she said. The gesture revealed a stark asymmetry: women with Down syndrome have far fewer rights to sexual expression and bodily freedom than men with Down syndrome. In this scene, the actress exposed her chest, as her male colleagues had done in a previous scene. This gesture—an assertion of the right to bodily autonomy—was blocked by the parents. The experience left a profound mark on the artist's psyche and affected her sense of personal and artistic freedom.

The immediate response to that situation was an artistic intervention by another ensemble member, Aleksandra Skotarek. In the performance *PokaZ* [*The Show*], which explored the experience of otherness and the phenomenon of "staring" from the perspective of people with visible disabilities, Aleksandra, during improvisation, exposed her chest, alluding to the previously mentioned, controversial gesture of female nudity. She then provided an analytical commentary, deconstructing "nudity" as a performance viewed through the lens of a normative, able-bodied society. "My body has upper nudity and lower nudity . . . both are illegal," she declared, highlighting the arbitrariness of the boundaries that define what can be seen and what is restricted by social norms. She treated *PokaZ* as a lecture space and the audience as an auditorium: a society that needed to be made aware of how people with disabilities experience imposed limitations. It was necessary to clearly outline the mechanisms of the normative gaze—the violence enacted through the disciplining and control of disabled bodies.

The relationships between the actors and their parents are often close and intimate, also because they both share the experience of social stigma related to disability. However, this shared stigma does not erase the hierarchical nature of the relationship. The parent retains structural authority, which can shape how the child's disability is understood, managed, and represented. In this context, (over)protection may emerge

as both a response to stigma and a mechanism of control. While intended as care, excessive protection can limit the child's autonomy and inhibit the development of their subjectivity and identity.

AGNIESZKA KOŁODZIEJCZAK: In my view, conflict is always intertwined with rebellion, which supports and amplifies it. In the context of Deaf culture, conflict (both with the dominant hearing culture and within the Deaf community itself) can be understood as an intense form of relationality that simultaneously fosters intimacy and resists phonocentric social norms. In Poland, a notable form of artistic rebellion was the founding of the Deaf Artists Group in 2012, which highlighted the distinctiveness of Deaf perspectives through collective exhibitions of their artwork. For d/Deaf artists, the strategy of forging their own paths as d/Deaf individuals has been a response to the frustration caused by their existing *in-between* worlds and not fully conforming to the social expectations of the hearing majority.

The axiological aspect of perceiving a Deaf person as the Other is related to comparing their ability to hear and speak with that of an average hearing person. Hearing and speech are closely linked and highly valued. The less deaf people hear and the less fluently they speak, the lower their status in the hearing community (Dunaj 16).

Audism stems from the belief that hearing culture is superior to Deaf culture, which is consequently perceived as inferior. Moreover, audism fosters paternalistic attitudes toward d/Deaf individuals. d/Deaf people are then viewed as constantly requiring assistance and support in managing their own lives (Pieniążek and Dankiewicz 435). Audism has also led to the emergence of another, rarely discussed social and cultural phenomenon called deafism, positioned in opposition to audism. Deafism refers to a situation where Deaf individuals consider their culture superior, and, as a result, discriminate against the hearing culture (Tomaszewski and Moroń 291). They may expect hearing individuals to possess a very high level of sign language proficiency, which implies that if a hearing person wishes to enter Deaf culture, they need to fully adapt to it. In the context of strategies of intimacy within culture and the arts, deafism can be understood as a form of rebellion against discriminatory practices of hearing individuals—including accessibility coordinators, exhibition curators, directors of cultural institutions, and employees in the cultural sector.

What fuels rebellion is d/Deaf ability to read emotional cues emanating from the hearing—the cues that indicate the pervasive oppression of Deaf culture and the pressure to conform to the majority. As a result, an individual may either surrender and *disappear*, or resist existing norms and

stereotypes, which are typically not subjected to social critique precisely because they function as convenient strategies that do not challenge dominant axiological dogmas.

HANNA ZAREMBA-KOSOVYCH: In contemporary Ukraine, intimacy cannot be separated from citizenship. Ongoing debates around the draft of the new Civil Code (*Draft Civil*) reveal how partnership, marriage, guardianship, and legal capacity are not merely private matters, but core terrains of political struggle. Drawing on Engin Isin's concept of enacted citizenship, these controversies can be read as acts through which marginalized communities claim recognition and reshape the boundaries of belonging. At stake is what Alan Santinele Martino and Margaret Campbell describe (after Kenneth Plummer) as "intimate citizenship": the right to make decisions about one's body, relationships, and sexuality (98–99).

Amid Russia's full-scale invasion and Ukraine's accelerated EU integration, legal reform is framed as a step toward European modernity. Yet the draft of the Civil Code has been publicly criticized from different directions. LGBTQ+ communities point to the continued absence of full partnership recognition and the precarity of queer families (Insight NGO; boss_moonshine). Organizations of people with disabilities, including Fight For Right, raise concerns about provisions on legal capacity and guardianship, warning that paternalistic control over disabled people's autonomy remains insufficiently dismantled (Fight For Right).

Both critiques target state regulation of intimate life. However, they largely unfold in parallel rather than through an explicitly intersectional framework. Queer activism focuses on relational recognition; disability activism centers on decision-making autonomy and protection from substituted judgment. The interdependence of these claims—the fact that partnership rights and legal capacity are structurally intertwined—remains underarticulated.

War further intensifies this dynamic. The defense of the nation and the trajectory toward the European Union open new channels for civic participation, encouraging communities to engage the state in shaping legal reform. At the same time, the state continues to determine whose intimacy is recognized as legitimate—or more legitimate—and whose autonomy remains conditional. Intimacy, thus, emerges as a contested arena of enacted citizenship, shaped by militarization, Europeanization, and ongoing struggles over who is authorized to love (whom and how), to decide, and to belong.

ELI CLARE: What might we learn about queer/trans disabled intimacies if, for a moment, we pull the notion of intimacy away from desire, pleasure,

romance, sex, even love? Allow intimacy to simply mean connection and closeness. Intimacies as irrevocable as gravity. Those of us who fall and fall and fall and those of us who crawl, scoot, slide as ways of moving through the world know such closeness with the ground. We experience both the unyielding danger of a hard stumble and the steady comfort of the floorboards and concrete beneath our wheels and crutches, feet and beds.

Intimacies as constant as skin and bone, liver and kidney, however we relate to our bodyminds. As necessary as sun and water and food. As persistent as hunger when food disappears—SSI (Supplemental Security Income) and food stamps stretched thin at the end of every month, starvation in the middle of war or famine. As ordinary as pain and heating pads.

Intimacies as messy as interdependence. On every scale, all of us—disabled or not, queer or not—are interdependent with the planet, with the beings who inhale carbon dioxide and exhale oxygen, with the people we pay for care, with friends and family who keep showing up—sometimes in helpful ways, other times in controlling ways. Very few of these interdependencies are entirely easy. Some of them are sweet and nourishing. But many of them are laced with desperation, power imbalances, and burnout. In all these permutations, interdependence brings us close to each other—human and more-than-human, sentient and nonsentient.

Here in the US—the belly of the empire amid climate chaos and fascism—thinking about intimacy feels like a luxury. And yet, as ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement) occupies city after city, targets schools and churches, farms and factories, terrorizing immigrant communities, our widespread resistance roots itself in connection and closeness. Disrupting ICE's brutality; documenting the state-sponsored abductions of Black and brown people; making the harassment, even murder, of protesters visible; singing outside courthouses; delivering food; driving neighborhood kids to school; fundraising to pay rent and legal fees are all acts of intimacy. If we dismiss intimacies as luxuries or relegate them solely to the province of sex and romance, we risk missing the many ways they keep us alive.

CONCLUDING THE ROUNDTABLE AND OPENING FUTURE DISCUSSIONS

As we have noted in the introduction, many perspectives remain missing from these multilogues. We desire future conversations that include voices representing the complicated interplay of racialization, ethnicization, and disablement—dynamics that need to be articulated from concrete

locations, as the theorization of racialization developed with respect to the specificity of US history and chattel slavery cannot be transposed to other times and spaces; similarly, the conversations gathered here do not reflect the vast array of religious and spiritual diversities.

In Europe, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The war is one of the most significant producers of disablement and debility there is. The violent attack has created forms of solidarity and intimacy locally as well as internationally/transnationally. It has led to cripqueer *microintimacies* that do not leave trace in the "large narratives" of the war and resistance, to gesture back to Natalia's words—*microintimacies* between soldiers, people helping each other by sharing both material and non-material resources, people helping refugees and people on the run. . . Very possibly, new forms of advocacy and emancipation movements of people disabled in the armed conflict will follow once the violent phases of the war are finally quenched. This remains to be seen and critically observed in order to identify whose voices and experiences are missing from such representations and which forms of disabilities, debilities, and hurt are, and are not, hailed as traces of past bravery and the fight for freedom.

Our attention and thoughts also turn to people on the move who have left their homes to escape persecution, discrimination, economic disadvantage, environmental pressures, natural disasters, political instability, limited educational and employment opportunities, and many other factors. This includes queer and disabled people who acquire impairments looking for a "habitable world: a world that wants [them] in it," to adopt Nancy Mairs's turn of phrase (63). As people from the Global South migrate towards the Global North, many Northern societies increasingly perceive themselves as besieged fortresses, seeking to defend their borders against perceived waves of those who are labelled as racial and cultural Others. The spread of the Fortress Europe mentality has given rise to political narratives that frame migration as a threat to economic stability, cultural cohesion, and national security. As a result, people on the move are not presented as individuals seeking security or opportunity, but as external pressures to be contained through walls, surveillance technologies, detention centers, and, increasingly, restrictive border regimes, as the example of Poland best shows, where in recent years the right to asylum has many times been suspended at the Belarus border, contributing to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in that region. Thus, the Polish-Belarusian border has become a place where the "right to maim" (Puar) has been exercised, "a place that produces disability" (Pamuła, Król, and Hajdarowicz).

We hope this text will encourage readers to keep asking questions such as: who is not at the (round) table? What other questions demand our

urgent attention? Which uncomfortable issues do we avoid? All of these are essential to forging intersectional coalitional politics, solidarity, and intimacies, as well as to crip and queer world-makings in the arts, academia, and far beyond, especially when the tools we have do not suffice, and we need to start articulating new tools and refashioning the ones we have to be able to speak to the changing landscape of violence, marginalization, and destruction, but also to hope, desire, and world-making.

And once again, we, Katarzyna and Kateřina, want to end by expressing our thanks to our colleagues in these multilogues. We know they have taken time away from other projects, from organizing assistance, resting, and planning. We are grateful for this space and time of sharing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Alexandre Baril: This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through Insight Grant No. 435-2023-0049. I am deeply grateful to Marjorie Silverman for her careful revision of the English language in my responses to the prompts. My thanks extend to the co-editors of this roundtable for their invaluable support throughout the publication process.

Agnieszka Kołodziejczak: This work was created as part of the Research Project no. UMO-2023/49/N/HS2/00984 (Preludium 22), financed by the National Science Centre in Poland.

Kateřina Kolářová: The work on the Roundtable was supported by an Aktion scholarship and stay at CEU (Central European University) in Vienna, in spring 2026.

Daniela Komanická: The research was supported by the Charles University, project GA UK No. 402321.

Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria E. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute, 1987.

Baril, Alexandre. "'Doctor, am I an Anglophone trapped in a Francophone body?' An Intersectional Analysis of 'Trans-crip-t Time' in Ableist, Cisnormative, Anglonormative Societies." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2016, pp. 155–72. https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2016.14

Baril, Alexandre. *Undoing Suicidism: A Trans, Queer, Crip Approach to Rethinking (Assisted) Suicide*. Temple UP, 2023.

Barokka, Khairani. *Indigenous Species*. Tilted Axis, 2016.
Barokka, Khairani. *Rope*. Nine Arches, 2017.
Bauman, H-Dirksen L., and Joseph J. Murray. *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*. U of Minnesota P, 2014.
Bauman, H-Dirksen L., and Joseph J. Murray. "Deaf Studies in the 21st Century: 'Deaf-Gain' and the Future of Human Diversity." *The Oxford Handbook of Deaf Studies, Language, and Education, Volume 2*, edited by Marc Marschark and Patricia Elizabeth Spencer, Oxford UP, 2010.
Belser, Julia Watts. "Vital Wheels: Disability, Relationality, and the Queer Animacy of Vibrant Things." *Hypatia*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2016, pp. 5–21. https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12217
Belser, Julia Watts, et al. "Falling in Love with the Crows." *On Crip Technique, Knowledge and Expertise: Bodies of Knowledge: Choreographies of Care—A Gathering* Symposium, 10–12 Oct. 2025, HAU Hebbel am Ufer (HAU2), Berlin, Germany.
boss_moonshine. "Проєкт нового Цивільного кодексу необхідно відкликати" ["The Draft of the New Civil Code Must Be Withdrawn"]. *Instagram*, 21 Feb. 2026, https://www.instagram.com/p/DVBQL9eCDY2/, accessed 3 Mar. 2026.
Charters, Kristen. "Beyond Vision: Designing for the Deaf." 2014. Syracuse University, Architecture thesis prep.
Chen, Mel Y. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Duke UP, 2012. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822395447
Chen, Mel Y., et al., editors. *Crip Genealogies*. Duke UP, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478093725
Clare, Eli. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Duke UP, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373520
Clare, Eli. *Unfurl: Survivals, Sorrows, and Dreaming*. Duke UP, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1353/book.138814
Cubacub, Sky. "Radical Visibility: A Queercrip Dress Reform Movement Manifesto." *Wellcome Collection*, 2015, https://wellcomecollection.org/works/ty9at3rg, accessed 3 Mar. 2026.
Draft Civil Code of Ukraine [*Проєкт Цивільного кодексу України—Кодексу права приватного*]. Bill No. 69528. *Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine*, 2025, https://itd.rada.gov.ua/billinfo/Bills/Card/69528, accessed 3 Mar. 2026.
Dunaj, Magdalena. "GŁUCHY-ŚWIAT. Głuchota w perspektywie antropologii zaangażowanej." 2015. University of Lodz, PhD thesis.
Erevelles, Nirmala. *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137001184
Fight For Right. "Позиція Fight For Right щодо проєкту нового Цивільного кодексу" ["Fight For Right's Position on the Draft of the New Civil

Code"]. *Instagram*, 26 Feb. 2026, https://www.instagram.com/p/DVNsCjXDCdf/, accessed 3 Mar. 2026.
Gaard, Greta. "Ecofeminism and Wilderness." *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1997, pp. 5–24. https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics199719136
Głusza/Deafland. Curated by Dagmara Stanosz et al., 24 June 2022–4 June 2023, Silesian Museum, Katowice.
Insight NGO. "Зупинити проєкт Цивільного кодексу та його клони!" ["Stop the Civil Code Project and Its Clones!"]. *Instagram*, 10 Feb. 2026, https://www.instagram.com/p/DUk6hPlCGLl/, accessed 3 Mar. 2026.
Isin, Engin. "Enacting Citizenship." *Encyclopedia of Citizenship Studies*, edited by Marisol García Cabeza and Thomas Faist, Edward Elgar, 2024, pp. 268–73. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800880467.ch46
Jarosz, Ewelina, and Justyna Górowska. "Cyber Nymphs: Manifesto for the Hydrosexual Movement in Art." *Justyna Górowska (Wetmewild)*, 2023, https://justynagorowska.com/Hydrosex-manifesto, accessed 10 Feb. 2026.
Jarosz, Ewelina, Karolina Kolenda, and Tomasz Sikora, editors. *Brackish Blue Humanities and Environmental Art: Thinking with the Baltic Sea*. Routledge, forthcoming.
Johnson, Merri Lisa, and Robert McRuer. "Cripistemologies. Introduction." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2014, pp. 127–47. https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.12
Kafer, Alison. "After Crip, Crip Afters." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 120, no. 2, 2021, pp. 415–34. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916158
Kafer, Alison. "Crip Kin, Manifesting." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–37. https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v5i1.29618
Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana UP, 2013. https://doi.org/10.2979/6841.0
Kazemi, Sona. *Disabling Relations: Wounded Bodyminds and Transnational Praxis*. Temple UP, 2025.
Kolářová, Kateřina. *Rehabilitative Postsocialism: Disability, Sex, and Race in Eastern Europe*. U of Michigan P, 2025. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11732880
Komanická, Daniela. "Žijem život na hrane [Living a Life on the Edge]." *Iné telá.txt*, edited by Johana Hedva et al., Display—Združení pro výzkum a kolektivní praxi, angažovaný měsíčník Kapitál a umělecký kolektiv APART, 2018, pp. 33–79.
Komanická, Daniela, and Lucie Hradecká. "Právo na rozkoš: O sexuální asistenci pro lidi s 'postižením'" ["Right to Pleasure: On Sexual Assistance for Disabled People"]. *Gender a výzkum/Gender and Research*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2016, pp. 89–95. https://doi.org/10.13060/12130028.2016.17.1.258

Kotowski, Daniel. "Głuchy narrator. Rozmowa z Danielem Kotowskim." *Szum*, no. 1, 2024, https://magazynszum.pl/gluchy-narrator-rozmowa-z-danielem-kotowskim/, accessed 29 Aug. 2025.

Kowalczyk, Irena, *Poza granicą skargi. Dzienniki* [*Beyond the Possibility of Grievance. Journals*]. Wydawnictwo Literackie Kraków, 1974.

Mairs, Nancy. *Waist-High in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled*. Beacon, 1997.

Martino, Alan Santinele, and Margaret Campbell. "Exercising Intimate Citizenship Rights and (Re)Constructing Sexualities." *The Routledge Handbook of Disability Activism*, edited by Maria Berghs et al., Routledge, 2019, pp. 97–109. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351165082-8

Martsenyuk, Tamara. *ЛГБТ-движение в Украине: 10 лет спустя* [*LGBT Movement in Ukraine: 10 Years Later*]. The National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, 2010.

Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Translated by Steve Corcoran, Duke UP, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478007227

McRuer, Robert. "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence." *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, Routledge, 2013, pp. 369–78.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York UP, 2006.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance*. New York UP, 2018.

Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy, Interdependence, and Disability Justice." *Leaving Evidence*, 2017, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/, accessed 10 Jan. 2026.

Neimanis, Astrida. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474275415

Neimanis, Astrida. "Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology." Interview by Richard Bright. *Interalia Magazine*, 2018, https://www.interaliamag.org/interviews/astrida-neimanis/, accessed 10 Jan. 2026.

Nierodzińska, Zofia. "Rzucenie ciała do walki." *Dwutygodnik*, no. 349, 2022, https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/10476-rzucenie-ciala-do-walki.html, accessed 29 Aug. 2025.

Ojrzyńska, Katarzyna. "Ecorelational Aesthetics. Embracing Animality and Conserving Disability." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2023, pp. 489–505. https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2023.36

Ojrzyńska, Katarzyna. "More-Than-Wet Cripistemology for the Baltic Sea: A Case Study in Young Adult Literature." *Brackish Blue Humanities and Environmental Art: Thinking with the Baltic Sea*, edited by Ewelina Jarosz, Karolina Kolenda, and Tomasz Sikora, Routledge, forthcoming.

Ojrzyńska, Katarzyna. "Whales, Water, and Disability: Towards a Blue Cultural Disability Studies." *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2021, pp. 268–83. https://doi.org/10.4467/20843860PK.21.019.14076

Pamuła, Natalia, Agnieszka Król, and Inga Hajdarowicz. *Niepełnosprawność, ludzie w drodze i rasizm. Czyli o studiach o niepełnosprawności i granicy* [*Disability, People on the Move, and Racism. Disability Studies and the Border*]. 26 Apr. 2025, Centrum Sztuki Włączającej/Teatr 21, Warsaw. Lecture. *YouTube*, uploaded by Teatr 21, 17 Feb. 2026 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vd4dK7L6no4, accessed 13 July 2026.

Pamuła, Natalia, Agnieszka Król, and Agnieszka Wołowicz. "Paradoksy widzialności: o związkach teorii" ["Paradoxes of Visibility: The Relationship between Queer Theory and Disability Studies"]. *Teksty Drugie*, no. 1, 2022, pp. 152–69. https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2022.1.10

Pieniążek, Sylwia, and Malwina Dankiewicz. "Analiza tożsamości kulturowej Głuchych." *Kwartalnik naukowy*, vol. 2, no. 34. 2018, pp. 429–48. *Towarzystwo Uniwersyteckie Fides et Ratio*, n.d., https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/Presentations0/2018-26Dankiewicz.pdf, accessed 27 Feb. 2026.

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Arsenal Pulp, 2018.

Puar, Jasbir K. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Duke UP, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372530

Queering the Crip, Cripping the Queer. *Schwules Museum*, 2022, https://queer-crip.schwulesmuseum.de/en/, accessed 12 July 2025.

Rezaire, Tabita. *Conscience u.terre.ine/Womb Consciousness*. Les presses du réel, 2022.

Rezaire, Tabita. "Premium Connect." *Vimeo*, uploaded by Tabita Rezaire, 18 Dec. 2017, https://vimeo.com/247826259?fl=pl&fe=vl, accessed 24 Apr. 2026.

Sachuk, Yulia, Iryna Tekuchova, and Hanna Zaremba-Kosovych. *Історія не бкз нас: становлення руху за права людей з інвалідністю в Україні* [*History Is Not Without Us: The Formation of the Movement for the Rights of People with Disabilities in Ukraine*]. Vydavnytstvo, 2023.

Sandahl, Carrie. "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1–2, 2003, pp. 25–56. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9-1-2-25

Sandilands, Catriona. "Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature: Toward a Queer Ecology." *Organization & Environment*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2002, pp. 131–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/10826602015002002

Sins Invalid. *We Love Like Barnacles*. *Vimeo*, uploaded by Sins Invalid, 6 Apr. 2022, no longer available online.

Solvang, Per Koren, and Hilde Haualand. "Accessibility and Diversity: Deaf Space in Action." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2012.761158

Sprinkle, Annie, Beth Stephens, and Jennie Klein. *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover*. U of Minnesota P, 2021. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1v3gr06

Stanosz, Dagmara. "Deaf design? Wyzwania projektowania inkluzywnego na przykładzie wystawy Głusza w Muzeum Śląskim." *Formy XYZ*, no. 19, 2023, pp. 1–19.

Taylor, Sunaura. *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*. The New P, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781620971291

Taylor, Sunaura. "Disability and Interdependence." *Messy Eating: Conversations on Animals as Food*, edited by Samantha King et al., Fordham UP, 2017, pp. 143–56.

Taylor, Sunaura. *Disabled Ecologies: Lessons from a Wounded Desert*. U of California P, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520393073

Tomaszewski, Piotr, and Ewelina Moroń. "W poszukiwaniu eklektycznego paradygmatu edukacji głuchych." *Studia Edukacyjne*, no. 49, 2018, pp. 281–97. https://doi.org/10.14746/se.2018.49.17

Want. Directed by Loree Erickson, Femmegimp Productions, 2006.

Wong, Alice. Introduction. *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2024, pp. 8–12.

Alexandre Baril is a Full Professor at the Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies and the School of Social Work at the University of Ottawa, Canada. His research is situated at the intersection of gender, queer, trans, disability/crip/Mad studies, critical gerontology, and critical suicidology. His commitment to equity has been recognized through several awards for his involvement in queer, trans, and disabled/Mad communities, including the Canadian Disability Studies Association's Tanis Doe Francophone Award (2020), the University of Ottawa President's Award for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (2021), and the King Charles III Coronation Medal awarded by the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario (2025). He is the author of *Undoing Suicidism: A Trans, Queer, Crip Approach to Rethinking (Assisted) Suicide* (Temple University Press, 2023), available in open access. The book has been translated into French (Éditions de la rue Dorion, 2025) and adapted into a European edition, available in open access (Éditions Burn-Août, 2026).

White, disabled, and genderqueer, **Eli Clare** (he/they) lives near Lake Champlain in unceded Abenaki territory (also known as Vermont), in the United States, where he writes and proudly claims a penchant for rabble-rousing. He has written two books of essays, the award-winning *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* and *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, and a collection of poetry, *The Marrow's Telling: Words in Motion*. His newest book, a mixed genre volume titled *Unfurl: Survivals, Sorrows, and Dreaming*, was released in September 2025. Additionally, he has been published in dozens of journals and anthologies. Eli works as a traveling poet, storyteller, and social justice educator, and currently serves on the Community Advisory Board for the Disability Project at the Transgender Law Center. Among other pursuits, he has walked across the United States for peace, coordinated a rape prevention program, and helped organize the first ever Queer Disability Conference.

Ewelina Jarosz (she/they) is a hydrosexual scholar working within the queer-feminist currents of the blue humanities. They are Assistant Professor in the Department of Media and Cultural Studies at the National Education Commission University in Kraków, Poland, where they also serve as the accessibility coordinator for the Institute of Polish Philology. Her research focuses on the intersections of environmental art, pleasure activism, and queer ecologies. She is a two-time recipient of the Kościuszko Foundation Scholarship. As an artist and researcher, she collaborates with the E.A.R.T.H. Lab at the University of California, Santa Cruz, USA, and the Posthumanities Hub at Linköping University, Sweden. She is a member of the artist-research duo cyber_nymphs and a co-founder of the hydrosexual movement in art, as well as the Blue Humanities Archive project. She is also a member of AICA Internationale.

Agnieszka Kołodziejczak is a deaf woman artist passionate about painting, comics, iconography, medieval miniature, text writing, graphic design, and collage. A graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz and the University of Lodz, Poland, she holds a PhD in humanities in the field of culture and art, paying attention to accessibility in professional life; she is Research Assistant at the Department of the History of Painting and Sculpture at the University of Lodz; leader of a National Science Centre research grant, *The Art of the Deaf People in Poland—History and Analysis*. She is a project specialist at the FIDEES Social Ideas Foundation. She is also vice president of the Ucieleśnienie Foundation, co-founder of the Group of Deaf Artists in Poland, and a social activist who enjoys learning new things and writing

new projects. She was the curator of the *Głusza/Deafland* exhibition in Silesia Museum in Katowice, Poland.

Daniela Komanická is a Slovak PhD candidate in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. As an extensively physically disadvantaged/disabled electric wheelchair user, she developed her own personal assistance (PA) system at a time when such services did not officially exist in the post-socialist Central European context. Her autoethnographic research—situated at the intersection of Disability Studies, Gender Studies, and Social and Cultural Anthropology—focuses on PA from the perspective of the service user. She is the author of "Žijem život na hrane: autoetnografické záznamy" ["Living a Life on the Edge: Autoethnographic Records"], published in the anthology *Iné telá.txt* [*Other Bodies.txt*]. She has long been advocating for the rights of extensively physically disadvantaged/disabled people and other discriminated minorities. Currently, she is completing a research article examining the contrast between her own lived realities of assistance and the experiences of PA users in Sweden.

Justyna Lipko-Konieczna is a dramaturg, theatre scholar, and educator. She is the programme director, board member, and dramaturg at the Center of Inclusive Art/Theatre 21, in Warsaw, Poland, where she integrates disability studies into contemporary theatre practice. Lipko-Konieczna is the author of numerous theatre scripts and academic texts, a co-creator of inclusive educational programmes, and a specialist in critical dramaturgy, bridging theory and practice.

Natalia Pamuła works at the American Studies Center at the University of Warsaw, Poland. Her research focuses on disability discourses and representations in Polish socialist and postsocialist culture and literature. Her articles appeared, among other places, in *Aspasia*, *Teksty Drugie*, and *East European Politics Societies and Cultures*. Her book, *Disability Disruptions: Family, Gender, and Care in Post-1989 Poland*, was published by Illinois University Press in 2026. Currently, she is working on a project investigating the history and discourses of neurosis and mental health in socialist Poland.

Filip Pawlak is a theatre maker and self-advocate for artists with disabilities. A graduate of the Film School in Katowice, Poland, and Malmö Theatre Academy at Lund University, Sweden. Since 2025, he has been a PhD student in art at the Krzysztof Kieślowski Film School at the University of Silesia, Poland. He has been involved in the international project Europe

Beyond Access as an ambassador and expert. Together with Łukasz Ronduda, he is the author of the multidisciplinary project *Freak Show*, staged at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, among other places. In 2024, he was a recipient of a Minister of Culture and National Heritage scholarship in the Young Poland programme. In 2024, he was artist-in-residence at the European Art Centre Hellerau in Dresden, Germany, and Komuna Warsaw, and, in 2025, at Skanes Dansteater in Malmö, Sweden.

Perel (they/them) is an interdisciplinary artist whose work moves between dance, performance, and text, and explores themes of disability, care, sexuality, and historical trauma. Utilizing choreography to examine power exchange between the artist and audience, "Perel is a master at timing, of tension, relief, and intimacy while creating a space of learning and unlearning" (Victoria Dejaco, *Spike Magazine*). Perel tours and teaches internationally at organizations in New York and Berlin, Germany. Most recently, Perel has performed at Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin, and Lincoln Center in New York. In 2022, Perel created, and continues to lead, the mentorship program, DREAM: Dance, Radicality, Embodiment, and Access for Makers, at Brooklyn Arts Exchange in New York. They received the prestigious Disability Futures Fellowship from United States Artists and the Ford and Mellon foundations, as well as the Hauptstadtkulturfonds in Berlin for the premiere and tour of their new work, *Natural Acts*.

Dr **Magda(lena) Szarota** is a disability and human rights academic and advocate, photographer, and published poet. She co-founded the first association of women with disabilities in Poland in 2004, and has been involved in policy advocacy at the European Union and the United Nations. Her artistic works have been shown in curated exhibitions in Poland, the UK, Australia, and Brazil. As part of her graduate studies at the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw, Poland, and scholarships at the Library of Congress, USA, and the University of Washington, Seattle, USA, she conducted research on the photography of pioneering women photographers from the turn of the 20th century and their use of various photographic methods. She is also the author of texts on photography and women's engagement in the field, including the text for the Annie Leibovitz exhibition *Women*, presented in Poland.

Hanna Zaremba-Kosovych is a sociologist and Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Social Anthropology at the Ethnology Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Lviv. Her research focuses on social (in)justice, disability studies, intellectual disability, and qualitative methods. She has held research positions at Indiana University,

Bloomington, USA, and the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland, and has collaborated with NGOs such as Fight For Right and SafeBirth. She was an analyst in a number of research projects, including *WARPATH: The Story of the Rescue of People with Disabilities during the Full-Scale Russian Invasion of Ukraine* and *You Can Believe: The History of People with Disabilities since 1945 to 2020 (Germany–Ukraine)*. Zaremba-Kosovych is a co-author of the book *History Is Not Without Us: The Formation of the Movement for the Rights of People with Disabilities in Ukraine*. She is actively engaged in interdisciplinary and policy-oriented research.

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.03

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Jen Ham
University of California Santa Cruz

Sabrina Ali Jamal-Eddine
University of South Carolina
University of Illinois Chicago

Cripping Intimacy: Interdependence and Promiscuous Care

ABSTRACT

"Cripping Intimacy" is an account of crip ways of living and loving as resistance amidst a phobic majoritarian public sphere. Through a shared narrative of access intimacy—the elusive affective experience of having one's access needs met—and promiscuous care—the multiplication of care through experimentation—the authors trace the practices they have co-created together over the last twenty years of friendship and disablement. Beyond meeting access needs, the authors gesture toward how these sorts of intimate acts can bring into reach/being the crip worlds not yet available.

Keywords: crip intimacy, access intimacy, promiscuous care, interdependence.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 15 Sept. 2025. Verified: 25 Jan. 2026. Accepted: 30 May 2026.

PROLOGUE

JEN: My hands are full as we wait in line at the New Orleans thrift store whose poorly insulated walls strain half-heartedly to keep out the muggy December swamp air. I've looped the strap of Sabs' water bottle around the last three fingers of my left hand, leaving the palm open and remaining two fingers to clutch her clunky encased iPhone while draping her crop beige sweater thrift find over the crook of my elbow. My right arm winds around her left to tether me in space and orientation as she steps us closer to the cashier.

"Are you two sisters?" an elderly man asks with his voice like cracked leather lilting at the edges in a slight accent. I nudge her conspiratorially with the linked arm, careful not to jab too hard at her sensitive assemblage of slippery joints and surgical alterations.

"No," we deny collectively with a shadow of a smile dusting both our lips.

"Then you must be *very* good friends," says the cashier at a different thrift store in the surprisingly crisp San Francisco summer six months later in a logical response to the repetition of the same question and same denial. This time, there is a knowing pronunciation to the way "friends" saunters from her lips—as if that much physical contact, the flushed joining of her arm to mine in the service of sighted guiding, could be nothing other than more than platonic.

We look nothing alike, considering that one of us is Arab and the other is Asian, but 20+ years of serving as each other's access partner exudes an imprint of deep familiarity often unconsciously recognized as kinship and other times speculated as romance. This misrecognition has comically happened time and time again over the last 20 years, revealing a public incapable of imagining intimacy beyond the familial or the romantic. Despite our ethnically distinct appearances, homophobic tendencies lead people to assume familial ties before romantic ones, while a lack of exposure to disability precludes their consideration of these ties as access intimacy.

Mia Mingus coined the term "access intimacy" to describe the elusive experience of having one's access needs implicitly and affectively met or even just understood if nothing materially changes besides a shared touch, look, laugh that reassures togetherness in this moment and that you've got each other's backs. The following shared narrative contributes our experience of living access intimacy.

INTERDEPENDENCE

Mingus describes access intimacy as the ease, safety, and relational closeness you feel with others when entering space where all your access needs are met. In order to understand access intimacy, one must also understand

interdependence and the relationality between these two concepts. Interdependence rejects the myth of independence and its underlying Western capitalist politic of individualism. Akemi Nishida explains that while the inability to perform independence has been weaponized against disabled people, "interdependent care is often imagined as and sprouts from the core belief that everyone is dependent on one another and requires care as much as everyone contributes to the care and well-being of others" (129). While Nishida illuminates the ubiquitous nature of interdependence, Mingus illuminates the ontology of interdependence as she states that "[a]ccess intimacy is interdependence in action." Ultimately, access intimacy is the mechanism of action that enables the praxis of interdependence. Nishida explains that "politically, interdependency is a way to value community-based collective and mutual care [as] resistance work that pushes against the independence-driven and individualist demands enforced within the United States" (128). Actualizing interdependence through the praxis of access intimacy becomes a tangible method of resistance to Western individualism.

SABS: We met when we were just ten years old. We were introduced to each other by a classmate on the first day of fifth grade where we had one of those rare, immediate clicks of best friendship. Jen's sense of humor, my envy of her clothes that I could never wear as the child of a Lebanese Muslim immigrant, our shared love for cooking—often followed by scolding from Jen's Korean immigrant mother who was dissatisfied with our attempts at cleaning—shopping, talking about boys we would never speak to, and attempting to get the perfect mid-air jumping pics created a foundational bond between us. I have only memorized four people's phone numbers in my life—my mother's, my father's, my brother's, and Jen's. Jen is my kin. She is a living, breathing archive who knows more about me, my life, and my access needs than anyone on this earth.

When we met twenty years ago, Jen had low vision. She was accompanied by an array of assistive devices that allowed her to zoom in on the whiteboard and zoom in on her papers with high contrast. I had a curvature in my spine that caused aches when sitting on the ground, but I had not yet crossed the invisible, arbitrary, ever-moving, contextually dependent line that might label me as "disabled." Following Jen's lead, we quickly developed access intimacy. For us, this includes linking arms for guidance everywhere we go, whispers of "watch your step," which we abbreviated as "WYS" pronounced "WIS," and providing rich visual descriptions of men, environments, outfits, and movie screens. Through this process, my positionality and consequential interpretation and perception of the world have become a part of Jen.

Our school district was phenomenal at both supporting and facilitating our interdependence. Considering our equal honors-level

math proficiencies, they placed us in the same math class for 8 years until graduation. We developed a nearly decade-long routine where we would sit in the back of class and I would fill gaps of inaccessibility, from reading the board to locating Jen's homework assignments, and we would leave class five minutes early to traverse the halls with her close-circuit TV cart prior to the flood of students between classes.

Five years later, I acquired my disability, which was manufactured through medicalized violence. I underwent a 12-level posterior spinal fusion for the curvature in my back and awoke with incessant breathing pain that felt like someone was cutting me with a knife every time I inhaled or moved my arms. I ended up being one of over 500 patients who experienced failed surgeries by the surgeon who eventually fled the country and left many of us with manufactured disability.

During those 2.5 years of non-stop breathing pain prior to undergoing my revision spinal fusion, Jen and I developed a deepened interdependence, expanding the access intimacy we had already built prior to my disablement. We slowly cultivated a routine that included linked arms so I could guide us while Jen carried my water bottle and backpack, something we still practice to this day. We meet each other's access needs. Nishida describes "affective collectivity," a concept connected to the type of access intimacy that is built between people over time, as "an ontological and sensual connection that is nurtured as care partners co-experience one another's differently shaped bodies, movements, rhythms, heat, and odors, among other sensory information through recursive care tasks or as they go, side by side, through every up and down of each other's daily lives" (37). Symbiotically moving side by side and up and down steps with linked arms, Jen and I quite literally embody the expression "joined at the hip"—although considering our height difference, my hip is half a foot higher than Jen's. Our co-movement and familiarity with each other's bodies have become ingrained as second nature for us. Affective collectivity also includes accumulation of "haptic memories and knowledge . . . of each other's distinct capacities, needs, paces, and even desires" (Nishida 105–06). Our interdependence, repetitive praxis of access intimacy, and affective collectivity have further deepened our crip kinship and sense of connectedness as human beings.

My life changed drastically at the age of 16 upon awaking from my first surgery: I could no longer play soccer, attend summer camp, go to school dances, ride a bike, run, etc.; my days were consumed by pain. Because of the unspoken pact surgeons have with each other, it took 2.5 years for me to finally undergo a full revision surgery, which I did through taking an institutionally approved year-long medical leave of absence between high school and college.

My high school developed a plan with an array of accommodations for me after I had acquired my disability and prior to undergoing my revision surgery: these included using the elevator, having an accessible parking spot, and adjusting my schedule. My disability was non-apparent, and a memory I will never forget is a time when Jen and I were using the elevator between classes. The only other people who ever used the elevator were students with broken legs. Linked arms, we entered the elevator, and a student with a broken leg looked down at all four of our uncompromised legs and said, "what's wrong with you?!" I muttered "uhhhh," knowing that the ten-second elevator ride would not be long enough to explain my story of medicalized violence and non-apparent disability. Jen quickly chimed in, "SHE'S PREGNANT!" He said, "oh, okay," and we promptly exited the elevator, laughing our way to the next class. In addition to becoming my arms and back, Jen also became my memory, my emotional support, and my personal massage therapist. My memory was severely impacted from all of the medications I needed after undergoing major surgeries and from developing forgetfulness as a survival strategy to trauma. Jen constantly tells me stories that I have no recollection of. Because she is the only person on this earth who knows everything about me, she is the only person who can serve as my systematic, 20-year archival memory: she tells me stories from the last two decades of the life we shared together in-person and virtually, and also reminds me of the reasons why I broke up with past partners while making sure my memory, or lack thereof, does not drive me to resume toxic relationships.

So essentially, for the first five years of our friendship, I was a non-disabled person practicing access intimacy and interdependence with a disabled person. Mingus clarifies that access intimacy is not charity or help, although it is often harmfully perceived as such by non-disabled people when one person is labeled as disabled and the other is not. This is rooted in the pathologization of certain care needs, meaning that the care I provide Jen is recognized, acknowledged, and legitimized more than the care Jen provides me, both before and after I acquired my disability. Nishida explains how society's failure to recognize the interdependent care that disabled people provide is rooted in the hierarchization and "standardization of care offered by the care industrial complex [which] often values physical care over emotional and spiritual care" (9).

Prior to acquiring my disability, Jen supported me and my humanness. Mingus explains, "[t]here is a good feeling after and while you are experiencing access intimacy. It is a freeing, light, loving feeling. It brings the people who are a part of it closer; it builds and deepens connection." Before my first surgery, I experienced just as much benefit from practicing access intimacy as I did afterwards. This is in part because having access

needs is not dependent on a socially constructed disabled versus non-disabled binary—I had (unrecognized) access needs before and after experiencing disablement. This is in part because I experienced the relational euphoria of being in a deepened relationship that only a radical practice of access intimacy can achieve. This is in part because interdependence mends aloneness in a capitalist society that facilitates isolation through the compulsory promotion of independence.

Our practice of access intimacy has never been stagnant either: it is a fluid practice that oftentimes requires the navigation of conflicting, complex needs which slowly evolve as our respective impairments shift. For example, when Jen's vision completely diminished, she got a guide dog named Verna. I am allergic to dogs and sensitive to sound, so Verna's shedding, jingling collar, and loud snores made sleeping difficult for me when sharing space. We have worked around this friction when we are together through white noise from an air purifier and having me pre-medicate with allergy medicine the week prior to making a visit. Additionally, my ADHD has intensified, and my restless leg syndrome makes it difficult for Jen to share a bed with me, so we often try to get two double beds when possible. Another friction we have worked through is that my back disability can make it painful for me to link arms with Jen for longer than a short walk. When we go on long walks or hikes together, we use a tether or a flannel that allows us to link together without me needing to raise my arm. Jen is also losing her hearing which will inevitably shift our practice of access intimacy in the future; however, we will continue to innovate with and for each other.

As someone who is disabled and queer, I have witnessed the inextricability between queer and crip kinship, and it is rooted in shared practices of radical acceptance and love. And this brings me to my final reflection on access intimacy, which is love. Jen and I have emotionally supported each other—to the best of our respective abilities—in navigating relationships, sex, and romance as disabled girls and eventually women. From navigating my weeklong back pain flare after experiencing my first orgasm to collectively crafting *crip coming out* texts for Jen's prospective partners to let them know that she is blind—our slyest attempt yet suggests that cat cafes will *not* be an option for the first date because Jen's guide dog will also be in attendance.

Access intimacy thoroughly complicates romantic relationships for disabled people. It is a pre-requisite for any prospective partner, and it also deepens our connection with, and attachment to, our respective romantic partner. In my first long-term relationship, access intimacy manifested as my ex-girlfriend massaging my back every night, and in my second long-term relationship, it manifested as my ex-boyfriend effortlessly placing me on my back every time I got my breathing pain—although many of the

times I got the breathing pain were from interactions with him considering that he was double my size.

Mingus explains that

> access intimacy is not easy to build. When it doesn't happen magically and organically, it has been hard to create. It requires a lot of trust and faith and practice. And it has been lonely because not everyone is ready for it (or even a good fit for it) and it has taken discipline inside myself to not settle for crappy access when I don't have to, which often means I have less access.

It can be more challenging for disabled people to leave toxic relationships because mastery of access intimacy tends to be rare and, once you get used to being in the euphoric space of access intimacy with a partner, it can be difficult to imagine letting it go. Mingus states: "[A]ccess intimacy makes love more possible in my life and in myself. And I will always be grateful for that. I'll never understand the magic of it or how it works exactly, only that it softens my heart and lets me exhale."

The last friction I will raise from my personal romantic relationship comes from partners not always understanding that non-sexual access intimacy takes place beyond monogamous relationships. I am a femme woman. I remember that after I guided my blind classmate/friend, my masculine ex-girlfriend questioned why I was linking arms with a man and questioned our phone calls when I would fill the gaps left by the inaccessible online platform used within our class. While touch, love, and access intimacy are sexualized and partitioned, crip kinship is resistance.

PROMISCOUS CARE

JEN: I'm on the way to a United Auto Worker's Region 6 union summer camp with an academic researcher I had just gone on strike with and an estranged bargaining committee member. Both these people are more or less strangers—just the first of many I'd come to depend on during the weeklong training. It's one of the first times I didn't coordinate to bring Sabs in for access support on a trip—partially because I've been communicating heavily with the organizers about my needs and partially because I experienced spontaneous organic care during our strike just months before. For the first time since becoming totally blind, I felt I could trust people to step up when I needed it. Throughout the week, I would meet Kani, Ren, Amy, Joyce, Matt, Victor, Luna, and so many more who took part and parcel in creating access for me: whether it was walking

to and from the dorms to our ever-changing meeting room for the day, sneaking out pizza slices from the food court, finding relief areas for my guide dog, reading out what was unexpectedly written on the board during workshops, sitting quietly in a patch of sun outside when background noise fatigue set in, showing me where the bathrooms were, so on and so forth; I never felt like I could not get a need met.

What I experienced in that week—besides the secrets of a successful organizer—was what the Care Collective calls an "ethics of promiscuous care," practiced with the aim "to multiply the numbers of people we can care for, about and with, thus permitting us to experiment with the ways that we care (33). This is adapted from Douglas Crimp's essay, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," in which he proclaimed that gay men's promiscuity would not be the thing that destroyed them but the very thing that would save them. For Crimp, community safety is less about changing one's individual sex life and behaviors to minimize exposure to the virus and more about sharing resources and supporting those who are HIV-positive or those whose partners are. He explains that living and loving promiscuously is to "protect ourselves and one another" (270).

Rooted in the practice of mutual and polyamorous reciprocity, this kind of promiscuous care unspools the care reserved for the exclusive partner to extend to the many that make up one's ecosystem of lovers, friends, exes, and their relatives. It is an experimental intimacy and care of radical egalitarianism.

In the same vein of revolutionary living and loving, Alexandra Kollontai, a century earlier than the Care Collective, proposed a new political imaginary of love, "winged Eros." In contrast to the demands of bourgeois morality which sequestered "all for the loved one," "[t]he morality of the proletariat demands all for the collective" (Kollontai). Instead of privileging the couple-form and insulating needs and desire within the dyad, Kollontai's "winged Eros" suggests responsibility from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs. Disloyalty to the single loved one opens up equality between persons, mutual recognition of the rights of the other, abolition of belonging and ownership of one to another, listening and understanding the intimate inter-workings of the comrade stranger (Kollontai).

In "Disability, Debility, and Caring Queerly," Crosby and Jakobsen assert that each "autonomous individual is complexly dependent on the labor of others" (81). Instead of privatizing and marketizing such dependencies—in the case of care that is either done by the unremunerated labor of the spouse and supplemented by, or substituted with, contracting a precariously employed care worker within the seclusion of the so-called private sphere—the promiscuity of winged Eros would communize care

for and between both the disabled and not-yet disabled. This way of caring is embedded in the "collective and political project to acknowledge bodily functions as common to all, rather than as something that care workers must make disappear" (Crosby and Jakobsen 95). This is to say, promiscuous care works to resist the regime that organizes our bodymind needs into a political economy that perpetuates precarity and surplus domestic labor. We are all multiply dependent on one another's labors of love. In rejecting the expropriation, exploitation, and monetization of these labors—in the care economy and within the privatized couple—we affirm our shared visceral vulnerability to, and need of, one another as the basis for a radical politics of care.

As tempting as it is to lean on Sabs for my access needs, if I always put those needs on her, it not only puts constraints on what new and different relations could be brought into being but also constricts the kinds of worlds possible. Since Sabs and I live on opposite sides of the country, I can either wait until things line up so that Sabs can be my access partner or I can manipulate contexts to open up the tendrils of relationality and accept to be promiscuous in the kinds of care I make for myself with/and others.

This means that sometimes I toggle between real-time strangers and virtual strangers on the BeMyEyes app. It means walking into a public space and trusting in the crip-come-hither effect to get assisted in finding the counter/table/doorway when your guide dog inevitably lunges for the other dogs or the spilled crumbs on the floor. It means asking the campus pharmacist to sprint with you to catch the right bus. It is how we get care needs met without depending solely on the one friend who knows how to do access, and thereby burning them out. It is how we live the maxim of "access is love"—by teaching others how to meet our access needs and how to voice their own, and how releasing fear of access scarcity opens an abundance of access among the many.

POSTCRIPT

"I had a good friend like that once," the cashier continues as she tallies up the pile of clothes. "We were like sisters but not sisters. . . We did everything together, shared everything . . . but we. . .," she fights for what words to divulge, "grew apart." Her voice hollows with the layers of memories and emotions briefly snatching her away to a different time and place. She starts to say more, begins to, then admonishes herself with a chuckle instead.

I wonder what she thinks—what anyone thinks—as they passively observe me sling the near bursting backpack of thrifted spoils over my slight shoulders with the same naturalness I sling my arm through Sabs'

as she guides my stiletto clad ass over the lifted threshold and out the door, and as she dodges us around dilapidated sidewalk concrete and poles while simultaneously reading me the menu of our happy hour destination: "Ooo, they have crab cakes, coconut shrimp, sweet plantains—WYS—five dollar margaritas . . . oh my god, Jen, that girl's dog looks spot on like Verna. Like spot on."

Feeling a simple contented smile settle with familiarity onto my lips at Sabs' antics and the utter comfort of being so at ease in the world with her, I found my mind meandering back to that cashier; I can taste the decadence of her nostalgia undercut by the sharp tang of her remorse at the loss of her friend. I think how lucky I am to have sustained what Sabs and I have for so many years, but it is also not only luck. It is as much a necessity born out of a crip politics to exist and resist as it is a joy forged by the tenderness of shared identity and experience, which makes longevity not just possible but persevering. It is a peculiarity of crip intimacy that brings worlds closer together so that my bodymind and its needs, struggles, dreams, and desires rub up against Sabs' (and others') and that thing—that ineffable connection that is intimacy—comes to embody something more, something that Alice Wong called "an ever-expanding universe composed of a myriad of heavenly bodies" (xviii).

Works Cited

Care Collective. *Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*. Verso, 2020.

Crimp, Douglas. "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic." *Art and Theory*, no. 43, 1987, pp. 237–71. https://doi.org/10.2307/3397576

Crosby, Christina, and Janet R. Jakobsen. "Disability, Debility, and Caring Queerly." *Social Text*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2020, pp. 77–103. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-8680454

Kollontai, Alexandra. "Make Way for Winged Eros: A Letter to Working Youth." Translated by Alix Holt, *Molodoya Gvardiya*, 1923, https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1923/winged-eros.htm, accessed 20 Aug. 2025.

Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice." *Leaving Evidence*, 12 Apr. 2017, leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/, accessed 30 Aug. 2025.

Nishida, Akemi. *Just Care: Messy Entanglements of Disability, Dependency and Desire*. Temple UP, 2022.

Wong, Alice. *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*. Vintage, 2024.

Jen Ham is a blind-deaf PhD candidate in the History of Consciousness at the University of California Santa Cruz. Her dissertation centers on the political economy of disability and the social domination of health.
jeham@ucsc.edu

Sabrina Ali Jamal-Eddine, PhD, RN, is a health humanities nurse scientist, disability justice scholar-activist, and Assistant Professor in the College of Nursing at the University of South Carolina and previous postdoc in Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois Chicago.
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1474-5954
jamaleds@mailbox.sc.edu

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.04

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Małgorzata Olsza
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

Queer and Crip Reproduction as/in Comics: Networks of Belonging in Aminder Dhaliwal's *Woman World* (2018)

Abstract

This article explores queer/crip reproduction and intimacy in Aminder Dhaliwal's *Woman World* (2018). Drawing on Sara Ahmed's theories of queer phenomenology (2006) and pleasure (2004), Sami Schalk's take on crip pleasure (2024), Alice Wong's reflections on disability intimacy (2024), and recent scholarship in comics studies (Fawaz 2022, Baldanzi 2024), it situates *Woman World* as a queer/crip object that fosters embodied networks of belonging. Set in a world devoid of men, *Woman World* envisions a future where reproduction occurs through scientific means, allowing relationships to center on solidarity, kinship, and embodied intimacy. The depiction of queer/crip love between Layla, a disabled character, and her partner Lara, exemplifies Ahmed's and Schalk's notion of queer/crip pleasure as the convergence of bodies in both sexual and affective intimacy. *Woman World* also functions as an intimate companion for readers/viewers, especially those from queer/crip communities (who often experience structural exclusion). As a historically marginalized form, comics possess a unique capacity for fostering affective connections (Gibson 2023). The tactile and visual qualities of the hand-drawn medium enhance intimacy (Szép 2020), allowing readers/viewers to engage physically and emotionally with the text. As a queer/crip object, *Woman World* enables unexpected connections and fosters networks of belonging that resist hetero- and able-bodied-normativity.

Keywords: (North-)American comics, graphic embodiment, queer/crip object, queer/crip pregnancy, queer/crip reproduction.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Research for this article was funded in whole by the National Science Centre, Poland (Narodowe Centrum Nauki), SONATA Grant No. 2022/47/D/HS2/00054 (*The Pregnant Body and Reproductive Rights in American Comics and Graphic Novels (1970–2022)*). **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 7 Sept. 2025. Verified: 6 Feb. 2026. Accepted: 17 Mar. 2026.

INTRODUCTION

Inspired by Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology and pleasure, Sami Schalk's notion of crip pleasure, Alice Wong's take on disability intimacy, and contemporary inquiries into embodiment in comics studies (Fawaz, Baldanzi), this article examines queer/crip reproduction as/in comics in Aminder Dhaliwal's[1] *Woman World* (2018). Considered a contemporary queer and feminist comics classic, *Woman World* (henceforth *WW*) introduces the reader/viewer[2] to a half-serious and half-humorous world in which men have become extinct.[3] Women must rebuild themselves as a community, navigating their way through the pitfalls of the binary utopian/dystopian thinking. The comics demonstrates, it is argued, how new networks of belonging based on intimacy may be forged both between *WW*, construed as a queer/crip object, and its reader/viewers, and between the fictional characters.

The article envisions the reader/viewer's relationship with comics as intimate companionship. Historically considered neither literature nor art, leastways not "high" literature and art (Hatfield, Lopes), comics have for years functioned on the margins of culture as "queer" objects. Building on this marginality, comics might also be further conceptualized as "crip:" as fragmented into panels, "prostheticized," with visual elements compensating for what (in this binary, the "ableist") prose supposedly does better. Such a critical perspective opens up a more nuanced contextualization of the relationship between the medium and non-normativity, one that expands the discussion about the representation of disability in comics (see Alaniz, Smith and Alaniz).

In their marginalization, comics have also developed more intimate ways of connecting with their audiences that extend beyond a mere commercial relationship (Gibson 287–307). *WW* provides a form of intimate queer/crip companionship for the reader/viewer who lacks a connection to a queer/crip community in real life. Ahmed explains in *Queer Phenomenology* (henceforth *QP*) that queer objects "mak[e] contact

---

[1] Born in Canada but working in the United States, Dhaliwal has built a career in the US animation industry, working as a director, storyboard artist, and writer for major studios. She often comments on American politics in her work (Dhaliwal, "About"). She names Jillian Tamaki and Marjane Satrapi (especially *Persepolis*) as major influences shaping her style and sense of humor (Dhaliwal, "Rabble").

[2] Throughout this essay, I use the term "reader/viewer" to emphasize the dual mode of engagement that comics require: we both read the text and view the visual-spatial arrangements and images. This terminology reflects the multimodal literacy central to comics.

[3] While it might be argued that same-sex relationships are the new diegetic "norm" in the world of *WW*, the use of "queer" in this context is meant to signal that the comics destabilizes heteronormative frameworks and (re)orients intimacy.

possible" and "creat[e] other kinds of connections where unexpected things can happen" (169), which helps illuminate how comics function as queer/crip objects: they orient the reader/viewer toward alternative relational possibilities. The comics page in particular and *WW* as a comics book in general (literally a queer/crip object) enable contact and create non-discriminatory networks of belonging.

Respectively, one of the most prominent aspects of building those new networks, as visualized in *WW*, is the intimate relation between bodies and selves. Without men, the women reproduce without sex (with the help of artificial insemination or a newly developed scientific process that uses stem cells extracted from their own bone marrow) and thus focus in their relationships on building a queer/crip feminist "utopia" where intimacy, primarily based on solidarity and kinship, is nevertheless embodied. What complements this general network of belonging in *WW* are also more private visualizations of queer/crip love, such as the relationship between Layla, a character with a physical disability, and her lover Lara. As such, *WW* reproduces both what Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* calls "queer pleasure," that is "the coming together of bodies" both in "sexual intimacy" and in "the pleasure of opening up to other bodies" (165), and what disability scholars describe as crip pleasure. Crip pleasure foregrounds the embodied, political, and affective possibilities that emerge when disabled bodies claim desire on their own terms (brown and Schalk, Schalk). Reading *WW* through this lens aligns with Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price's ("Deleuzian Connections" and "Breaking the Boundaries") reflections on disability and (being) touch(ed), which help destabilize the fixed boundaries of disability. In this sense, Layla and Lara's relationship stages a queer/crip (re)orientation of intimacy.

Considering the above, the article starts with a survey of queer/crip intimate methodologies that inform the analysis of *WW* in the contexts of intimate relations between the comics and its readers/viewers as well as the respective characters, demonstrating how new networks of belonging are forged between them.

DEVIANT MATTERS: QUEER/CRIP INTIMATE METHODOLOGIES

"Intimacy is more than sex and romantic love. Intimacy is an ever-expanding universe composed of a myriad of heavenly bodies. Intimacy is about relationships within a person's self, with others, with communities, with nature and beyond," Alice Wong writes in the introduction to *Disability Intimacy*, hoping that her readers will "reexamine what intimacy can be"

(xviii). This reexamination, in my case a reading of *WW*, is based on a queer/crip intimate methodology that, to draw on Wong, I also conceive of in terms of "an ever-expanding universe," where queer/crip phenomenology, pleasure, and graphic narrative all intertwine, trying to capture, represent, and theorize something that thrives on the material—on physicality, belonging, and "the enduring place of human-to-human touch . . . in networks of connection that stretch from near to far" (Shildrick and Price, "Deleuzian Connections"). The methodological template constructed in this section, based on the writings of Sara Ahmed and Sami Schalk, will help analyze *WW* as a queer/crip object, site, and embodiment of networks of belonging.

In her investigation of sexual orientation in relation to phenomenological orientation presented in *QP*, Ahmed argues that desire, identity, and body are shaped by the directions one takes toward objects and others. "Phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies," the feminist scholar writes, "insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, . . . the significance of nearness," both of which are further shaped by emotions as forms of "(re)orientation" as essentially intimate because "the orientations we have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting the relations of proximity and distance between bodies" (2–3). When one orients oneself toward certain people or objects, one makes them proximate, reachable, and (potentially) intimate. When one turns away, they become distant, invisible, and undesirable. A powerful example Ahmed uses in *QP* considers home, a safe and familiar space (10–11), that is intimacy embodied and inhabited, which, when queered, says as much about belonging as about non-belonging. Ahmed writes:

> "[T]he family home" seems so full of traces of heterosexual intimacy that it is hard to take up my place without feeling those traces as points of pressure. In such moments, [bodies] might feel "out of place" where they have been given "a place." Such feelings in turn point to other places, even ones that have yet to be inhabited. (11–12)

(Non)belonging in certain places and spaces allows for exploring queer/crip intimacy, (re)orienting it as a process of inhabitation that is dynamic, relational, and contextual, that both resides in and affects or directs the body.

As Ahmed further explains in *QP*, drawing on the metaphor and the materiality of the line, which guides one's life, "mak[ing] certain things, and not others, available" (14), we follow certain lines simply because they have been directed towards us, at times failing to realize the constrictions such an illusionary "choice" offers. "We follow the line that is followed by

others," Ahmed writes, "the repetition of the act of following makes the line disappear from view as the point from which 'we' emerge" (15, 17). Queer, and by extension crip (see Kolářová and Koobak 218), phenomenology is thus in equal measure about the uneasiness triggered by a lack of intimacy, or non-belonging, and intimacy which conceals the existence of other possible directions. To adopt a heterosexual/ableist orientation entails not only orienting oneself toward the objects prescribed and legitimized by heterosexual/ableist norms, but also actively disengaging from, or rejecting, those objects and/of desires that deviate from or disrupt this prescribed trajectory, insofar as "[t]he queer object within straight culture . . . deviates and is made socially present as a deviant" (Ahmed, *QP* 21). Some bodies and objects belong (in)to spaces, cultures, and norms, while others do not.

Ahmed reflects on the familiar table as an intimate object that may shape one's identity as a writer, as both a profession and an aspiration, since it makes one "orient" oneself "around writing" (56). The table is thus exemplary in navigating and configuring bodies in space, raising further questions about "what kind of objects bodies 'tend toward' in their tendencies, as well as how such tendencies shape what bodies tend toward" (57). As mentioned above, oftentimes the nature of this relationship is repetitive and socially conditioned: limited by the fact that certain spaces are already "occupied" by other, most often heterosexual/ableist, bodies and norms.

Queer/crip objects and bodies, intimately connected to one another and to space, thus disrupt and reconfigure their surroundings and themselves. Ahmed writes: "When bodies take up spaces that they were not intended to inhabit, something other than the reproduction of the facts of the matter happens. The hope that reproduction fails is the hope for new impressions, for new lines to emerge, new objects, or even new bodies" (62). Belonging and non-belonging, as well as forging intimate connections, "involv[e] hard work" and are "a form of action" (63, 102). This labor of intimacy is directed against "reproduction," defined by Ahmed in terms of the reproduction of oppressive norms (62). Queer/crip objects, bodies, and spaces, as and in *WW*, are deviant, thus reconfiguring intimacy. Ultimately, Ahmed concludes, we investigate "how they gather, how they perform, to create the edges of spaces and worlds" (167). In other words, queer/crip (re)orientations produce alternative spatial and/as social arrangements, creating new worlds and destabilizing the edges of existing ones.

In being "deviant," a term which, following Ahmed, I also connect with the (re)orientations of crip/queer as "fluid and ever-changing, claimed by those whom it did not originally define" (Sandahl 27), they are not only disorienting but also, in the intimacy they embody and forge, function as a source of queer/crip pleasure. Queer pleasure, a phenomenon

essential to the understanding of intimacy yet sometimes overshadowed by queer alienation (see Dyer, *Now You See It* 133–40; Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* 1–8, 15–23; Careless and Cotton 10–28), is also fundamentally deviant. Likewise, crip pleasure deconstructs the normative boundaries of the experience. "We're whole and happy," Schalk writes, "when we fight against the ways that the world believes that some people are less worthy of good lives and happiness" (168).

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed explains how "emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (10). Emotions are in her understanding political, insofar as they are—as a response, movement (being moved by something), effect—a kind of "world making" (12). Ahmed analyzes, among others, fear, disgust, and shame "as different kinds of orientations towards objects and others, which shape individual as well as collective bodies" (15). Moving beyond the negativity of alienation, she focuses on love, pleasure, and intimacy in queer and feminist contexts in the two closing chapters of the book. Queer pleasure, Ahmed writes, is envisioned as a form of affective disruption to heteronormativity by adopting what it marks as shameful (164). Queer pleasure does not simply transform shame into pride but instead "challenge[s] the designation of queer as abject" (163). Crip pleasure operates in a similar way, countering and transforming shame into a site of resistance (Schalk 170).

Both further engage with space (boundaries), power, and activism. Ahmed explains that there is "an important spatial relation between pleasure and power. Pleasure involves not only the capacity to enter into, or inhabit with ease, social space, but also functions as a form of entitlement and belonging" (*Politics* 165). Transcending sexuality, important as it may be, queer/crip pleasure reconfigures how queer/crip bodies inhabit the world and relate to one another: "When bodies touch and give pleasure to bodies that have been barred from contact, then those bodies are reshaped. . . . Queer pleasures are not just about the coming together of bodies in sexual intimacy" (ibid.). As a Black disabled queer woman, Schalk analogously explains how "[p]leasure activism has helped [her] find less hurtful ways to take care of [her]self" (170), literally allowing her to open up to other bodies and spaces. "Creating pleasure with people the world hurts," in that sense, "creates change" (173). Queer/crip pleasure, by inviting contact, unsettles "the boundaries between sameness and difference," between "the 'purity' of the 'healthy" body" and its "contaminated others—disease, disability, lack of control" (Shildrick and Price, "Breaking the Boundaries" 439).

Intimacy, sexual or not, allows queer/crip bodies (and objects) to expose the constraints of hetero- and able-bodied normativity both

in private and public. This dynamic operates similarly to what Keren Moscovitch calls "radical intimacy," which is an artistic and social practice that positions intimacy beyond its socially sanctioned boundaries, so that it becomes a powerful "disruption of ideological constructs" (2).

COMICS AS QUEER/CRIP OBJECTS

Ahmed's and Schalk's views of queer/crip phenomenology and pleasure, located at the intersection of bodies, objects, and spaces, provide a thought-provoking platform for conceptualizing and working with comics. I propose to think of *WW* as a queer/crip object that, for one, makes an intervention in what Pierre Bourdieu calls the literary field (24, 47–57, 215–42) and, secondly, offers a form of intimate companionship to the reader/viewer.

While they may have been elevated to the status of "serious literature" in recent years, as demonstrated, for instance, by the critical acclaim garnered by Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, comics historically grew out of a turf that is as removed from the literary model (Miodrag 390–98) as from art history (Gray and Horton 1–9). They are in that respect fundamentally queer and crip. Still, the history of mainstream comics, works from the Golden and Silver Ages (from the 1930s to the 1970s), and most titles published by such powerhouses as Marvel and DC, is largely heteronormative, "full of traces of heterosexual intimacy" (Ahmed, *QP* 11), and ableist. Comics whose tradition *WW* continues make an intervention in that space, being queer/crip among the already othered. Bodies which "tend toward" such objects (57) find their home there.

WW in fact draws on the legacy of the comix underground scene—a rebellious, artist-driven comics movement that flourished in the 1970s, fueled by the counterculture's rejection of the mainstream. In the 1970s, Mary Wings and Roberta Gregory broke ground with early lesbian comics like *Come Out Comix* and *Dynamite Damsels*, and the 1980s saw the rise of LGBTQ+ magazines such as *Gay Comix* (Aldama 2–3). By the 1990s, zines allowed many queer artists to express themselves (Galvan 178–205). Both the status of comics and their form lent themselves to intimate queer (and crip) expression, where, as Ramzi Fawaz explains in *Queer Forms*, the language of comics, characterized by fragmentation, juxtaposition, and sequencing, reflects queer/crip epistemologies that resist "norms"—linearity and coherence (6–7)—much in the way described by Ahmed and Schalk. Deviant comics language, the very interplay between panels and gutters as well as word and image, unsettle stable interpretations. This further aligns with political efforts to destabilize fixed categories,

and the medium's visual and sequential flexibility lends itself to depicting characters and bodies that evolve and defy categorizations (9–12).

WW is thus not an isolated experiment but a deliberate continuation of that deviant comics lineage. Dhaliwal initially began *WW* as a serialized webcomic, in early 2017, after participating in the Women's March in Los Angeles ("Rabble"). Taken up by Drawn & Quarterly, it expanded into a more than 250-page long graphic narrative which strategically—through queer/crip modalities—adhered to the formal poetics of fragments, pieces, and disorientations. Framed by an introduction (1–29) and an epilogue (250–57) executed in color and relying on full-page drawings, the body of *WW* (30–247) is minimalistic and black-and-white. There are between four and six square and rectangular panels per page arranged in two to three rows,[4] whose constellations never settle into a predictable and regular visual rhythm but instead vary, morph, and do not follow the straight, normative lines or patterns critiqued by Ahmed, Schalk, and Fawaz.

This formal deviance is further enhanced and elevated by the comics' status as a queer/crip object, as a physical, printed text with which the reader/viewer may form an intimate connection, insofar as queer/crip bodies gather around queer/crip objects and through them connect with other queer/crip bodies (Ahmed, *Politics* 165–67). Conceptualized as a queer/crip object, *WW* both stems from and forges "other kinds of connections where unexpected things can happen" (Ahmed, *QP* 169), where word, image, line, space, physicality, representation, reproduction (as multiplication), grassroots newspapers, underground series, fandoms, and communities meet. This connection between form, semantics, and physicality is also subtly emphasized in *WW* by queer/crip meta-objects, namely colorful and detailed drawings of two statues featured on two corresponding pages (84–85, 140–41, 190–91). They appear three times in the comics, further interrupting what is already a fragmented graphic narrative. Both statues present semi-naked women, embodiments of classic art and beauty, in their original setting: that is, before the end of men. They metaphorically represented abundance and justice, (ab)using and sexualizing women's bodies in the process of patriarchal meaning-

[4] This structure, in turn, is based on Dhaliwal's creative process: she used post-it notes, each functioning as a single panel. Dhaliwal developed *WW* initially on Instagram ("Rabble"), a platform that itself "queers" the conventional, print-first path by centering immediacy and community-driven circulation (other titles followed a similar trajectory; for example, Tillie Walden's 2018 *On a Sunbeam*). Dhaliwal's creative process, marked, as she puts it, by "re-doing," that is "re-writing" and "re-drawing" ("Comics Q&A"), is documented on the penultimate page of *WW*. A reproduced photograph shows countless yellow pieces of paper covered with drawings (Dhaliwal, *WW* 258). It is in and of itself an intimate sight, foregrounding Dhaliwal's fragmentary method.

making. Repeatedly depicted in *WW*, in different stages of decay, they function as both bodies and statues, as remnants of the patriarchal past, which the comics does not so much violently destroy as ignores or, in Ahmed's words, fails to "reproduce" (*QP* 62). *WW* as an object and the bodies that engage with it are liberated from heterosexual and ableist norms in Dhaliwal's comics as a result of a long yet peaceful (re)orientation. The final double-page shows both statues fractured and covered in moss (*WW* 190–91). Their eventual decomposition demonstrates that when the social forces that maintain oppressive normative frameworks as "natural" cease to operate, the construct fails as well.

This slow, almost organic undoing of patriarchal symbols in *WW* demonstrates how the material and the conceptual come together in an embodied, relational experience of reading. Comics forge intimacy through the interplay of image, text, and space, drawing the reader/viewer into deep emotional and cognitive engagement (Simpson). This closeness lies not just in what they depict but in the act of reading itself: the reader/viewer holds the object, turns its pages, and connects the gaps and gutters in the process of "closure" (McCloud 63). As Benjamin Fraser writes, "the page is a relationship that cuts both ways": "This interaction is an affective form of thought, thinking that is already relational and conditioned by bodies" (89).

Contemporary inquiries into embodiment in comics studies (Szép, Cressman and DeTora, Baldanzi) further inform the understanding of comics as queer/crip objects through the double materiality of drawing and the body (of both the artist and the characters). Following Jessica Baldanzi, embodiment in *WW* may be conceptualized as a site of resistance and reimagination (2–3). In and through her drawings of queer, disabled, and intersectional characters, Dhaliwal critiques dominant visual tropes of femininity and gender representation. While her characters embrace sexuality, they are not sexualized or fetishized, a problem which remains one of the cardinal sins of mainstream comics (3). In Dhaliwal's "woman world," as one of the elders proclaims, a woman is not construed by "anything specific," be it "period," "breasts," or ability to bear children (*WW* 168). The running joke throughout the comics is the new flag of the town the women inhabit, namely the powerful and inspiring "Beyoncé's Thighs" (37). While the essentialized idea of a vagina as a symbol is discussed, it is ultimately dismissed because it does not "represent the scope of womankind" (36). Belonging in Dhaliwal's "woman world" is, if anything, based on declaring that one is willing to be a part of the community and this invitation, interlaced with jokes but nevertheless earnest, is extended to the reader/viewer as well.

The cast of fictional characters living in Beyoncé's Thighs is presented on the final page of the introduction (29). Their identities reorient the

lines of gender, race, age, and ability, exploring the themes of feminist community and resilience. Ulaana, the matriarch of the group, is a trans woman. The Doctor, a tall woman of South Asian descent, has had a mastectomy, and two scars are visible on her bare chest (Fig. 1). Gaia, the "mayor" of the town, is a full-figured woman with light skin and long hair who manifests her bodily autonomy through nudity. Lara, the town's carpenter, is a young woman with dark skin and curly hair. Layla, one of the disabled characters, uses a prosthetic leg (Fig. 2). Layla's disability expands the comics' broad interest in embodied difference and demonstrates that disabled embodiment—prostheticized or otherwise—participates in, and potentially redefines, the intimate.[5] This recalls the critical work of artists such as Nomy Lamm, who foreground the erotic potential of prostheticized bodies through explicitly autobiographical practice. Dhaliwal's engagement with queer/crip embodiment unfolds in the realm of fiction but it also renders Layla as both sexual/desiring and desired. Both Lamm's and Dhaliwal's critical practices thus point to "the dangers of invisibility that arise when disabled individuals are viewed as desexualized, passive, infantile, and dependent" (Kafai 183). Beyond Layla and Lara's relationship, which forms the central romantic story in *WW*, Dhaliwal also introduces Ina, a character who is desperately in love with Layla, craving for touch and physical contact (48–49, 56, 70, 114–15, 119, 159, 165, 214–15). The futuristic setting allows Dhaliwal to draw a world where disability, intimacy, and sexuality are reconfigured, with desire circulating around and through queer/crip embodiment. This act of "imagining different futures and temporalities," in turn, allows us to "see, and do, the present differently" (Kafer 28).

QUEER/CRIP REPRODUCTION AND NETWORKS OF BELONGING

One of the central elements in the construction of new networks of belonging, as depicted in *WW*, is the interplay between corporeality and identity. The absence of men and a queer, crip (and) feminist utopia created in the aftermath of their natural extinction, with fewer boys being born every year (Dhaliwal, *WW* 3–10), foregrounds the characters' embodiment as reproductive agents, engaging critically with traditional roles assigned to female bodies. Just as home is discussed by Ahmed in *QP* as a space

[5] Importantly, Layla's portrayal defies what Wälivaara calls "the medical model" of showing disability in science-fiction and futuristic texts "in which disability is considered in relation to cures" (229). Layla's prosthetic leg is part of her embodied self, not a "problem" she or the narrative seeks to fix.

of oppression, "so full of traces of heterosexual intimacy that it is hard to take up . . . place without feeling those traces as points of pressure" (12), reproduction is inhabited anew in *WW* by queer/crip bodies. Ahmed further explains that, historically, reproduction inscribed in heterosexual contexts served to discipline queer pleasure:

> Whilst sexual pleasure within the West may now be separated from the task or duty of reproduction, it remains tied in some way to the fantasy of being reproductive: one can enjoy sex with a body that it is imagined one could be reproductive with. Queer pleasures might be legitimate here, as long as "the queer" is only a passing moment in the story of heterosexual coupling ("queer as an enjoyable distraction"). (*Politics* 163)

Feminist dystopias and utopias, a tradition to which *WW* also refers, have long used speculative frameworks to interrogate and reconfigure the politics of reproduction, severing sexual desire from the reproductive imaginary (see Kafer, Wagner-Lawlor). Women-only reproduction functions in such texts not merely as a biological alternative but a reimagining of kinship, intimacy, and social organization.

Alison Kafer's critical investigation of crip/queer futurity and pleasure helps us imagine how queer/crip bodies might (re)orient reproductive imaginaries (26–46). *WW* points to these questions at the general level, hoping to, to draw on Kafer, "articulate a queercrip time that does not oppose queerness to longevity yet maintains a critical stance toward hegemonic expectations of (re)productivity" (44). The comics explicitly, yet in a fragmentary manner (as suit for the medium), shows Lara and Layla discussing the possibility of having a baby together (*WW* 206–07), and this moment both opens and closes space for queercrip reproductive futures (Lara is ultimately unable to commit). Although the comics does not frame Layla's disability as shaping her relationship to reproduction, her presence unsettles normative assumptions about who is positioned as a bearer of the future, insofar as the queer/crip allows us to reflect on the very notion of futurity and/versus chronicity (Kolářová and Koobak 218). Lara's anxiety (but not refusal), in turn, highlights the ambivalence that often surrounds queer/crip reproductive visions—even in feminist texts[6]—revealing both the possibilities and the limits of the future the comics constructs. In this context, "[t]his time of anticipation is itself a kind of queer liminality, living always in anticipation of the moment that has not yet arrived" (Kafer 66), where Layla and Lara's child occupies a space of possibility that is neither erased nor, however, fully imagined.

[6] See Kafer's critique of Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) as feminist utopia which erases disabled people (69–85).

WW, in and through queer/crip reproduction, further traces and interrogates two phenomena. One concerns new ways of home-making and/as world-making and belonging. The old patriarchal family home is radically re-possessed and re-inhabited. Queer/crip bodies begin to "mak[e] the strange familiar through the extension of [their] bodies into" the previously hetero- and able-bodied-normative space (Ahmed, *QP* 11). The other revolves around queer pleasure and intimacy conceptualized "beyond" reproduction, insofar as queerness may also disrupt the very imperative to reproduce (Edelman 25–31). "[T]he movement away from oppressive families of origin toward alternative structures of belonging," Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman further explain, "may offer intimacy, care, eroticism, and dependency in other forms: throuples, friendships, cousins, mentors, companionate marriages, nesting partners, roommates, queer platonic partnerships" (13). This reimagining of kinship in *WW* resonates with a longer history of queer/crip reproduction.



Fig. 1. Alternative methods of woman-only reproduction. *Woman World*, Drawn & Quarterly, 2018, p. 192. Copyright Aminder Dhaliwal. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly.

For one, reproduction is re-possessed and re-inhabited in *WW* through technological advancements. One involves artificial insemination, that is relying on the few remaining sperm banks whose deposits are, due to scarcity, rationed (Dhaliwal, *WW* 136, 186). This method, in a wider historical context, is both a nod towards and a reflection of the queer grassroots reproductive groups which first emerged in the US in the 1970s and developed in the 1980s, allowing lesbian women to conceive through artificial insemination, often with the help of gay male donors, as the first sperm bank available to lesbian and single women opened in California only in 1982 (Matthiesen 224). An alternative innovative scientific procedure involves stem cells derived from women's bone marrow (Fig. 1).

Reproduction is thus no longer tied to sex. This (re)orientation of/in reproduction enables the formation of relationships centered on solidarity and kinship, while remaining grounded in physicality, touch, bodily interaction, and mutual care. Women are no longer forced to perform their roles as reproductive bodies, but those who choose to become pregnant are supported by the entire community (Dhaliwal, *WW* 186–87), which may constitute a playful utopian take on the phrase "it takes a village to raise a child."

Complementing this broader communal framework in *WW* are intimate portrayals of queer/crip love, exemplified by the relationship between Layla and Lara (Fig. 2).

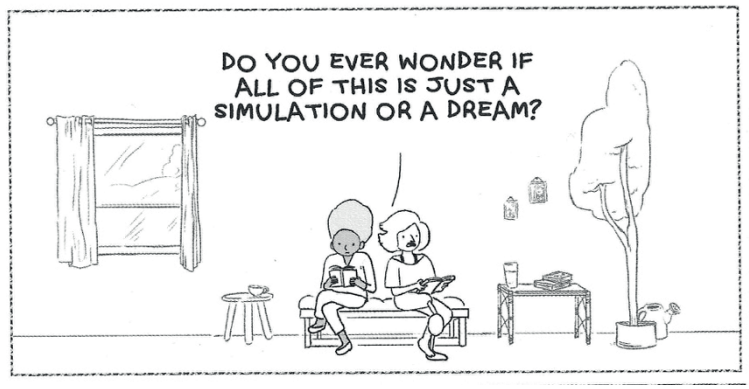

Fig. 2. An intimate portrayal of Lara and Layla. *Woman World*, Drawn & Quarterly, 2018, p. 146 (single panel). Copyright Aminder Dhaliwal. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly.

Their relationship, weaved into the greater tapestry of other non-romantic forms of belonging (grandmother–granddaughter, the elder–the young, doctor–patient, friends, co-workers, etc.), lies at the heart of *WW*. The respective panels and sequences often show Lara and Layla being intimate

(talking, arguing, joking, dancing, kissing, hugging, touching, protecting and helping one another) and thus acting as both subjects and objects of care and desire (56, 70, 83, 86, 90, 134, 142, 146–47, 151, 160–61, 164, 194, 206–07, 222–23, 232–33, 244). Their intimacy—emotional, relational, and occasionally erotic—is grounded in connection and closeness rather than in (normative) sexual sequences. These depictions resonate with Ahmed's (*Politics* 165) and Schalk's (170) concepts of queer/crip pleasure seen as the convergence of bodies in both sexual intimacy and affective openness.

Queer/crip pleasure and intimacy in *WW*, to once again refer to Ahmed's examples involving the family home and the table, are both products and triggers of (re)orientations. Likewise, the focus on both desire *and* care in Lara and Layla's relationship is meant to expand the concept of intimacy beyond what some disability critics call the superficiality of touch and nakedness. Ashley Volion explains, for example, in her conversation with fellow disability scholar Akemi Nishida, how due to her condition she is required to undress and be touched by healthcare professionals every day, though rarely in intimate contexts; therefore, she defines intimacy as "something *deeper*. . . . Intimacy for disabled people can be more of an emotional connection but on a *deeper level*. It is this moment of intimacy when you're seen fully. That can be rare" (96, emphasis in the original). In showing Lara and Layla engaged in intimacy, *WW* desires to see them fully and thus redefine physical/sexual intimacy, important as it is, into a form of engagement that is molded and shaped into something that feels right for them (101). Instead of foregrounding explicit sexual acts, the comics emphasizes gestures of care, shared routines, and comfort. As mentioned earlier, comics as a medium struggled with the sexualization and fetishization of bodies; *WW* avoids such visual economies. In this sense, the intimate is felt in the ways bodies relate to one another.

Looking at Lara and Layla's relationship through the combined lens of queer/crip theories further demonstrates how the binaries of "normal/abnormal," "disabled/non-disabled," and "heterosexual/homosexual" rely on an unmarked norm—an "invisible center"—that upholds them as compulsory (Kafer 8–17; Santinele Martino and Fudge Schormans 57). In its conceptual makeup, *WW* eradicates this "invisible center," and as such queer/crip intimacy is both positioned in the sphere of the utopian/fictional or "inclusive futures" (Wälivaara 235), and critically juxtaposed with the dystopian/real or the discriminatory present. In *WW*, both disabled and non-disabled characters desire, are desired, and enter fulfilling relationships.

What is most "utopian" about *WW* is how it challenges existing structures and envisions transformative (re)orientations. Unlike some futuristic texts, it does not adopt "absence of disability" as a sign of a "better future" (Kafer 2). Instead, it asks: can you imagine a world where Lara and Layla's relationship exists on such terms? In answering this question, the reader/viewer is once

again asked to either accept or decline the invitation to join the fictional (that is utopian) yet tangible (physical, hand-drawn) community. Not to position themselves on the outside looking in but as active actors in the networks of belonging forged by the comics. In a way, the question of reproduction is reiterated, but it concerns the willingness to reproduce the utopian in the real. For one last time, the comics conceptually and physically envisions this new "woman world" in the epilogue (Dhaliwal, *WW* 250–57) as both "the coming together of bodies" (Ahmed, *Politics* 165) and of words and images. The future involves, as the captions announce, "appreciating loved ones," "strengthening the community," and "spreading love," and the corresponding drawings show, respectively, Lara and Layla lying together in a field of grass, with Layla's head resting on Lara's stomach (Dhaliwal, *WW* 250); the mayor Gaia listening to the voices of everyone who lives in the town (251); and one of the younger girls in the community, Naomi, feeding a stray cat (255). Banal as they may seem, these are radical acts of intimacy.

CONCLUSION

One of the first things Wong mentions in her introduction to *Disability Visibility* has to do with the political, activist, and communal power of storytelling which, importantly, need not be confined only to "a blog post, essay, or book" (xviii) and should, I argue, also include comics. By drawing on the theoretical frameworks of queer/crip phenomenology and pleasure, this article explores the dynamics of queer/crip reproduction and intimacy in *WW*, arguing that it may function as a site for reimagining networks of belonging. Graphic narratives can disrupt normative paths and offer radical (re)orientations of intimacy, belonging, and identity, thus contributing to the broader discourse on queer/crip intimacy. Ultimately, the comics invites readers/viewers to reconsider the possibilities of intimacy and community in a world which challenges oppressive norms: we are meant to enact the change, to participate in its reproduction in the real. The pleasure of reading, to draw on Ahmed for one last time, "functions as a form of entitlement and belonging" (*Politics* 165).

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke UP, 2006. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388074

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP, 2004. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748691142

Alaniz, José. *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond*. UP of Mississippi, 2014.

Aldama, Frederick Luis. "Gender and Sexuality in Comics: The Told, Untold Stories." *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Sexuality in Comic Book Studies*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama, Routledge, 2021, pp. 1–12. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429264276-1

Baldanzi, Jessica. *Bodies and Boundaries in Graphic Fiction: Reading Female and Nonbinary Characters*. Routledge, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2023.2297760

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Translated by Susan Emanuel, Stanford UP, 1996. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503615861

Bradway, Tyler, and Elizabeth Freeman. "Introduction: Kincoherence/Kinaesthetics/Kinematics." *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form*, edited by Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman, Duke UP, 2022, pp. 1–22. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2vr9cnp

brown, adrienne maree, and Sami Schalk. "Crip Pleasure." *Sex Ecologies*, edited by Stefanie Hessler, MIT P, 2021, pp. 81–87.

Careless, Eleanor, and Jess Cotton. "No Woman is an Island: The Politics of Loneliness, *Spare Rib* and the Women's Liberation Movement, 1969–1993." *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, vol. 109, 2023, pp. 10–28.

Cressman, Jodi, and Lisa DeTora, editors. *Graphic Embodiments: Perspectives on Health and Embodiment in Graphic Narratives*. Leuven UP, 2021. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ccbg8p

Dhaliwal, Aminder. "About." *Aminder Dhaliwal*, aminderdhaliwal.com/about, accessed 10 Jan. 2026.

Dhaliwal, Aminder. "Comics Q&A with Aminder Dhaliwal." Interview by Andy Yates. *Illustration Age*, 8 Nov. 2018, https://illustrationage.com/2018/10/08/comics-qa-with-aminder-dhaliwal/, accessed 29 July 2025.

Dhaliwal, Aminder. "Rabble Interviews Aminder Dhaliwal." Interview by Rabble. *Drawn & Quarterly*, 22 Nov. 2018, https://drawnandquarterly.com/press/rabble-interviews-aminder-dhaliwal/, accessed 29 July 2025.

Dhaliwal, Aminder. *Woman World*. Drawn & Quarterly, 2018.

Dyer, Richard. *Now You See It*. Routledge, 1990.

Dyer, Richard. *The Culture of Queers*. Routledge, 2002.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke UP, 2004. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822385981

Fawaz, Ramzi. *Queer Forms*. New York UP, 2022. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479893782.001.0001

Fraser, Benjamin. *Comics Beyond Text and Image: On the Substance of Visual Narration*. Routledge, 2025. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003597810

Galvan, Margaret. "Making Lesbians Visible: Recovering the Social History of the 1990s Lesbian Comics Boom." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2025, pp. 178–205. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ff.2025.a962235

Gibson, Mel. "Readers and Fans: Lived Comics Cultures." *The Cambridge Companion to Comics*, edited by Maaheen Ahmed, Cambridge UP, 2023, pp. 287–307. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009255653.019

Gray, Maggie, and Ian Horton. "Ways of Seeing Comics: Art-Historical Approaches to the Form." *Seeing Comics Through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form*, edited by Maggie Gray and Ian Horton, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93507-8

Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. UP of Mississippi, 2005.

Kafai, Shayda. "Crafting Disabled Sexuality: The Visual Language of Nomy Lamm's *Wall of Fire*." *Disability and Art History*, edited by Ann Millett-Gallant and Elizabeth Howie, Routledge, 2016, pp. 178–92. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315440002

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana UP, 2013.

Kolářová, Kateřina, and Redi Koobak. "Cripping Postsocialist Chronicity: A Conversation." *Postcolonial and Postsocialist Dialogues: Intersections, Opacities, Challenges in Feminist Theorizing and Practice*, edited by Redi Koobak, Madina Tlostanova, and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, Routledge, 2021, pp. 216–26. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003003199

Lopes, Paul. "Culture and Stigma: Popular Culture and the Case of Comic Books." *Sociological Forum*, vol. 21, 2006, pp. 387–414. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11206-006-9022-6

Matthiesen, Sara. *Reproduction Reconceived: Family Making and the Limits of Choice After Roe V. Wade*. U of California P, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520970441

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Kitchen Sink, 1993.

Miodrag, Hannah. "Comics and Literature." *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, edited by Aaron Meskin, Frank Bramlett, and Roy Cook, Routledge, 2016, pp. 390–98.

Moscovitch, Keren. *Radical Intimacy in Contemporary Art: Abjection, Revolt, and Objecthood*. Bloomsbury, 2023. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350298217

Piercy, Marge. *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.

Sandahl, Carrie. "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance."

GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, vol. 9, no. 1, 2003, pp. 25–56. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9-1-2-25

Santinele Martino, Alan, and Ann Fudge Schormans. "Theoretical Developments: Queer Theory Meets Crip Theory." *The Routledge Handbook of Disability and Sexuality*, edited by Linda Mona and Russell Shuttleworth, Routledge, 2021, pp. 53–67. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429489570-5

Schalk, Sami. "Pleasure is the Point: On Becoming a Pleasure Artist." *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2024, pp. 167–77.

Shildrick, Margrit, and Janet Price. "Breaking the Boundaries of the Broken Body." *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, edited by Margit Shildrick and Janet Price, Routledge, 1999, pp. 433–44.

Shildrick, Margrit, and Janet Price. "Deleuzian Connections and Queer Corporealities: Shrinking Global Disability." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 11/12, 2005–06, rhizomes.net/issue11/shildrickprice/index.html, accessed 10 Jan. 2026.

Simpson, Will. "Feelings in the Gutter: Opportunities for Emotional Engagement in Comics." *ImageText*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2018, https://imagetextjournal.com/feelings-in-the-gutter-opportunities-for-emotional-engagement-in-comics/, accessed 29 July 2025.

Smith, Scott T., and José Alaniz, editors. *Uncanny Bodies: Superhero Comics and Disability*. Penn State UP, 2019. https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctv14gpdr1

Szép, Eszter. *Comics and the Body: Drawing, Reading, and Vulnerability*. Ohio State UP, 2020. https://doi.org/10.26818/9780814214541

Volion, Ashley, and Akemi Nishida. "Igniting Our Power by Reclaiming Intimacy." *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2024, pp. 93–102.

Wagner-Lawlor, Jennifer A. "Engendering Utopia: The Force of Gender and the Limits of Feminism." *The Cambridge Companion to American Utopian Literature and Culture Since 1945*, edited by Sherryl Vint, Cambridge UP, 2024, pp. 62–81. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009180078.004

Walden, Tilly. *On a Sunbeam*. First Second, 2018.

Wälivaara, Josefine. "Marginalized Bodies of Imagined Futurescapes: Ableism and Heteronormativity in Science Fiction." *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2018, pp. 226–45. https://doi.org/10.25595/1494

Wong, Alice. Introduction. *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2024, pp. xv–xx.

Wong, Alice. Introduction. *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2020, pp. xv–xxii.

Dr Małgorzata Olsza (she/her) is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of English at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. Her research interests concentrate on American comics in feminist contexts. Her current research project, *The Pregnant Body and Reproductive Rights in American Comics and Graphic Novels (1970–2022)*, SONATA Grant No. 2022/47/D/HS2/00054 funded by the National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki), focuses on the study of reproductive rights and freedoms in American graphic narratives. Her work has appeared in *Polish Journal for American Studies*, *Image [&] Narrative*, *Studies in Comics*, and *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9171-0352
malgorzata.olsza@amu.edu.pl

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.05

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

S. Proski
Independent Scholar

Crip Intimacies in Concrete: Polish Post-War Mosaics and the Architecture of Touch

Abstract

The article analyzes Polish post-war mosaics and architectural ceramics to expand understandings of crip intimacy and our relationship to bodies, both human and architectural. The history of ceramics is rooted in touch and physical intimacy, and its use by the Polish United Workers' Party to further their political agenda had profound, lasting psychological implications. By implicit design, tactile materials that would have otherwise enhanced the experience of architecture were covertly used as tools for propaganda to strengthen the Iron Curtain. Illusions in concrete and meticulously constructed mosaics promised visions of a utopian future in Poland, as in other states in the Eastern Bloc. Since these monuments were commissioned by and under the supervision of the state, artists would often encrypt secret messages into their compositions, evading decryption and countering propaganda. As a result, new aesthetic concepts that prioritized the sense of touch and disablement began to emerge. However, architectural ceramics and mosaics eventually disappeared from Polish cityscapes, and this erasure of history encourages reflection on the legacy of the Polish People's Republic and invites artistic actions and discussions concerning buildings created during the socialist period. Through my research, I will connect how the human body mediates and interacts through these architectural spaces, processing the various facets of tactual information that span Poland's complex history. I will give autoethnographic accounts detailing my personal experiences with these art objects, from the perspective of blindness. Looking at architecture from a marginalized perspective forms another kind of archive we ought to consider when thinking about disability or the disabling of a nation state.

Keywords: disability aesthetics, crip intimacy, Polish culture, postwar architecture, mosaics, waste material.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 7 Sept. 2025. Verified: 26 Jan. 2026. Accepted: 17 Mar. 2026.

INTRODUCTION

The art of mosaics has a long and distinguished history, often associated with once great civilizations, such as Ancient Greece and Rome, and flourishing across the Byzantine Empire from the 6th to 15th centuries, primarily for decorating temples. By the turn of the 20th century, mosaics were typically found only in churches and historical sites. However, the communist state dramatically reappropriated this art form to promote its ideology, essentially storming the gates of heaven to dethrone God and install a new faith. It was crucial for the Soviet republics to mimic or impose this fiction of a grand empire upon newly occupied territories, as this narrative drew power from its undeniable link to centuries of historical authority. Under Stalinism, mosaics were stripped of their original religious context and rigorously forged into the state-sanctioned style of socialist realism. Mosaics were favored for their cost-effectiveness combined with ostentatious opulence, as well as their inherent durability against freezing winter temperatures. The facades of factories, schools, and bus stations became ubiquitous canvases, where vibrant colors and hues were deployed to transform otherwise grey Soviet cities into images of a happy socialist society triumphing over darkness. These depictions typically promoted muscular, heterosexual bodies toiling in fields, often contrasted with engineers and scientists pointing towards the cosmos in a hyper-driven pursuit to establish the promise of an attainable sci-fi utopia.

Ruins, or rather, mosaics, act as an antidote to the flat, manufactured imagery of the urban landscape, instead serving as markers of reality within a post-catastrophic condition. In Poland, they represent a mysterious topographical element, one that could further define the country's development if allowed to remain intact; Poland is littered with mosaics—hidden and unstudied, they quietly decay behind the facades of socialist modern architecture or peek out from behind housing blocks; they linger in courtyards, caged and obscured from the touch and gaze of both the socialist and subsequent capitalist eras (Elżanowski, "Manufacturing Ruins" 740). My concern centers on these ruin-mosaics and their fraught representation as aesthetic objects—or, more precisely, the significant gap in their representation. Regardless of whether they are formally interpreted as works of art, their very existence invariably summons images of disability. Most often, they register as wounded or disabled bodies, representations of irrationality or cognitive disability, or effects of warfare, disease, or accidents (Siebers 64). Given that aesthetic feelings of pleasure and disgust are often inextricably linked, particularly in connection with trauma, these critical concerns risk disappearing from public discourse altogether. Yet these objects are crucial: what do they tell us about the underlying ideals

of a nation, especially when viewed through the lens of art and its public display? My analysis thus intends to examine the material condition of the country, specifically how artists emerging from the shadows of World War II engaged in a process of manufacturing ruins at an accelerated rate—often in the form of mosaics and architectural ceramics—which then became indelible components of the urban fabric.

Research for this essay was conducted on foot via railway and public transportation across the country of Poland between September 2024 and July 2025. As a blind researcher working within a foreign context with limited resources, my methodology paradoxically necessitates the utilization of photography. Working primarily in painting, photography has not been a primary focus of my artistic practice, but its adoption has been compelled by the unique assemblage of circumstances: navigating a landscape defined by decay and the abundance of waste material mosaics. These mosaics—whose historical records explicitly cite "waste material" as their primary medium—have, through my engagement, become sites of rigorous aesthetic inquiry. Though often situated in public spaces, these objects remain largely unobserved, their unintentional beauty tragically obscured. I am thus engaged in a systematic exploration of these overlooked architectural sites, frequently located in interstitial and marginalized urban spaces. Despite their conventional inaccessibility, their profound tactile and sensory allure actively demands investigation. These architectural spaces, imbued with a latent communicative capacity, seem to whisper their histories, demanding a prolonged engagement that transcends mere visual observation. This research, therefore, posits that a sustained, multi-sensory encounter with these sites reveals an intimate narrative otherwise inaccessible through conventional visual analysis.

For the better part of a year, I lived on the train, sustaining myself on vending machine coffee and Żabka[1] offerings. To document my findings, I used a Sony DSC-HX99 equipped with a Retissa Neoviewer, a device designed specifically for blind and low-vision users—a technical choice that places my work within a specific lineage of artistry. Much like Alice Wingwall, a photographer who became blind mid-career and whose work deals with architecture and memory, my use of the camera is not an attempt to mimic sighted vision but a way of using photography to navigate architectural space. In contrast to her use of the camera as a preservation tool, where her work depicts a vanishing snapshot of what was, mine is a haptic collision with what remains.

While I have visited several hundred locations, the exact number of surviving works in Poland remains difficult to pinpoint. No comprehensive

[1] A Polish chain of popular small convenience stores.

national inventory exists; current research is largely fragmented, focusing on specific regions like Warsaw or Małopolska. Many sites remained out of reach, guarded by bureaucratic gatekeepers or buried in remote, inaccessible areas. My research eventually became a personal mission to seek out every known site, consulting city records and online archives to cross locations off a growing map. Navigation was a digital choreography: Google Maps for direction and Seeing AI to translate visual data into descriptive language. For interior works, the process took on a comedic edge; I would have to negotiate with receptionists, stating my case for entry. Some were elated, fully aware of the treasures they guarded, while others were merely bewildered by my presence. Yet, even as I documented the mosaics, the material history continued to vanish: a mosaic in Pruszków was systematically demolished, while another in Kiekrz—once obscured by graffiti and slated for destruction—was cleaned by a group of local volunteers only to be dismantled by city officials. It now sits in a storage facility, its future location and fate entirely uncertain.

What does it mean to want to see? My research distinguishes itself from previous scholarship through a unique set of experiences: that of a blind person with a studio practice grounded in visual art, and as someone generations removed from my Polish ancestry. Looking at architecture from this marginalized perspective forms a vital alternative archive—one that documents not just the disabling of a body, but the disabling of a nation-state.

Studying ruins condemned as waste material reveals profound errors and misunderstandings that lead to poetic conclusions about our relationship to bodies, both human and architectural. What is particularly compelling about ruins, or images depicting a city in ruin, is their inherent lack of relationality when a singular image exists in isolation; it conjures an abstraction of its own logic, appearing surreal. For instance, a photograph of a crumbling mosaic becomes an image without a clear object—the "object" spreads throughout the frame, filling it to the point of bursting, rendering any attempt at conventional signification meaningless. The ruin, then, is effectively without image; it can never be truly corrected into focus. Paradoxically, the very optic means for gathering such information produces further ruin, generating more images without image. To genuinely see in the face of ruin, the conventional image must be vanquished, abstracted into obscurity, left teetering between life and death (Pijarski).

It is in this space of visual death that a different kind of life begins. For me, intimacy is not just romance or touch, but a collective survival strategy and a disability justice necessity. Crip intimacy is not a polite social arrangement or list of accommodations; it is a radical, haptic alliance between my body and a world that is often dormant or apathetic to my presence. It is the codified language shared between the disabled body

and the ruined environment. This intimacy is further negotiated through a rigorous act of contact. It is the blind leading the blind into a world where scars are scripts and touch is the ultimate form of truth. We learn the world through the friction of it: the roughness of bark, the coldness of stone, the ache of the climb. This is not just physical; it is psychic. Our bodies are maps of where we have been and whom we have touched. If the chunks of ceramic waste constitute ghosts within these mosaic walls, then my pilgrimage across Poland is an act of crip lineage—finding my own reflection in the broken, discarded, and freakish shards of a previous era's failed vision for utopia.

BELONGING IN THE MISFIT

The way modern cities are built is a quiet global catastrophe affecting all our lives. Buildings are too flat, too plain, too straight, too shiny, too soulless, too boring (Heatherwick 3). The bumps and lumps and disfigurations in buildings matter. This monotony fosters an indifference to reality, a pervasive plague of boringness that extends into a form of architectural oppression, compelling individuals towards insular digital existences. While monotony can sometimes be entrancing, this should not serve as an excuse for further self-oppression. This manufactured environment disproportionately accommodates certain bodily forms while marginalizing others; consequently, only those privileged bodies feel truly at home in this constructed world (Ahmed 129). It is precisely within this paradox that I find belonging. I feel at home here, among the dislodged and misfitted ruins, and the people who frequently maneuver through them.

Vasilis Galis states that different bodies are not merely recipients of architectural design; they are mutually constitutive with it, such that produced space actively shapes social norms (qtd. in Boys 64). These crippled structures are not tacked-on decorative embellishments; they are disabled bodily forms that are constitutive of the whole. Similarly, these objects reveal themselves as neither distinct entities nor archetypal projections, but rather as modes of relevance invested with meaning, deeply embedded in specific situations and bodily modalities. Within their very fabric, there are secrets hidden in these cracks and crevices—unheard conversations, worlds within worlds nestled into every nook and cranny. Each fractal of the ruin is characteristically unique, offering a wealth of irrefutable tactile information, an encrypted language of survival that is felt through touch.

This personal sense of belonging in the misfit finds a historical parallel in the widespread urban decay of the socialist period. The withering and rotting of structures under the omnipresent gaze of surveilling eyes is

analogous to the frailty and woundedness experienced by the disabled body. This is particularly evident when examined through the lens of what Filip Springer calls an "ill-born" building, namely those created during the socialist period (6). Springer vividly describes this architectural neglect:

> [A]nd it was to such banishment that the best works of that period were sent; we forgot about their existence, we stopped caring about them, we did not look in their direction. They existed, but for us they were invisible. They appeared for a moment only when we had to face them. This is what happened at the Central Station, whose undergrounds until recently were the true vestibules of hell. We hated them and gave vent to that hatred. (6, translation mine)

If these buildings can be described as ill-born, then one could argue that the country of Poland was symbolically reborn disabled. As Magdalena Gajda further describes, much of the Polish population experienced some form of disablement in the immediate aftermath of the war:

> In every family there was someone who, after fighting, camps, prisons, or torture, never regained health and emotional balance. Passers-by with amputated limbs, moving in wheelchairs, the deaf or the blind did not arouse unhealthy curiosity—they were next to clerks heading to their offices and children playing on top of the rubble. (translation mine)

The analogy of the ill-born building serves as a provocation regarding the legitimacy of post-war structures, yet it finds its true depth when translated into the reborn disabled identity of the Polish state. Here, a distinction is vital: while a building may be ill-born—conceived within a flawed ideological or material framework—the nation is reborn disabled, meaning that it emerges into its new sovereignty already bearing the functional impairments of World War II. As Magdalena Gajda's testimony suggests, this is not a metaphor for a lack of health, but a description of a specific mode of being. The rebirth is not a clean break from pre-socialist history, but a synthesis where the new state (the nation) must inhabit the ill-born structures (the architecture), using the specific, adaptive strategies of a disabled citizenry.

This profound mass disablement created a disorienting context from which works of public art began to emerge, surfacing from the vast sea of bricks that dominated the postwar landscape of Poland, particularly in Warsaw. For instance, the reconstruction of Muranów, Warsaw's former Jewish Ghetto, largely utilized salvaged materials, with several sections built directly atop compacted rubble. While the precise number of bodies, treasures, or personal belongings buried beneath remains unknown (as no

large-scale systemic excavations were ever made), these aspects simply did not factor into the immediate necessity of reconstruction. Reeling from the slaughter and devastation of the war, the city had no choice but to look forward. As Jerzy Elżanowski suggests, this material reality extends to the very foundation of the city:

> There can be no possible study of Warsaw that escapes a profound reflection on wartime destruction and the materiality of corpses gathered into ruins. . . Even if architecture in Warsaw is physically suffused with human remains, it would be unimaginable to pursue an empirical analysis. But it is equally impossible not to imagine that such a possibility exists and to consider its deep implications on the relationship between people, violence, and architecture. ("Ruins, Rubble, and Human Remains" 115)

If one has ever stumbled through the streets of Warsaw and felt an irreconcilable haunting presence, the pins and needles of innumerable ghosts, it is precisely for these reasons. The city's very fabric is permeated by this buried history. Consequently, when such bastardized waste material is directly wedged into wet, heaping slabs of rubble-concrete, the relationship between the body of architecture and the human body becomes undeniably phantasmagoric, brutally blurred beyond recognition, thus perpetuating a cycle of destruction, death, decay, and rehabilitation.

Architecture reflects the political, economic, and social relations of the period in which it was created, and for Poland, it was an antidote to socialist realism. In the years following World War II, architects faced the formidable demand of rapidly meeting the housing needs of a burgeoning population. Cheap and affordable housing solutions needed to be implemented in accordance with the ideology of socialist realism, meaning that designs had to undergo strict approval processes. Polish architects in this early postwar period felt increasing pressure to serve the Party's agenda, yet they skillfully manipulated the political situation to satisfy their professional ambitions. The ubiquitous deployment of brick and concrete represented a reaction against the excessive, even "mad," application of ornamental facings and plasters that had characterized earlier periods, particularly decorative Socialist Realism. Concurrently, there was a compelling desire for "bad" brick—shamefully exposed due to physical imperfections or aesthetic disfavor—to be transformed, or perhaps concealed, into "good" brick (Springer 281). The alchemical solution to this pervasive scarcity of decent brick was the widespread application of mosaics and ceramic cladding. It is my understanding that mosaics themselves were not of aesthetic interest to these architects; rather, they were more inclined to emulate contemporary international trends, such

as those championed by Le Corbusier. The implementation of mosaics, therefore, served as a means of covering up and diverting attention from the "bad brick," functioning as a monumental bandage to a relentlessly oozing wound. Thus, the addition of architectural ceramics and mosaics functioned as a form of adaptive equipment, reanimating the building process and necessitating a fundamental reorientation of urban space. The mosaic, then, is the point where the ill-born structure receives its prosthetic, turning a site of misfitting into a site of radical, tactile creation.

A PERIOD OF ERRORS AND MISTAKES

Pervasive censorship paralyzed artistic activities and industries, effectively stifling the country's natural cultural development. "What was permitted one year was forbidden the next, and vice versa; what was tolerated in literature was condemned in painting; what one artist might be permitted would bring dire consequences to another" (Wallach 76). This oppressive climate fostered a form of self-policing, where adherence to the authorities' whims subtly created a disabled body/mind. To make one's work public as an artist was to risk being labeled as "infecting" others, a dangerous contagion. However, as David Crowley notes, "some fields of art and design were less strongly policed than others; [architectural ceramics and mosaics] lay at the edge of the ideologues' field of vision" ("Stalinism" 80). In effect, this created a uniquely tenebrous condition in which a disability aesthetic could subtly flourish. A discourse centered on individualism, and the expressive quality of materials were thus nourished in practice, even as such formalist experiments remained officially prohibited. For many, painting abstractions became a subtle strategy for outsmarting the system.

Disability has been characterized historically as a mistake or an error in genetic purity, and such "errors" powerfully challenge our conventional understanding of art and aesthetics. This resonates deeply with the Stalinist years in Poland's history, often regarded by both Polish and foreign observers as a cultural nadir, described in Party jargon as a "period of errors and mistakes." Art and design until Poland's "Październik" (the political "Thaw" of October 1956) were typically considered, by observers abroad, uniformly poor and corrupted—an unfortunate derailment on the modernist journey of the 20th century (Crowley, "Building" 187). This pervasive cultural isolation produced an overall frustration that the country desperately sought to overcome, scrambling to compensate for inherited neglect through new architectural forms and means of expression. This historical neglect, whether cultural or architectural, measurably cripples the body; a neglected body is a broken body, denied fundamental access

to care. This period in Poland's history, therefore, reflects a profound derangement of epitaphs. Isolation itself is a disabling experience, reaping severe mental consequences. All these interconnected factors must be considered when appraising the value, or indeed the devaluation, of these works of art.

The transformation of a mosaic into a ruin is a temporal process driven by neglect and collective orientation; even the invisible mosaic, draped in camouflage, is categorized by its evasion of detection. This image of ruin, then, embodies the tension between death and survival, loss and life, destruction and preservation. However, in an age of artificial remakes and sanitization, we risk erasing the very evidence of how we came to be (Pijarski). Rather than simple conservation, I argue for recognizing the ruin-mosaic as a powerful embodiment of memory that is in danger of being swept away by the infrastructural debris of constant urban updates and reboots.

These structures are what I call "un-monuments"—they defy conventional criteria of monumentality. Unlike their formal counterparts, un-monuments embody a struggle for mere existence, a daily fight for survival. They lack the luxury of concern for public perception. Paradoxically, un-monuments welcome acts of vandalism and defacement, often blurring the lines between intimacy and violence, precisely because they are accustomed to nothing else—any form of attention serves as positive reinforcement. Abuse and neglect have become their inherent condition. Yet, in their ruination, they become unintentional jewels. In stark contrast, traditional monuments overtly command attention, often displaying a form of architectural narcissism, caring deeply about external validation. People do not protest, retaliate against, or demand the removal of un-monuments; instead, un-monuments are willfully ignored into obscurity—a disfigurement of memory. When an un-monument finally reemerges into perception, it is met with shock and confusion, akin to encountering the sublime. The eyes desperately wish to be plucked from their sockets, yet they cannot look away from the decaying abomination.

SURVEILLANCE AND THE POLICING OF TOUCH

Given their ubiquitous presence, what then are we to do with these mosaics? The Greeks can neglect certain things because they have a ton of ruins. For Poland, however, post-communism presents a unique challenge regarding its material remnants. Clay, specifically, holds profound significance here, both historically and due to its prevalence in the country's reconstruction. In ceramics, the term "plastic memory" is used to define clay's inherent ability to retain its initial form and resist subsequent alterations. Yet

there are instances where clay surrenders its memory, refusing any fixed shape; when it does, it is irreversibly lost, necessitating a complete recommencement. This phenomenon aptly mirrors the psychic landscape of postwar Poland. Just as the manipulation of clay enables individuals to confront the constructive and destructive aspects of the self, so too does plastic memory serve a similar function for Poland's fractured history. It embodies the materiality of a collective memory, resilient yet susceptible to erasure. When these resilient material memories are embedded into the walls of the city as mosaics, they become sites of tension—surfaces that demand contact, which the state often deems suspicious.

Because these material histories are so fragile, my physical entanglements with them often trigger unexpected, confrontational encounters. For instance, in Kraków, I was twice reprimanded for photographing mosaics: first at a district court where trees had been strategically planted in front of the mosaics—an effective solution that circumvented the need for outright demolition—and again at the "Kłos" housing cooperative, despite its unobstructed invitation for public engagement. Given that both these mosaics are registered monuments, one might ask: is this how history is effectively swept under the rug? My grasp of the Polish language wasn't yet refined enough to argue with authority, so, contrary to my iconoclastic nature, I succumbed to obedience and clumsily fled the scene of any future crime. But what exactly is my crime? Photographing the body of architecture, practicing rituals of intimacy, being curious about something otherwise not worth being curious about, being blind in a foreign country—more precisely, being blind with access to a camera?

When I engage with these imperfect surfaces, I fear committing some kind of Orwellian crime. This touchcrime, I have come to realize, is the deliberate act of prioritizing touch over vision—a direct challenge to ocularcentricity and its pervasive supremacy. Ironically, touchcrime has nothing to do with keeping one's hands to oneself. Whose responsibility is it to monitor and report suspicious mosaic-related activity, how committed are they to this task, and do they get paid a decent wage? Admittedly, a truly intimate experience with these mosaics feels almost impossible. There are bodies everywhere, lingering even in the most secluded locations, as if the mosaics possess a gravitational pull. I perceive not only the surveillant gaze of cameras monitoring my activity, but also the ice-cold scrutiny of distrusting eyes penetrating my body. This policing of touch effectively oppresses our most primal sense—the fundamental need for tactility—which dwindles as our world becomes increasingly homogenized and flattened, as if "flat death" couldn't possibly become any flatter (Barthes 115). Yet it is precisely within the crime of this contact that a deeper, more painful intimacy with the building is born.

This haptic engagement—this touchcrime—leaves a physical record on the seeker. Within the encrypted aesthetics of these mosaics, texture functions materially as its own subversive and codified language, offering a spectrum of touch that oscillates between pain and pleasure. Through my observations, the rigorous act of touch has left its mark, and I have amassed an extensive collection of bodily abrasions: lacerations, punctures, pustules, lesions, boils, sores, avulsions, gapes, rashes, and gashes. The profound understandings these injuries impart are felt through the very act of touching these architectural wounds: groping, fingering, fondling, tickling, caressing, stroking, penetrating, licking, massaging, squeezing, or clenching. Different mosaics offer vastly different experiences of intimacy, or lack thereof. Some express profound indifference, exhibiting an outright apathy towards engagement. Where one mosaic seems to implore touch, another lies dormant, awaiting demolition—perhaps because its fundamental access needs, and thus its capacity for intimacy, have not been met.

HARVESTING WASTE

Fig. 0. National Bank Poland, Świętokrzyska 11/21, Warsaw. Maria Leszczyńska, exterior composition, mosaic in the enclosed courtyard; glass and ceramic waste material, 1967. Photograph unavailable, access not granted.

On Christmas Eve, I set out to document a mosaic, anticipating fewer onlookers given the holiday—a welcome relief from the questioning I often struggle to navigate. The mosaic I was hunting for was located at Narodowy Bank Polski. The building itself proved elusive, tucked away in a courtyard protected by metal gates and listless security guards. Once I managed to stumble into what I thought to be the entrance, I felt initial

confusion and slight disgust, unsure if I had found the correct location, only to soon realize that I had. To my bewilderment, the entire structure had been enveloped in a vinyl fabric, caked in advertisements presumably promoting the joyless pleasures of banking. The mosaic had been concealed in a manner that painfully revealed its obfuscated content, akin to a poorly executed Christo and Jeanne-Claude installation, or a child dressed up as a Halloween ghost with sneakers peeking through the costume. Whoever manages this building had clearly deemed its ugliness unacceptable, determining it needed to be masked from the world. Its perceived disability, in essence, was rendered invisible, yet simultaneously, "violently included" into the urban landscape (Pamuła 858).



Fig. 1. A. Jurasz University Hospital No. 1, Marii Skłodowskiej Curie 9, Bydgoszcz. Marian Kokoszyński, interior composition, mosaics on multiple floors in the waiting area; ceramic waste material, 1980. Photograph by S. Proski, 2025. Courtesy of S. Proski.

The mosaics in the hospital were sterile and sanitized, like the medical devices poised to penetrate each unsuspecting patient. For a disabled person, a hospital waiting room typically embodies hell on earth, but this place was different—perhaps purgatory, but not damnation. Hoping to have found lesions, I found health, as these mosaics were smooth and

glossy, in pristine condition. This prompted a critical question: could these even be considered ruins, given the extraordinary level of care they have received over the years? Whose responsibility is it, I wondered, to disinfect and meticulously scrub the crevices of gunk accumulating between the margins of plastic waste—a spit-shine sonata effectively slowing the process of decay? Furthermore, what is the role of these mosaics as caregivers, ensuring they perform their duty for patients anxiously awaiting diagnoses, treatments, cures, and prescriptions? This implied role as caregivers, mirroring the very medical procedures administered within the hospital, underscores a deeper connection: building a mosaic, in a strange way, feels rather surgical. As an artist, one performs an operation on a building—meticulously and with absolute precision.



Fig. 2. Madonna, Reja 1, Olsztyn. Unknown artist, exterior composition, mosaic on the facade; glass and factory waste material, date unknown. Photograph by S. Proski, 2025. Courtesy of S. Proski.

With curious, trembling fingers, I penetrated the decomposing, neglected wall, towering with abrasions in the freezing rain. Over the course of decades, the calcified waste material had accumulated into a heaping mass of rot, largely ignored by the commuters who day by day willfully avert their gaze from the architectural body disfiguring the landscape, implicitly

wishing it would disappear. I massaged the lumpy, abnormal clusters of growth in a surreptitiously circular motion that bordered somewhere between clinical and sexual, aroused by the otherworldly spectrum of textures. I cannot fix these wounds, nor would I want to; I wish only to ruminate in their oozing imperfection.



Fig. 3. Municipal Cultural Centre, Chopina 101, Sochaczew. Hanna and Gabriel Rechowicz, exterior decoration, mosaic on the facade; ceramic waste material, date unknown. Photograph by S. Proski, 2025. Courtesy of S. Proski.

Every orifice is a portal that transports you to another textured dimension. I reach my hand into the hollow crevice, and I'm met with both pain and pleasure, navigating a labyrinth of blisters and fissures. The surface shifts between rough and slick, slippery and bone dry, a pockmarked utopia of imperfections from the ceramic glazing process, akin to a teenager's unfortunate complexion or the moon's cratered face. As I touch the rock—a fleshy concrete mass embedded with unnamable, unrecognizable shards—the jaggedness of the abnormality cuts an incision into my skin. I'm wounded; my palm seeps blood into the porous rock, leaving traces of smudged fingerprints daubed across the surface. This act becomes a living composition, a collaboration and a contamination, a pact written and paid for in blood. Each loosely held chunk of light-reflecting

rock transforms into its own reading stone, illuminating a whisper from within the wall, seemingly dislodged from time.



Fig. 4. Institute of Ceramics and Building Materials, Toszecka 99, Gliwice. Unknown artist, exterior decoration, mosaic on the facade; ceramic waste material, date unknown. Photograph by S. Proski, 2025. Courtesy of S. Proski.

A mosaic in Gliwice escaped bulldozing and the uniform dullness of thermo-modernization only to be painted over: industrial-grade, banal bright white aggressively smothered its spectrum of light and color. As any painter knows, paint offers the potent illusion of a fresh start—a new ground for a salvaged composition, a clean slate to begin anew, or a means to destroy past work and reclaim the support. It is undeniably alchemical in its transformative power. Yet, there's one thing, as a material, that it is utterly incapable of: truly concealing texture. No matter the pigment load, the viscosity, or the number of layers, the mosaic's inherent topography, its raised points and deep tessellations, simply refused to be flattened. Here, tactility profoundly triumphed over the flatness of image, a material resistance that undoubtedly exasperated those attempting its rehabilitation. Their botched, painfully obvious effort was ultimately thwarted, leaving them no choice but a final, more desperate solution: mounting a vinyl advertisement over their failed, textural battle.

CONCLUSION

Crip intimacy is the moment the encrypted world stops being a barrier and starts being a collaborator, as is the case in these mosaics. It is the feeling of being understood by a material. While the sighted world experiences a mosaic as a flat image, my experience with that object occurs through the pustules, boils, and lacerations of its decay. It is the moment the stone implores touch, and I respond. It is a rejection of the touchcrime—the ableist policing that demands we remain distant spectators. Crip intimacy is finding home in the misfitted. It is the recognition that my blind embodiment—with its mist, debris, and stumbles—is mirrored in the un-monuments of the city. We are both ill-born structures navigating a world obsessed with curation and curative repair. In this intimacy, the ruin is not a tragedy to be fixed, but a peer to be felt. It is the anthropological understanding that I am not blundering alone. I am part of a lineage of friendly ghosts who left their tactile signatures in clay shards and kilns, harvesting this waste material and carrying it into a future where it can be valued.

Contending with the taken-for-granted serves as the basis of our differential being-in-the-world and can give insights into how things might be done differently (Boys 62). So, how can we truly care intimately for these buildings when most have been rendered invisible? Caring becomes a commitment to understanding and actively working against ordinary, unnoticed discriminatory practices, while critically rethinking and redesigning them (66). These mosaics are invisible in two keyways: first, their locations are often skewed and indeterminable, with many destroyed or covered up. Even when a location is provided, it is typically a vague street name, leaving discovery to accidental encounter. Second, even when the mosaics are more spatially intrusive and noticeable within the urban fabric, people rarely pay them attention, despite surfaces seemingly begging to be touched by curious hands and further understood. For me, however, there is a small victory: whenever I am photographing on location, passersby inevitably pause, beginning the slow, arduous process of reevaluation. They scratch their heads, noticing for the first time the ugly majesty of these relics of a not-so-distant past that still linger in the shadows, unforgettable. While arguing in favor of ugliness is nothing new, it is crucial to acknowledge that the interpretation of something damaged or broken can reveal new forms of beauty, inherently challenging our reliance on perfect bodily forms. In other words, perfection is the enemy of the good.

"Only the sick are truly healthy" (Tokarczuk 84). This paradox frames a critical lens through which to view damaged art: beholders of such works discover an image of disability that compels contemplation not as a symbol of human imperfection, but as an experience of the corporeal variation inherent

in all modern life. Art, as Siebers argues, is profoundly materialist—it relies on means of production and available resources but also embodies new conceptions of the human (67). This understanding directly applies to the art produced during the People's Republic of Poland, where artists responded—often through careful, strategic, and covert means—to their new, restrictive reality. The strategic use of rehabilitated waste material in mosaics during this period of intense transformation allowed a unique disability aesthetic to emerge within Poland's modernist architecture. Poland has, in effect, become a landscape garden of both future and present ruins, comparable in its profound layered history to Ancient Greece. These manufactured ruins of the socialist period, particularly through the symbolic use of ceramics, foreshadowed an image of martyrdom, paradoxically serving as a protest to the totalitarian regime. Ultimately, objects of art are bodies, and aesthetics is the science of discerning how some bodies make other bodies feel (63). The fragments of these sites represent a refusal to be sanitized. They are crip artifacts—stubborn, sharp, and physically demanding—forcing the world to grapple with a reality perceived through the skin rather than the distant, surveilling eye. This is the essence of their architecture of touch, their profound crip intimacy. If what one encounters in these works of art is a site of disfigurement and alienation, it is because they unequivocally represent the state of the soul of Poland, an enduring, haptic archive that demands engagement beyond mere sight.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the editors of this publication and to my reviewers for their feedback. I want to express appreciation of the support given to my research by the Polish-US Fulbright Commission. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge Natalia Pamuła, whose guidance and support informed the clarity of my research.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology*. Duke UP, 2006. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388074

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 2010.

Boys, Jos. "Cripping Spaces? On Dis/abling Phenomenology: In Architecture." *Log*, no. 42, 2018, pp. 55–66.

Crowley, David. "Building the World Anew: Design in Stalinist and Post-Stalinist Poland." *Journal of Design History*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1994, pp. 187–203. https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/7.3.187

Crowley, David. "Stalinism and Modern Craft in Poland." *Journal of Design History*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1998, pp. 71–83. https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/11.1.71

Elżanowski, Jerzy. "Manufacturing Ruins: Architecture and Representation in Post-Catastrophic Warsaw." *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2018, pp. 740–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2018.1495912

Elżanowski, Jerzy. "Ruins, Rubble, and Human Remains: Negotiating Culture and Violence in Post-Catastrophic Warsaw." *Public Art Dialogue*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2012, pp. 114–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/21502552.2012.717838

Gajda, Magdalena. "Jest tyle nowych dróg…," *Niepełnosprawni.pl*, 12 Nov. 2006, https://archiwum.niepelnosprawni.pl/ledge/x/16957, accessed Feb. 2025.

Heatherwick, Thomas. *Humanize: A Manifesto for Better Buildings*. Penguin/Random House, 2023.

Pamuła, Natalia. "Violent Inclusion: Disability and the Nation in Polish 1950s and 1960s Young Adult Literature." *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2020, pp. 858–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325419897787

Pijarski, Krzysztof. "Wunderblock Warsaw: The Ruined City, Memory, and Mechanical Reproduction." *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, no. 4, 2013. https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2013.4.1263

Siebers, Tobin. "Disability Aesthetics." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2006, pp. 63–73.

Springer, Filip. *Źle urodzone. Reportaże o architekturze PRL-u*. Karakter, 2022.

Tokarczuk, Olga. *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*. Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Riverhead, 2019.

Wallach, Amei. "Censorship in the Soviet Bloc." *Art Journal*, vol. 50, 1991, pp. 75–83.

S. Proski is a blind/disabled artist, writer, and educator. Their work addresses their own personal experience of blindness and takes the form of painting, printmaking, sculpture, and text with the aim of challenging the bias towards vision in art. Their work foregrounds the complexities of blind culture, its relationship to vision and language, and the embedded systemic structures that prioritize the ocularcentric. Their work has been shown in various venues in Tokyo, Toronto, New York, Boston, and Chicago. They are the recipient of numerous awards, most notably a Wynn Newhouse Fellowship, and a Fulbright Research and Study Scholarship to Warsaw, Poland.

sproski.info@gmail.com

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.06

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Maricela DeMirjyn
Colorado State University

Fluid Kinship: Queer, Crip, and More-than-Human Relations in Anna-Marie McLemore's *Lakelore*

Abstract

This article argues that Anna-Marie McLemore's *Lakelore* theorizes *fluid kinship* as a relational mode that joins queer, crip, racialized, and more-than-human forms of belonging. Focusing on Bastián and Lore, two nonbinary, neurodivergent teenagers of Mexican descent, the novel imagines intimacy not as stability or resolution but as an ongoing practice of mutual recognition, interdependence, and ecological relation. Bringing together queer and crip theory, Latinx speculative fiction, and more-than-human feminist thought, the essay examines queer/crip temporalities, ecological companionship through the lake and alebrijes, and intersectional embodiment as race, transness, and disability shape belonging. *Lakelore* is analyzed as a site of theory-making that reimagines care through cultural memory, creativity, and more-than-human relation, showing how the novel expands Latinx speculative fiction through queercrip ecological worldmaking.

Keywords: queercrip, kinship, Latinx, embodiment, more-than-human.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 28 Oct. 2025. Verified: 1 Apr. 2026. Accepted: 15 Apr. 2026.

> "I set the dolphin down on the lapping water. The teal body stretches and grows until the alebrije looks like some ancient sea dinosaur. Then the alebrije swims down into the world under the lake." (McLemore 19)

Lakelore, Anna-Marie McLemore's 2022 young adult novel, follows two Mexican American, nonbinary, neurodivergent teenagers, Bastián and Lore, whose lives converge around a small lakeside town and a submerged realm beneath the water. The novel opens with a childhood encounter at the lake and returns to it years later, when the characters meet again as teenagers amid personal and ecological instability. What begins as a wary rescue during a storm becomes an unfolding practice of recognition. The two learn to name themselves, narrate their differences, and inhabit non-normative ways of moving through time, school, family expectations, and desire.

As the lake's weather turns volatile, its submerged world begins to press back against the surface: storms reopen what had been sealed off, memories return, and the boundary between "below" and "above" becomes increasingly unstable. The novel builds as Bastián and Lore realize that surviving the lake's pull also means surviving the social pressures that police their bodies and stories. Their movement from mistrust toward mutual visibility becomes the novel's primary arc of transformation. The central tension of the story is a layered struggle for livable relations. It asks how to survive institutions and families that misread (or refuse) queer and disabled life, and how to build forms of care that do not require normalization. As Bastián navigates ADHD, trans embodiment, and the pressures of being read as "brown and trans" in public space, Lore lives with dyslexia, gendered misnaming, and a history of flight. The lake, as well as the community memories clustered around it, becomes a site where these pressures can be reworked rather than merely endured.

The novel's speculative elements stay close to local ecology and cultural practice. Bastián creates papier-mâché alebrijes that externalize specific anxieties. This practice of making bright hybrid creatures, rooted in Mexican folk art, has been passed down through his family. Bastián's bisabuelo, or great-grandfather, learned the creative praxis from the alebrijes' originator, Pedro Linares, who began depicting the fantastical animals in the 1930s (McLemore 13). When released into the lake, the alebrijes animate in the underwater world, carrying affect into an ecological register and returning as companions. In one scene, Bastián sets a dolphin-shaped alebrije on the water and watches it stretch, transform, and swim down into the world under the lake (19). The act becomes a small ritual of letting-go, one that links embodiment, creativity, and more-than-human relations.

Building from this narrative arc, this article argues that *Lakelore* stages *fluid kinship* as a relational mode that emerges across queer, crip, racialized, and more-than-human experience. In this context, fluid kinship refers to forms of relation that move beyond biological, heteropatriarchal, and state-centered models of belonging and instead emerge through interdependence, permeability, and shared vulnerability. The term draws on earlier kinship scholarship that understands kinship as affiliation beyond blood or reproduction, but it also resonates with recent work on oceanic kinship. Katharina Fackler and Silvia Schultermandl define oceanic kinship as both "kinship with the ocean and kinship shaped by the ocean," stressing practices of mutual care grounded in collectivity and affiliation (197). This framework is especially useful for *Lakelore*, where kinship is materially and narratively mediated by water. The lake shapes how memory, affect, and belonging move, and it reorganizes relations across human and more-than-human life. Fluid kinship thereby addresses flexibility in social ties, as well as a watery and ecological mode of belonging that resists fixed boundaries and linear genealogies.

Fluid kinship also speaks to Donna J. Haraway's insistence that kin must be reimagined outside the narrow terms of family, lineage, and reproduction, and argues for making "oddkin" (*Staying* 2). Here, Haraway focuses on kinships as forms of relation that develop across heterogenous beings and worlds, with kin stretching to include all species, human and otherwise (*Staying* 103). This resonates with Kafer's concept of "crip kin," which emphasizes kinship as being more than what is biologically or legally recognized and highlights "the queer possibilities of intimacy with other presences and entities" ("Crip Kin" 1). Together, these formulations help clarify that in *Lakelore*, kinship is made through queercrip interdependence, creative practice, and more-than-human companionship. Bastían and Lore discover a connection with one another, and they inhabit a relational world where access, affect, water, and alebrijes all participate in the making of a livable relation. In the novel, these fluid kinships emerge through three interwoven dynamics: (1) queer/crip temporalities shaped by neurodivergent rhythms and access needs; (2) ecological companionship, in which the lake and the alebrijes function as co-regulators of affect; and (3) intersectional embodiment, where racialization and transness reconfigure the everyday conditions of safety, visibility, and belonging.

Beyond treating the novel as representation alone, I read its storytelling as theory-making. Alternating first-person voices, watery imagery, and patterns of repetition and return produce a model of intimacy grounded in interdependence. The analysis centers close readings of key scenes across the novel and traces how the plot moves from isolation and misrecognition toward mutual visibility through relational forms that exceed the human and the normative.

Central to this study is the conceptual overlap between queer theory and crip theory. Queer theory, emerging from scholars such as Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and José Esteban Muñoz, interrogates normative constructs of gender, sexuality, and time. Crip theory, as shared by Robert McRuer and Alison Kafer's work (see McRuer, *Crip Theory*, and Kafer, *Feminist*), builds on queer theory's anti-normativity arguments while centering disability and neurodivergence. Kafer stresses "crip time" as a refusal of linear, productivity-driven, and developmental expectations (*Feminist* 25). In practice, crip time names flexible pacing shaped by access needs, fluctuating capacity, medical and bureaucratic schedules, and interdependence, not by capitalist "on-time" milestones. Crip time is also a political framework. It expands what futures can look like by rejecting the idea that a single "normal" timeline is the only livable one. Carrie Sandahl highlights the intersection of queer and crip theories by examining autobiographical performances by crip and queer artists to identify "where queerness and 'cripdom' intersect, separate and coincide" (25). Sandahl shows how this challenge unfolds performatively. Crip/queer artists expose how compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality are mutually reinforcing, and they also make visible points of friction when queer spaces reproduce ableism or when disability discourses presume heterosexual norms. Her formulation of "queering the crip and cripping the queer" (Sandahl 37) therefore names overlap without collapsing difference, and it resonates with the relationship between Bastián and Lore, which is built through mutual recognition, shared embodied knowledge, and non-linear temporal unfolding.

The work by Eli Clare provides an important framework for understanding the intersections of disability, environment, and embodiment. In *Brilliant Imperfection*, Clare critiques "cure" as a dominant cultural story that measures disabled lives against able-bodied norms and treats difference as something to be fixed (12–13). Against this, he reframes interdependence as ordinary and generative. He presents it as an ethical practice of living with and through others and rejects the idea that it signals a failure of autonomy (135–36). Clare also links disability to place by showing how access, sensory life, and vulnerability are negotiated in ecological spaces (forests, streets, homes), making the environment a lived dimension of embodiment. For Clare, creativity is not ornamental. It is a practice of survival and world-making that refuses shame and builds coalitional care (143–45). Such a perspective aligns with the novel's representation of alebrijes and the lake as affective and ecological companions in Bastián's and Lore's journeys. Together, these queer and crip theoretical frameworks offer a foundation for analyzing how the novel narratively constructs intimacy, temporality, and embodiment.

Instead of approaching these categories separately, the novel brings them into relation. Queer recognition happens through crip time, disabled embodiment is understood through an ecological imaginary, and intimacy is structured through shared vulnerabilities and relational openness.

Lastly, grounding the essay in Latinx disability studies clarifies the concepts of disability, belonging, and embodiment in *Lakelore*. Julie Avril Minich states that Chicanx studies and disability studies "speak meaningfully to one another" and uses the concept of "Greater Mexico" to rethink political belonging apart from fixed national boundaries (12–13). Susan Antebi likewise understands disability as forming within "complex, interdependent, and shifting continuums" and defines "intercorporeality" as the "mutual dependency and referentiality linking bodies to one another" (3–4). Together, Minich and Antebi situate *Lakelore*'s queer and neurodivergent embodiments within relational, racialized, and transnational frameworks of belonging. Antebi also draws on McRuer's concept of crip futurity, particularly as a way "to recognize the persistent temporal contours of human differences" (104–05). McRuer's more recent attention to disability within a "global politics of austerity" (*Crip Times* 4) and to the "paradoxical role of disability and 'access'" (132) further clarifies how space, recognition, and political belonging are shaped. His turn toward "inhabitable spaces and worlds" (135) extends this framework and foregrounds disability in *Lakelore* through questions of livability, relation, and belonging rather than as an isolated identity category.

Another important framework locates the text in dialogue with Latinx speculative fiction. Sami Schalk speaks to the political astuteness of speculative fiction and how it can provide commentary on our world and "make us imagine alternative possibilities" (1). Renee Hudson (n. pag.) and Maia Gil'adí (186–87) agree that Latinx speculative works resist dominant dystopian or universalizing speculative modes by grounding their imaginaries in racialized "liberatory" Latinidad, resistance and belonging within the temporality of past, present, and future. Gil'adí also speaks to the manner in which Latinx speculative texts narrate historical violence and trauma (197). However, *Lakelore* diverges from this trend by focusing on healing, belonging, and kinship. Using queercrip and ecological relations, this divergence expands the scope of Latinx speculative fiction to include stories centering care and interdependence. Furthermore, Hudson contends that Latinx speculative fiction is often representative of lived histories, such as those of migration and cultural continuity, and is rooted in contemporary experiences of marginalization.

Lakelore exemplifies this tendency by locating its speculative elements, including the underwater world of the lake and living alebrijes, within a recognizable Latinx cultural context. As noted earlier, the shared artistry

of creating alebrijes in Bastián's family represents an intergenerational transmission of Latinx artistic tradition by placing the speculative nature of the living alebrijes as more than fantastical decoration and resists falling under cultural appropriation. Antonio Córdoba and Emily A. Maguire, editors of *Posthumanism and Latin(x) American Science Fiction*, showcase in their introduction to the book how Latinx speculative writings focus not only on technologies or futurisms, but also on the expression of Indigenous and Latinx ecological worldviews. These worldviews challenge anthropocentric binaries and imagine permeable boundaries between human and nonhuman worlds. The novel participates in this mode by rendering the lake not as a backdrop but as a sentient and relational presence that shapes characters' identities and experiences.

The third theoretical strand for this study draws on more-than-human scholarship and ecocritical feminist theory. An application of Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, the movement of matter, affect, and agency across human and nonhuman bodies, provides a framework for understanding of how the lake functions narratively (48). In the novel, Bastián's emotional states flow into alebrijes, which then enter the lake, transforming both the creatures and the water. The lake, in turn, influences the characters' perceptions, movements, and memories, thereby enabling transcorporeal exchange. Moreover, more-than-human scholarship points out that nonhuman entities are not passive settings but agents and companions (Haraway, *When Species* 250). Such scholarship challenges anthropocentric ideology by rejecting the view that humans are the sole makers of meaning, relation, and agency. The alebrijes become co-actors in the narrative by not only carrying away Bastián's anxieties but also by accompanying Lore underwater and visually manifesting emotions that are otherwise difficult to articulate. By drawing on these works, this article reads the lake and alebrijes as central to the text's exploration of identity and kinship. They mediate between human and nonhuman worlds, between personal affect and ecological systems, and between cultural memory and speculative imagination.

Across these fields, queer and crip theories, Latinx speculative fiction and more-than-human studies, scholars and activists have centered fluidity, relationality, and alternative epistemologies. Yet few works bring these frameworks together like the storytelling in *Lakelore*. McLemore's novel provides a unique case for engaging with how speculative narratives can generate theory through story by voicing queercrip and ecological kinships rooted in Latinx cultural understandings. This review of relevant scholarship provides the theoretical foundation of this study, demonstrating that the text operates at the intersection of multiple critical conversations.

Methodologically, this article uses critical content analysis as an interpretive, theory-driven approach to examining how a young adult narrative organizes power, embodiment, and belonging through plot, voice, and figurative language. Following Kathy G. Short's account of critical content analysis as a critical stance that locates power in social practices and reads for both inequity and sites of resistance (4–6), this analysis reads McLemore's work as a representational and theory-making text that organizes meaning and positions readers toward particular understandings of queer, crip, racialized, and more-than-human life. In keeping with qualitative content analysis processes, I read the novel multiple times, beginning with an immersion reading to experience the narrative as a whole before returning for analytic rereadings guided by the theoretical frame.

Across subsequent rereadings, I conduct close readings of key incidents and turning points, and move between theory and narrative detail to develop claims. Three analytic tools organize this narrative analysis: (1) focalization and voice—how alternating first-person narration shapes what can be known, named, and withheld; (2) social processes of characters—how institutions, family expectations, and public surveillance distribute agency and risk across race, gender, and disability; and (3) closure—how the novel resolves (or refuses to resolve) its central tensions, and what assumptions its ending invites readers to accept or reject (Short 11).

Within this analytic approach, four cross-cutting lenses guide what I look for in each selected scene: voice and perspective, metaphor and watery imagery, queer/crip temporalities (including repetition, return, and pacing), and intersectional embodiment (race, transness, neurodivergence, disability, and ecology as co-constitutive). These lenses are applied across the article's three thematic sections on queer/crip intimacy, more-than-human kinship, and racialized belonging so that each section explicitly tracks how narrative form (voice, imagery, time, embodiment) produces the thematic claims being made.

QUEER AND CRIP INTIMACIES

Reading through focalization and pacing, I show how alternating narration produces queer/crip intimacy by making neurodivergent processing and relational pauses structurally central to the scenes that bring Bastián and Lore together. One of the central achievements of the narrative lies in its representation of queer and crip intimacies through Bastián's and Lore's interconnected stories. Rather than framing disability and queerness as separate or additive identities, McLemore renders them mutually

constitutive, echoing Sandahl's argument that "queering the crip and cripping the queer" is a reciprocal process that disrupts both normative heterosexuality and able-bodiedness. Using first-person narration, scenes of mutual recognition, and temporal shifts, the novel develops a narrative of intimacy that is neither linear nor easily codified. Also, the story alternates between Bastián and Lore's voices, each marked by distinctive rhythms, concerns, and sensory orientations.

A key example occurs in Bastián's reflection on their ADHD:

> My brain is a shifting landscape. . . . So I try to claim all of myself, whenever I am in the seiches that move through my brain. It's the only way I can break out of thinking that I am only as good as the last thing I've done, or as the weather inside my brain. (McLemore 279)

Here, McLemore connects the physical and emotional geography of Bastián's neurodivergence to the environmental phenomenon of seiches, oscillating wave movements in lakes. Bastián's crip temporality, as Kafer describes it, resists capitalist and developmental time, and Bastián experiences shifting internal tides in place of linear progress (*Feminist* 27–28). A close reading shows that this moment functions as character development and as a crip narrative intervention whereby the use of the lake positions ADHD not as a deficit but as a rhythm shaping subjectivity and relationality.

This rhythm also governs how intimacy begins between Bastián and Lore. Their first lengthy encounter at the inlet is neither romanticized nor presented as instantaneous recognition. More quietly, it unfolds through hesitation, embodied gestures, and cautious trust. When Lore moves to help Bastián out of the rising inlet due to a storm, they state, "'If you don't want to pull me down with you,' . . . 'then don't grab my hand, grab on to my forearm,'" to which the hesitant Bastián internally voices, "I don't know this person, and I have no faith that they're steady enough, no matter what part of their arm I grab" (McLemore 50). A key scene occurs shortly after more water comes in the inlet, and Bastián decides to reach out and grab Lore's arm. This moment uncovers layered meanings, including Bastián's neurodivergent processing, the characters' embodied awareness of physics and vulnerability, and their emergent trust in a stranger. The scene also shows the ways in which connection organically manifests in times of shared risk and embodied negotiation.

In this same chapter, Bastián internally processes whether "this person is like me" by observing their low voice, loose clothing, and hair "stuffed into a beanie, some of it fluffed out in front to look like a boy's haircut" (51). Lore's response to Bastián's presence is similarly inflected by gender

fluidity and past trauma. Their interior narration during this meeting reflects mutual recognition and becomes a site of queercrip worldmaking. The text constructs dual narrators to stage scenes of recognition by showing how queer and trans individuals often find kinship through subtle, embodied cues more than explicit declarations. Throughout the novel, crip and queer intimacies are linked with how characters navigate shame, silence, and misunderstanding. Bastián's narrative voice changes rapidly between external stimuli and internal calculations, mirroring the fragmented yet deeply aware temporality of living with intersecting marginalized identities. Meanwhile, Lore navigates their own history of running and hiding, including their formative encounter with the underwater world as a child, a memory they cannot easily articulate to others.

By analyzing these scenes narratively, we see that intimacy in *Lakelore* is neither purely romantic nor purely platonic. It is queercrip intimacy formed through shared embodied experiences, non-normative temporalities, and mutual visibility. Late in the novel, this dynamic is named with clarity: "We go forward. To the rest of the world, we vanish. But to each other, we're seen" (280). Being seen here involves recognizing neurodivergent rhythms, gender fluid embodiments, and shared vulnerabilities. Through voice, gesture, and temporal structure, the narrative produces a form of intimacy that challenges normative narrative arcs of friendship or romance.

MORE-THAN-HUMAN KINSHIP AND EMBODIMENT

Through watery imagery and metaphor, I trace how the lake and the alebrijes function as narrative agents that reorganize affect and time. They are not merely a setting but participants in identity formation and communal relations. Importantly, these relations also restructure time. The lake's cycles and seiches offer a non-linear clock that aligns with neurodivergent pacing, allowing feelings to recur, drift, and return instead of resolving on a normative developmental timeline. Grounded in ecocritical feminist theory, particularly Alaimo, this analysis treats the lake and alebrijes as more than background elements. They operate as agents in the narrative's unfolding. From the beginning, the lake is presented as a liminal entity consisting of both air and water. Bastián and Lore are the only ones who have witnessed the underwater world, as it was a place that Bastián had never shared before because the lake had never opened up to anyone else (McLemore 8). This underwater space is not a distant place of fantasy. The underwater world sits alongside the human world and sometimes intrudes upon it, blurring boundaries between the real and the speculative. Sensory

detail renders this adjacency by showing the lake crossing mediums, with water behaving as airborne and animate matter:

> Then I saw the first flicker of iridescent blue lift off the water. It fluttered through the air, a slice of lake-silver wafting like a leaf. Then another followed it. Then a few more, then a dozen. Then a hundred, each of them like a butterfly with its wings made of water. (8)

Here the lake operates as what Astrida Neimanis would call a hydrological subject in reference to "watery bodiedness" (4). Neimanis posits that human subjectivity is co-produced through hydrological and ecological relations, the significance of which is to name the lake not only as a simple location, but as an active relational body that shapes human subjectivities.

The hybrid papier-mâché alebrijes Bastián crafts are equally significant. Initially, they function as tools for emotional regulation. Bastián learns from his brother, Antonio, while creating an alebrije to "'pick one thing that bothers you . . . and give it as much space in your brain as it wants, just for now'" (McLemore 14). Each alebrije embodies a specific anxiety or memory, such as a teal cat with a peacock's tail for not tracking when to take a course of antibiotics or a "yellow marmota with sherbet-orange wings" for losing a test assignment (14). Over time, Bastián releases these creatures into the lake, where they come to life and carry their "shadow boxes" of worry into an ecological world (21). The effect is twofold. Affect becomes material and mobile as it is moved into color, texture, and animal hybridity, and the lake becomes more than scenery as a receiving body that transforms what it holds. In this way, the alebrijes link interior experience to cultural inheritance and ecological relation, refusing an ableist demand that emotion remain privately managed and relocating care into creative, more-than-human companionship.

Lore's connection to the lake develops differently. After their childhood encounter, they find their name in the broken "LAKELORE" sign:

> This sign gave me my name. After I left that strange world underneath the water, and the boy who led me into it, I saw these letters. I'd been looking for my name for months. The name I'd been given when I was born had a kind of weight I couldn't carry. It was so distinctly feminine I didn't know how to hold it up. (47)

Their moment of naming is both personal and ecological, as Lore literally takes their name from the land-water interface. The scene's narration foregrounds Lore's sensory engagement with the sign and their affective recognition of belonging: "My fingers graze the worn wood, and it sends

a shiver of recognition through me" (47). In naming themselves after the lake, Lore forges a kinship with the place that resists ownership and mysticism, and affirms shared subjecthood.

In essence, the lake is not a mere setting but a participant in Bastián's and Lore's queercrip becoming, with identities formed through watery entanglements (Neimanis 44). Alebrijes, too, represent more-than-human companions by carrying affect into ecological realms, mediating between the personal and the collective (Haraway, *When Species* 88). Through this analysis, we see water and alebrijes convey fluid, transcorporeal forms of kinship that challenge anthropocentric ideology. These forms of kinship push against the assumption that care, agency, and relationality belong only to human subjects. Instead, the lake and the alebrijes participate in affect, embodiment, and belonging, expanding kinship beyond the human.

RACIALIZED IDENTITIES AND BELONGING

Using social-process questions—who holds power, who is required to self-monitor, and who absorbs risk—I read scenes of school, public space, and family as distributing vulnerability unevenly across brown trans and disabled embodiment. Specifically, I examine the ways the novel narrates race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability (Schalk 4–6), as well as ecology. Here I use (dis)ability to emphasize that ability and disability are shaped together, and that what counts as disability depends on social context and norms. The protagonists are both nonbinary and neurodivergent, and they are also Latinx. Their racialization shapes how they move through the world, including how time is experienced and managed through rapid risk assessment and self-monitoring:

> I can't really tell anyone what it's like to be dyslexic. The same as how I can't really tell anyone what it's like to be nonbinary, or Mexican American. I can only tell them what it's like for me to be dyslexic. . . . We all have warehouses where our brains store words. . . . But for me, it's like I have two totally separate warehouses. (McLemore 142)

The novel reveals systemic ableism and racialized marginalization. Bastián's schooling experiences, medical interactions, and social navigation reflect multiple structures of exclusion. Yet, crucially, these experiences are not portrayed as tragic or isolating. They are embedded within community, cultural practice, and queercrip kinship. The narrative voice resists medicalization and pathologization, while centering agency, creativity, and collective care.

The lake and alebrijes also carry racialized meaning. As stated earlier, alebrijes come from Mexican folk art traditions and are taught through intergenerational family practices. The lake's lore is rooted in local Latinx communities—las viejas, who once read seiches like tides and fishermen who know how to interpret the sky: "The old men gauging the clouds, the old women reading the rise and fall of the water, they were probably the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of anyone who'd believed in the world under the lake" (McLemore 2). These ancestral knowledges are positioned to be lost, as "anyone who took the world under the lake as fact was long gone," and yet they persist through Bastián and Lore's embodied encounters (2).

This passage highlights how the author uses intergenerational memory and ecology to depict racialized identity as not merely cultural, but as relational and environmental inheritance. By applying multiple subjectivities in conjunction with ecology, the novel creates an alternative epistemology. Rejecting universal claims, the novel locates queer and crip experience within Latinx cultural landscapes, neurodivergent temporalities, and ecological kinships.

Across the novel's arc, from childhood encounter, to storm-driven reunion, to a final movement toward mutual visibility, *Lakelore* imagines belonging as a practice of relation rather than the achievement of normalcy. Bastián and Lore do not "resolve" queerness, (dis)ability, or racialization into stability. Instead, they learn to read their lives through non-linear rhythms (seiches, storms, returns) and through companions that exceed the human (the lake and the alebrijes). The story's closing gesture of vanishing to the outside world while being seen by each other marks a queercrip ending that refuses a celebratory arrival and favors ongoing interdependence (McLemore 280).

Reading these scenes together clarifies what I refer to as "fluid kinship," an ethic and aesthetic of connection that moves across bodies, water, art objects, and cultural memory. The lake operates as a porous archive of community knowledge and a co-regulator of affect. The alebrijes materialize anxiety and care in ways that reframe creativity as an access practice. The protagonists' racialized, trans, neurodivergent embodiments show how intimacy is negotiated under conditions of surveillance and risk. In bringing queer/crip temporality into sustained contact with Latinx speculative fiction and more-than-human feminist thought, the article argues that *Lakelore* does not simply illustrate theory. The novel makes theory available through narrative form, offering a culturally specific model of ecological, disabled, and queer relationality. This model of fluid kinship culminates in the text's closing articulation of "raw beauty" as a shared practice of remembering and sustaining one another, even when fear and vulnerability may remain present:

> But the raw beauty in us, it's something living and breathing. It's no more real or true above the surface or below it, but this is where we remind each other and ourselves of what we already know. We don't have to be unafraid of our hearts to be proud of everything they hold. (280)

Pride is reframed as relational, not individual, and fluid kinship becomes an ongoing sensibility of holding what is carried in bodies and in water, as well as a shared practice of holding and being held across difference.

Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana UP, 2010. https://doi.org/10.2979/6079.0

Antebi, Susan. *Embodied Archive: Disability in Post-Revolutionary Mexican Cultural Production*. U of Michigan P, 2021. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11644714

Clare, Eli. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Duke UP, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373520

Córdoba, Antonio, and Emily A. Maguire. Introduction. *Posthumanism and Latin(x) American Science Fiction*, edited by Antonio Córdoba and Emily A. Maguire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, pp. 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11791-6_1

Fackler, Katharina, and Silvia Schultermandl. "Kinship as Critical Idiom in Oceanic Studies." *Atlantic Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2023, pp. 195–225. https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2022.2079900

Gil'adí, Maia. "Latinx Speculative Fiction, Speculative Latinx." *Latinx Literature in Transition: 1992-2020*, edited by William Orchard, Cambridge UP, 2025, pp. 185–201. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009314091.013

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q

Haraway, Donna J. *When Species Meet*. U of Minnesota P, 2007.

Hudson, Renee. "Imagining the Futures of Latinx Speculative Fictions." *ASAP Review/Open-Access Reviews of Arts of the Present*, 2 Dec. 2019, https://asapjournal.com/feature/imagining-the-futures-of-latinx-speculative-fictions-renee-hudson/, accessed 9 Aug. 2025.

Kafer, Alison. "Crip Kin, Manifesting." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–37. https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v5i1.29618

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana UP, 2013. https://doi.org/10.2979/6841.0

McLemore, Anna-Marie. *Lakelore*. Feiwel and Friends, 2022.
McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York UP, 2006.
McRuer, Robert. *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance*. New York UP, 2018.
Minich, Julie Avril. *Accessible Citizenships: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico*. Temple UP, 2014. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrdf3tp
Neimanis, Astrida. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Bloomsbury, 2017. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474275415
Sandahl, Carrie. "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer?: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1–2, 2003, pp. 25–56. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9-1-2-25
Schalk, Sami. *Bodyminds Reimagined*. Duke UP, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371830
Short, Kathy G. "Critical Content Analysis as a Research Methodology." *Critical Content Analysis of Children's and Young Adult Literature: Reframing Perspective*, edited by Holly Johnson, Janelle Mathis, and Kathy G. Short, Routledge, 2017, pp. 1–15.

Dr. Maricela DeMirjyn is Professor in the Department of Race, Gender, and Ethnic Studies at Colorado State University. Her doctorate was completed at the University of California, Santa Barbara in Cultural Perspectives and Chicana & Chicano Studies. She teaches Latinx creative expression, Chicana feminisms, and queer studies. Dr. DeMirjyn's research areas of expertise include critical visual discourse, narrative inquiry, and water epistemologies. She has published articles in *Ethnic Studies Review*, *Sexualities*, and *Journal of Environmental Media*. Dr. DeMirjyn has been an active member in several national academic organizations, including the National Women's Studies Association and the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies.
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4290-1906
maricela.demirjyn@colostate.edu

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.07

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Gabriela Kozakiewicz
University of Warsaw

Queer Vegetal Desires and Monstruous Flourishings: More-than-Human Intimacies in Speculative Plant Fiction

Abstract

This article seeks to further expand academic perspectives on crip and queer intimacies by engaging with speculative plant fiction. Open to bold experimentation in style, language, and the limits of what is conceivable, the speculative mode provides an excellent space for envisioning bodies and desires that traverse the human-nonhuman boundary. The narratives examined in this article bring queer/crip intimacy into contact with the vegetal realm, an encounter that is often overlooked. Yet, even the speculative accounts of human-plant kinship can activate those aspects of vegetal being which unsettle conventional notions of subjectivity and relationality, much like queerness disrupts fixed identities and normative practices. The article presents a diffractive analysis of three short stories that narrate intimacies beyond the human: "Water" (2014) by Ellen van Neerven, "Seedlings" (2018) by Audrey R. Hollis, and "Desfloración" (2019) by Ángelo Néstore. By depicting intimate entanglements of human protagonists with flora—whether through explicit interspecies eroticism or human-plant hybridization—these texts challenge (hetero)normative models of pleasure, embodiment, identity, and relationality. To fully engage with the critical and conceptual stakes, the analytical framework combines queer ecologies, crip theory, critical plant scholarship, and selected insights from posthuman thought. The Anthropocene, as famously argued by Haraway, calls for a specific type of stories, capable of fostering kinship across species. Taken together, the analyzed "phytospeculations" demonstrate how human–plant bonds not only transgress conventional boundaries, but reconfigure them, thus positioning more-than-human intimacy as a site of (eco)crip/queer resistance, survival, and regeneration.

Keywords: literary and cultural plant studies, speculative fiction, queer theory, crip theory, phytospeculation.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 18 Sept. 2025. Verified: 30 Jan. 2026. Accepted: 15 Apr. 2026.

INTRODUCTION

As environmental catastrophe becomes our lived reality, a growing number of intellectuals call for a reevaluation of the instrumental treatment of nonhumans and for the creation of stories that foster kinship across species (Haraway, *Staying*; Tsing; Dooren and Rose). Simultaneously, as the systemic context grows increasingly hostile to bodily trans/deformations and non-conforming identities, both scholarly and artistic explorations of crip and queer experiences become invaluable. Arising from these complex concerns, this article seeks to expand academic perspectives on queer and crip intimacies by analyzing how this quality can be mobilized within narrative environments to traverse the species divide—more precisely, how nonnormative intimacy emerges in fabulated relationships with plants. To this end, the article turns to speculative plant fiction, as the speculative mode provides an excellent space for envisioning bodies and desires that destabilize the human-nonhuman boundary.

The narratives examined in this article bring queer and crip intimacy into contact with the vegetal realm, an encounter that remains largely overlooked and fraught with ethical risks. For a study grounded in plant humanities, entering into dialogue with queer and disability theory—let alone advocating for nonhuman kinship—requires working through the legacy of discursive violence. Comparisons to animals and plants have long functioned as strategies of dehumanization aimed at queer, disabled, racialized, and otherwise-nonstandard bodies, whose alleged proximity to nature is continuously mobilized to justify their oppression and exploitation (e.g., Ray and Sibara). Yet the recent expansion of work by queer and crip theorists that engages with ecocriticism and posthumanism—giving rise to intersectional fields such as queer ecologies (e.g., Sandilands; Luciano and Chen) and eco-crip theory (e.g., Clare; Kafer; Taylor)—suggests that such dialogues are becoming vital. Intimacy, in particular, emerges as a key site of convergence among scholars attuned to queer modes of subversion, compelled to "embrace . . . sexual pleasure and transgression as foundational to environmental ethics and politics, and resistance to heteronormativity as part and parcel of . . . green strategy" (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 39).

Strikingly, despite their immense generative potential and theoretical resonance, sustained encounters involving queer and crip theories alongside plant humanities remain scarce. Several concerns crucial for crip and queer scholars, including the stigmatization of anomalous bodyminds[1]

[1] This term, conceptually abolishing Cartesian dualism, was introduced into disability scholarship by Margaret Price in her 2015 article "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain."

and desires, converge with particular intensity around critical reflection on plant-being. Vegetal modes of existence, as critical plant scholars have shown, defy the conventional Western norms of embodiment, subjectivity, and relationality (Marder, *Plant-Thinking*). Plant propagation, in all its diversity, unsettles normative reproductive scripts, destabilizes gender binaries, and routinely transgresses species boundaries. Vegetation can thus help theoretically reconfigure intimacy, in accordance with Marder's assertion that "the front line in the fight for the liberation of sexuality from metaphysical and onto-theological constraints cuts through the being of plants" (*Plant-Thinking* 88). As this article argues, through literary analysis, even speculative accounts of human–plant kinship can activate these disruptive vegetal qualities that resonate with queer and crip challenges to normativity and systemic oppression.

What follows is a complementary analysis of three short stories that narrate intimacies beyond the human: "Water" (2014), authored by a non-binary writer of Yugambeh and Dutch origin, Ellen van Neerven; "Seedlings" (2018) by a US writer, Audrey R. Hollis; and "Desfloración" (2019) written by Ángelo Néstore, a non-binary artist residing in Spain.[2] I refrain from applying the term "comparative" to the sort of theme-focused analysis proposed here, which involves literary works from diverse cultural backgrounds without the clear intent to examine the intricacies of their contexts or treat them as exemplary of their respective traditions. Instead, I propose to think of the following analysis as an exercise in "diffractive reading,"[3] in a sense used by Birgit M. Kaiser as a potential response to the methodological challenge of "re-calibrat[ing] 'comparison' under conditions of increased entanglements on a planetary scope" (276). Such an approach is built upon Karen Barad's notion of diffraction and its application as a method of reading—one that juxtaposes insights from multiple domains (or texts), "reading them through one another" (Interview 52)—to allow diverse literary works to meet, relate, and mutually illuminate shared concerns.

Coming from different cultural and geographical contexts, all three stories present more-than-human intimacy as a site of subversive pleasure and transformative political potential. Thus, I argue that human-plant intimacy in these texts does not merely transgress the conventional boundaries—it reshapes them. As their protagonists renegotiate

[2] All the citations from this story have been translated from Spanish by me, in the absence of an English translation.

[3] Or else, given the vegetal focus of this paper, as an instance of what Astrid Møller-Olsen refers to as "companion plant reading," i.e. bringing together "individual stories that, like the gourd or the bean, help one another grow in the reading and bring their own linguistic, cultural and historical contexts to the field of comparative literature" (124).

relationships with the self, community, and environment, these narratives envision how more-than-human intimacy might offer resistance, survival, and regeneration not only to the queer/crip subjects but to all beings rendered precarious by environmental and societal collapse.

"WATER": FROM VEGETAL DESIRE TO ECO-POLITICAL ALLIANCE

Set in the near future, "Water" traces five transformative weeks in the life of Kaden—a queer Australian woman of Aboriginal descent—who begins work for a corporation commissioned by the government to construct "Australia2." Presented as the pinnacle of numerous retributive pro-Indigenous reforms, the project involves creating a second island, where Aboriginal people would settle and rule; a phantasmal substitute for the lost ancestral territories. Its construction requires invasive land-forming methods and the relocation of the area's predominantly Indigenous inhabitants. The project, however, is stalled by the appearance of the so-called "sandplants": sentient and articulate humanoid plants. Kaden's task is to persuade these creatures to abandon the islands, allowing the construction to continue. To gain the plantpeople's trust and understanding of their nature, the protagonist starts delivering a special anti-insect formula to the communities scattered around the islands.

Most descriptions of the plantpeople are tainted by a similar ambiguity: "She has a face that's like me and you. With space for two small eyes and a hint of a mouth. Am I blind not to notice much difference? Of course there is the body of them, shaped like a post, covered in prickles except for the hands" (van Neerven 78). The plantpeople's obvious human resemblance, conflicting with distinctly unhuman aspects, provokes a two-fold reaction of fascination and repulsion. Their not-entirely-human bodies fill Kaden with discomfort, as she notices "an *awkward* tangle of roots and limbs" (87), or even experiences fear as "their shoulders swing back and forth like some smooth stroke" (89). Such mixed reactions to departures from standardized body images are well documented in disability scholarship;[4] yet these interpretations alone miss the added uncanny of roots and

[4] See, e.g., Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's account of cultural responses to disability in the US, oscillating between fascination with crip "freakishness" and repulsion-driven attempts to remove disabled people from public view (55–80). Importantly, the strategy of highlighting the perceived vegetal features in certain humans, particularly those with physical or mental impairments, has historically served to accentuate their supposed biological inferiority, as evidenced by the widespread use of plant-based metaphors (such as "human weeds") in both US and Nazi eugenic rhetoric (see O'Brien).

reedlike, wind-tossed motions. The vegetal intrusion into this otherwise familiar embodiment heightens a sense of essential, insurmountable difference, conveyed in Lynda H. Schneekloth's claim: "[p]lants are the ultimate alien" (253).

Indeed, the plantpeople's transgressiveness extends beyond mere physicality. For instance, they do not conform to a binary vision of gender—which "is not predetermined . . . only communicated" (van Neerven 78). Another aspect—science-fictional, albeit debated by contemporary botanists and plant-inspired thinkers—is their intelligence. Demonstrated by the capacity to communicate in English, adapting to the normatively human, colonially entangled language and structure of thought, the plantpeople's intelligence is constantly questioned. Even Kaden doubts that they might have cognitive capacities similar to humans or be capable of processing emotions. This reluctance can be seen as indicative of the internalized normative standards of intelligence and rationality, reproached by critical theorists for their arbitrariness as well as complicity in biocapitalist agendas. To varying degrees, the verdict of intellectual inferiority has justified assuming control over individuals and populations, rendering them available for exploitation: "[T]heir distancing from Western civilization's most prized capacity of rationality ha[s] served as the rhetorical basis of their dehumanization" (Mitchell and Snyder 556). Apparently, histories of prejudice, mobilized to gatekeep personhood and its concomitant privileges, instantly resurface when the vegetal subaltern learns to speak, even in a work of fiction.

"Water" further problematizes the question of plant consciousness, speculating on the extent of the plantpeople's sentience, including their conception of death. These issues converge when one of the vegetal characters explains how they experience pain: "When I'm away from sunlight. When I see others ripped. But not death. Death doesn't affect me" (88). By echoing Heideggerian view of death as constitutional to human existence, this passage points to another distinctly nonhuman—yet, according to Marder, specifically vegetal—trait of the plantpeople: their lack of concern with individual survival, supplanted by a plural sense of self, "a mode of being in relation to all the others, being *qua* being-with" (*Plant-Thinking* 51). Grounded in this relational, transcorporeal model of consciousness, Marder's interrogations of death through the plant lens destabilize the life-death antinomy by showing that the withering of some parts does not prevent the collective from flourishing—sometimes even stimulates growth ("Resist" 30). Perceiving one's death not as tragedy or sacrifice, but as an organic stage and potential nourishment for the more-than-human community, is essential to grasp the plantpeople's mindset and actions as the narrative unfolds.

Confronted with radical difference—and the threat it poses to the primacy of anthropocentric reason and interests—fictional human authorities adopt strategies closely mirroring those employed by nonfictional governments to combat figures designated as "aliens." These strategies involve the dissemination of biopolitical concerns regarding the proximity between the species, exemplified by the monologue of Kaden's supervisor:

> [I]t's come to my attention, through research, that as these sandplants can closely resemble us and mimic our behaviour—well, some people in close proximity can find themselves getting quite attached. Now that's fine, in the same way that of course we get attached to our cat or dog, maybe even to our mango tree that's been in the backyard for a few generations. But there have been cases of sexual attraction. . . . But it is unnatural if you take it that couple of steps further. The government has recognised the danger—it is, of course, illegal to be in any way romantically involved with them. (van Neerven 97)

The character voices a state-sanctioned view on interspecies intimacy, mobilizing discursive mechanisms designed to discipline sexual dissidents: from appeals to "unnaturalness" to threats of legal prosecution. Historically, analogous measures have been enacted to produce a sense of social undesirability and legitimize control over countless nonfictional bodies and populations, specifically in the sphere of sexuality and reproduction. As demonstrated, for instance, in Eli Clare's powerful essay "Yearning toward Carrie Buck," the practices of incarceration and state-mandated sterilization of the "feebleminded"—be them people with disabilities, sexually active maidens, or poor whites—as well as anti-miscegenation and anti-immigration policies stem from the same eugenic impulse traversing patriarchal sanctimony, white supremacy, class prejudice, and obsession with able-bodymindedness. Tellingly, Kaden's supervisor claims to draw his conclusions from "research," foregrounding the centrality of the power-knowledge apparatus in the production of pathologized minorities. Moreover, his position is sanctioned by tradition: not coincidentally, his argumentation reflects the Aristotelian "ladder of nature," linking acceptable levels of intimacy to a given entity's place in the hierarchy of beings. In light of this speciesist logic—which, as crip theorists remind us, constitutes only one materialization of the broader biocapitalist tendency to rank beings according to their proximity to privilege-ossifying standards of intelligence, embodiment, and productivity (Fritsch, "Toxic")—since the plantpeople belong to the lower tier reserved for vegetation, any attachment with them is irreconcilable with the myth of human exceptionality.

To preserve this myth and synergistic hierarchies, the fictional authorities implement mechanisms that precipitate the plantpeople's elimination more directly than denigrating discourses. The formula distributed by Kaden is revealed to serve this insidious purpose: instead of nourishing them, it has debilitating and, eventually, lethal effects. State-funded research is thus mobilized to intervene in the plantpeople's bodies at the cellular, metabolic level, clearing the way for "progress" (and profits). Given the larger context of retributive action towards the Aboriginal community, this thread reads as an obvious allusion to the colonial methods of subjugation and extermination that the Indigenous and other racialized people have been historically subjected to. At the same time, the formula quite literally represents the insidious work of cure, which, instead of being a manifestation of care, becomes a socially accepted channel for "the desire to eradicate disability," poignantly criticized by Clare for its complicity in the physical elimination of marginalized communities ("Notes" 258–59).

A specifically vegetal counterpart illuminating this storyline can be found in weeds—often overlooked victims of homogenizing and optimizing practices. As Brylska points out, weeds are targeted by the same eugenic rhetoric that casts difference as a threat to a healthy, pure, and fully controllable human body or population (79–83), the vegetal equivalent of which is the perfectly manicured lawn (cf. O'Neill[5]). This drive towards the eradication of (bio)diversity manifests in the use of herbicide, widely regarded as an appropriate response to *weed invasion*, regardless of its environmental toll. Like weeds—known for resilience—the plantpeople emerge as victims of fantasies of total control over ecosystems and, by extension, as vegetal allies in struggles for environmental and community preservation. Thus, by refusing to participate in the genocidal scheme of big business and state, Kaden not only rejects the racist biases, but also "resists this logic of foundational speciesism taken for granted by the normative human world" (Mitchell and Snyder 559). Her decision is, however, only partially motivated by interspecies empathy; an equally important, if not decisive factor, is the growing intimacy between the protagonist and the plantpeople's leader, Larapinta.

The political gravity of this erotic entanglement, defying biopolitical state propaganda, becomes evident in the relationship's early stages, looming over Larapinta's attempts to seduce Kaden:

[5] In her art-as-research project, Cynthia O'Neill maps conceptual connections between dandelions and disabled bodyminds, revealing analogies in the construction of deviation, impact of the social models of exclusion, and use of chemical toxicity targeting all those who do not belong and thus should be removed.

> She is brushing up against me in the dinghy again. Surprisingly, her prickly skin doesn't irritate mine. . . .
>
> "I've been thinking about you," she says. . . .
>
> "You don't think," I say. "It's just processes."
>
> "I have been thinking . . . a lot. I have enough intelligence. . . . I think we do have what you call a 'sparkle.'"
>
> "It's a spark. It's not a fucking *sparkle*."
>
> She's not taken aback at my outburst. "Finally. A political statement." (95–96)

This banter between future lovers, during which Kaden's preconceptions are challenged, playfully alludes to the galvanizing potential of queer/trans monstrosity. The passion-indicating spark that appears between a human and a nonhuman, soon to be involved in transgressive romance, is reminiscent of the electric jolt that brought Frankenstein's monster to life. "Water" celebrates this revitalizing force of queer more-than-human intimacy, showcasing its ability to "empower and radicalize" (Barad, "Transmaterialities" 392), to fuel the political agency of disadvantaged communities.

This message is reinforced by the portrayal of sexual encounters between the characters, showing intimacy not only as a site of resistance to the political oppression, but as a possible pathway towards more livable futures. A foundational ecosexual binding of environmental care and queer pleasure is at work here (Sprinkle and Stephens). Sexuality becomes the sphere where the human-nonhuman boundary is tested—not without excitement—and eventually overcome, proving this barrier to be porous enough to allow the flow of physical tenderness and passion:

> What will I discover in this uncharted experience? How much of what it means to be human will sway deep in my mind like a ship. I see her eyes are open, those green unhuman eyes, watching. . . . suck on her bottom lip, surrender my teeth. She makes a noise that I could only interpret as arousal. . . . To feel she is human now is a lie, I must be with who she is. (van Neerven 102)

This passage stimulates imagination to envision intimacies that traverse the human-nonhuman divide, suggesting that the lover's taxonomical affiliation might hold less importance than the sustenance and joy derived from their relationship. This intuition is confirmed by the dialogue that

immediately follows the sex scene, in which Larapinta pronounces "I am renewal" and presents "her flowers, one on each fingertip of her right hand" (103), as proof of her capacity to adapt to love. The literal post-coital blooming of the character positions queer eco-sex as an antidote to the detrimental tendencies of Western erotic imagination,[6] scolded by Luce Irigaray: "The West has focused on the fruits more than on the flowers. And carnal love has become the way to produce children and not make lovers flower" (38). Consequently, this image can be viewed as a symbol of mutual flourishing attained through ecological lovemaking—through crip/queer erotic entanglements with nonhuman actors.

The renewal heralded by Larapinta soon encompasses Kaden, catalyzing a reconsideration of the categories previously unquestioned by the protagonist, including the bounds of loyalty and mutual interests linking her to the nation, the Indigenous community, and the plantpeople. More-than-human intimacy lays the ground for the character's discovery of different forms of kinship: she reconnects with her family, reclaims the Aboriginal heritage, and develops a sense of belonging to the ancestral land, endangered by the plans to construct "Australia2." We could view this process, following Deleuze and Guattari, as an instance of "becoming-minoritarian," since the most prominent aspect of the protagonist's evolution involves rejecting the dominant discourses in favor of her Indigenous identity, represented in the text as the discovery of emotional connection to her relatives as well as her native island.

Yet, many subtle hints open this text to a more radical interpretation: a personal account of the nonhuman turn. Indeed, rather than seeking humanity in her lover, Kaden is compelled to reexamine her own positioning as a human—in an unmistakably queer gesture, since, as Luciano and Chen remind us, "'full humanity' has never been the only horizon of queer becomings" (188). Crip theory, too, exposes the interests behind the pervasive cultural resistance to recognizing disabled subjectivities as

[6] One such tendency, criticized by disability scholars, is the continued desexualization of people with disabilities, which either completely invalidates or pathologizes pleasures experienced and evoked by disabled bodyminds. I align with Ojrzyńska and Vaidya in suggesting that the ecosexual framework holds emancipatory potential for crip sexualities, due to its conceptualization of pleasure as decoupled from dominant body standards or physical capabilities, neither necessarily genital nor explicitly sexual (including, for example, breathing techniques recommended for outdoor practices), but instead extending to all body parts and beyond them, toward the environment (cf. Vaidya 143; Ojrzyńska). Ecosexuality, then, with its invitation to overcome the pain of injustices by indiscriminately loving the Earth and its inhabitants—in both sexual and non-sexual ways, but always with healing in mind (Sprinkle and Stephens 23)—might be seen as a less oppressive and much-needed instantiation of cure, as opposed to its violent manifestations informed by ablecentric ideologies, which Clare problematizes in his writings.

fully human (e.g., Mollow 307–09; Puar 78–84). Recent crip scholarship has further compromised anthropocentric primacy by favoring relational models of identity based on shared vulnerability to injury (e.g., Taylor 250–03) or even promoting "cross-species identification" (Mitchell and Snyder 559–60; 563–64).

"Water" proves particularly attuned to these insights in its depiction of Kaden's inner transformation. Namely, the less normatively human Kaden becomes, the more vegetal qualities she exhibits, which suggests that the intimate exposure to plantness reshapes the character. In a retrospective passage, the protagonist recalls: "[W]hen I was little, Dad and I lived off the sun. We spent the whole day in the fields. Never in the shade. And I lost the wide-brimmed hats my mother bought me on purpose" (van Neerven 91). This rediscovered capacity to draw nourishment from sunrays, humorously evoking photosynthesis, veers the character's seemingly superficial change into the nonhuman, vegetal territory. Another hint at Kaden's inherent plantness is woven into her name, as the word "kaden" denotes "orchid"[7] in the language of her father's tribe. The alliance between the protagonist and the vegetal realm is thus presented as constitutive of her being, as an element she needs to embrace in order to save her cultural and environmental heritage from obliteration by humans.

The fight for the millenary heritage and the environment cannot be a solitary one, the narrative reminds us, as it culminates in the rebellion of the Aboriginal people against the neo-colonial government. Important allies, or rather instigators of this uprising, are the plantpeople, who are revealed to be ancestral spirits, reawakened to protect both nature and culture from the violent forces of neoliberal capitalism. The realization that Larapinta and her tribe incarnate the endangered landscape does not diminish the relevance of the vegetal dimension of their embodiment. To the contrary, van Neerven's decision to anchor queer agents compromising heteronormative sexual policies and settler-colonial endeavors in plant bodies complements the vision of this more-than-human alliance of the dispossessed. After all, as convincingly argued by Catriona Sandilands, in neoliberal biopolitics where "intensive (ab)use of plants is the rule" and

[7] Far from coincidental, this choice reflects the persisting fascination with orchids, whose diverse floral shapes—so, essentially, the variety of their reproductive strategies—earned them the status of the cultural symbol of the hypersexualized life of flowers. In fact, the abundance of orchid specimens is a direct result of their promiscuous sexual life: "The spectacular floral diversity of orchids has often been attributed to their intricate and intimate interactions with their pollinators" (Tsai et al. 101–02). Orchid, a quintessence of the power to adapt to the needs of various pollinators to ensure mutual survival, a plant whose existence is shaped and secured through co-evolution with beings dissimilar to her, seems a perfect counterpart for a character involved in transformative vegetal romance.

"people and animals are increasingly organized and controlled *like and even as plants*" all earthly life comprises "the vegetariat" ("Vegetate" 22)—the oppressed community of those whose life is not considered meaningful, and too easily turns expendable. "Water," therefore, offers a speculative insight into the revolution of the vegetariat, rooted in intimacy, affect, and concern for mutual survival.

"SEEDLINGS": CACTI DEFIANCE OF REPRODUCTIVE AND REHABILITATIVE FUTURISM

"Seedlings" recounts the story of Pamela, who literally pushes the boundaries of the human, willingly transforming herself into a vegetal hybrid. The premise of the narrative challenges the traditional perception of the human body as singular, bounded, and impermeable, gravitating instead toward heterogeneous visions of corporeality, such as Lynn Margulis's concept of the holobiont. A text that foregrounds the relationship between body and environment—in fact, undermines the very idea of an external environment by locating the vegetal Other within the protagonist—calls for an attuned analytic framework. Hence, this section relies on the eco-crip theoretical proposition advanced by Matthew J. C. Cella: "the ecosomatic paradigm." As a tool for literary analysis, the ecosomatic approach, by assuming "the inseparability of ecological context and somatic experience," enables readings that trace how "changes to the body lead to subsequent changes in one's perception of and experience with being in the world" (Cella 184, 172). Fittingly, the symbiotic merge between the character and a succulent begins on the bodily surface:

> Pamela swallowed a cactus and grew spines. They shot up through her pores, inches long and thick and stiff. They lay flat with the hair on her head. Everywhere she had hair, she grew spines instead. She enjoyed it, that first day, feeling them push up through her skin. . . . there wasn't a single place which was soft. She loved, so deeply, being an untouchable thing. (Hollis)

Pamela's transformation, as foreshadowed in this opening passage, will soon encompass her sensibility, reshaping how she experiences and inhabits the material and social environment, including a newly discovered pleasure: untouchability.

Although the use of the word "untouchable" here is literal, it nonetheless elicits associations with social exclusion. Pamela's paradoxical enthusiasm with the pariah status conferred by her monstrous corporeality raises an

important question: what exactly is she hoping to escape from by assuming vegetal embodiment? An explanation I propose is that her former female body was *too touchable*, subjected to discursive and physical violence.[8] This intuition is reinforced by Meeker and Shabari's point regarding femi-queer artists who identify with plants: "By becoming plant, they have located themselves outside of or in opposition to the socially accepted norms of woman- or personhood" (174). The narrative offers more clues to sustain this reading; for instance, the passage about Pamela's refusal to pluck her eyebrow spines: "[T]hey were creeping towards the center. It would have mattered to her except she didn't need to care about being beautiful anymore" (Hollis). Evidently, cross-species embodiment offers Pamela relief from the asphyxiating beauty standards and disciplinary pressures imposed on women. At the same time, hybridity frees the protagonist from the ableist imperatives to strive for the normatively healthy and productive body—a stance that resonates with Johnson and McRuer's notion of "crip willfulness," defined as "a refusal to act in accordance with the system of compulsory able-bodiedness" (136). Pamela's vegetal embodiment thus emerges as an adaptation choice, celebrated for the distance it introduces between her and society.

Nevertheless, "Seedlings" does not eradicate the possibility of physical intimacy. If anything, Pamela's cacti-corporeality inspires innovative approaches to sex, prompting her and her partner to revise familiar patterns of caress and pleasure: "Things had been different since Pamela swallowed the cactus. The sex was certainly more creative. Lydia would crack her open now, stroke the moist, water-bearing seams that made up her insides, moving with exquisite care. Pamela would wear gloves" (Hollis). The sensual language describing the women's erotic encounters suggests that adaptation to hybrid corporeality has enriched rather than limited their physical connection, further cripping and queering their already nonheteronormative lovemaking. Similarly, non-sexual intimacy remains largely uncompromised, with tender gestures still common between the partners: "Lydia leaned down and kissed her carefully, between the spines, her lips as soft as waterbeds."

Gradually, however, the couple's intimacy begins to falter. This shift cannot be attributed to the accommodations required by a nonstandard body, but rather to Pamela's transforming sensibility, increasingly shaped by vegetal—more precisely, cacti—desire. The protagonist grows repulsed by the excess moisture produced by her partner's body; at one point,

[8] The motif of vegetal transformation as an escape from patriarchal violence recurs across literary traditions, from ancient Greek myth (e.g., Daphne) to contemporary Korean fiction, exemplified by Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*.

Lydia's skin is compared to "a baby vole or some other hairless, wet thing that had never seen the sun," an image hardly meant as flattering. In turn, Pamela's fantasies become populated with images of her new succulent kin, until she finds herself "obsessed over the height of the saguaro, the wispy beard of the old man cactus, the plump lush fruit of the prickly pear." As this divergence in preferences grows—extending beyond sexuality—the partners become estranged and eventually split, accelerating Pamela's disengagement from the human world.

The character's visceral aversion to water contributes to her alienation from the physical and social environment, neither of which shares her "dream of deserts":

> And everywhere, this strange overabundance, this ridiculous fecundity. The world seemed laden with water, with gifts. . . . When she woke, their front yard was covered in dew and she wanted to faint from the richness of it. The feeling wasn't entirely pleasant—she had dreams of the strange softness, in which she might sink and drown. It was not the first time that she thought she could not raise children here but it was the first time that thought had come to her with such force.

Evidently, the more succulent the character becomes, the less at home she feels in her surroundings. The ecosomatic lens helps to unpack this process: it appears that the cactus within Pamela has brought its habitat requirements with it; consequently, as vegetal presence gains prominence within her bodymind, Pamela's somatic experience of the environment clashes with her altered needs. Crucially, what emerges is not simply discomfort, but a quiet resistance to the universal reliance on water and its life-sustaining promise. Despite her cacti entanglement, Pamela's aversion to reproduction cannot be understood as purely vegetal, given how constitutive proliferation and growth are to plant-being (Marder, *Plant-Thinking* 160–62). The protagonist's withdrawal from her previously articulated desire to have children must therefore arise from a different drive. In what follows, I read Pamela's stance as an instance of queer/crip rejection of futurity.

Pamela's withdrawal from reproduction emerges from an experience of profound unbelonging—one that resonates with queer and crip critiques of futurity. Lee Edelman famously identified the persistent hostility toward queerness as a reaction to its structural opposition to the core drive of dominant heteropatriarchal culture, which he termed "reproductive futurism" (13–14). Pamela's refusal to participate in repronormative, anthropocentric futurities—represented by a fecund watery ecosystem—aligns with Edelman's call to renounce parenthood and, by

extension, the regime in which the central figure of the Child functions as an antidote to queerness, stabilizing the socio-political order. Pamela's turn away from the figurative Child thus signals a radical affirmation of her queer identity and, simultaneously, an act of disidentification with the anthropocentric order and its biocapitalist reproductive agenda.

Anna Mollow's cripping of Edelman's approach reinforces this interpretation by exposing a synergistic drive, also rejected by Pamela: "rehabilitative futurism," or the ableist fantasy of a future purged of disability and difference (288–89). As Mollow shows, dominant culture casts both queerness and disability as identity-disintegrating and potentially dehumanizing forces that must be neutralized in the name of a healthy, optimized human future. Therefore, rejecting the "humanizing enterprise" (307)—by relinquishing the aspiration to be recognized as fully human—emerges as the only ethical escape route from a social structure based on the production of countless abjected others. Renouncing privileged species-belonging and parenthood thus marks Pamela's departure from both reproductive and rehabilitative futurisms and toward multispecies horizons that have no need for the category of the human. Aligned with her transition into a cacti hybrid, this gesture liberates her from normative pressures, hierarchies, and homogenizing future scenarios, opening space for inclusive, queer, posthuman futures and kinship.

Paradoxically, the theme of reproduction becomes central to "Seedlings" imagery and plot. In all instances, though, its renditions contradict the normative heterosexual discourses, expanding the horizon of reproductive imagination to encompass transgressive, queer registers. Importantly, Hollis models the sensations of the physical transformation into a succulent on pregnancy. One case in point is found in the following formulation: "like a sea cave has been constructed in your rib cage, like you consist of crystalline structures slowly filling with water." This monstrous yet tangible description harmonizes with the trajectory of "queer self-birthing" proposed by Barad, who explores the monstrous origins of trans bodies—re-assembled and brought back to life, renewed—maintaining "comparison/contrast" to the actual birth (Shelton 120). Consequently, Pamela's transformation could be seen as "radically queer configuring of spacetimemattering" (Barad, "Transmaterialities" 393), an instance of queer (self-)actualization that encompasses entire corporeality, becoming the dark double to the figure of the Child.

Additionally, the narrative challenges heteropatriarchal scripts of childbearing by bringing the vegetal dimension into the picture. In fact, the plant element in Pamela seems to take over, involving the protagonist in one of the myriad modes of vegetal propagation—cloning, i.e. producing

plant offspring that, albeit unconscious, quite literally is flesh of her flesh. However, the firstborn lump, conceived and born unintentionally, is not even recognized as her progeny at first, eliciting an ambiguous reaction reminiscent of confronting the abject:

> She picked up the thing that had so recently been part of her. . . . It lay completely still in the palm of her hand, tiny and prickly and stubbornly alive. Hard and round and genderless, with tiny spines that looked as soft as cuticles, ready to sprout and grow. Pamela set it on the ground by the foot of the bench and walked away from it, feeling freed. (Hollis)

Pamela's first nonhuman offspring is thus abandoned, in a reiteration of her earlier refusal to raise children.

Despite this initial rejection of her monstrous progeny, the protagonist soon adopts a stance of genuine care, sparing no effort to provide the buds with the best conditions for growth: "She had purchased soil from a nursery and was patting it down around the little cacti, humming to them as she worked. Didn't plants like music?" The resulting image of domestic bliss denaturalizes heteronormative models of reproduction and familial bonds, loosening the grip of patriarchal fantasies around relationality. Importantly, the description of Pamela's offspring echoes patterns found in cultural representations of people with "severe" disabilities, marked by muteness, immobility, and doubts surrounding their consciousness. The narrative thus codes the buds as crip beings. Pamela, once again, steps outside the "broad cultural logic of disabled children positioned as having no or foreshortened futures" identified by Fritsch ("Cripping" 19), indicating that multispecies care may offer alternatives to the neoliberal biocapitalist horizon of capacitation or withering. Though Pamela's progeny will never become productive protagonists of normative futures, alongside their mother-plant they form a non-speciesist, life-sustaining community. Arguably, Pamela's transition into plant parenthood strikes the most powerful blow to the logic of reproductive and rehabilitative futurisms.

Therefore, Pamela's reaction to the disintegration of her relationship with Lydia—closely resembling a heteronormative family unit—is telling:

> She should have felt devastated and she kept waiting for the feeling to arrive. . . . Pamela let her mind wander, not thinking of the child she'd wanted, with dark eyes and ferocious spines, not thinking of the wife she'd wanted, strong and prickly, but instead thinking of the lumps on her back, the spaces inside of her. Broken hearts leak water. What a waste. (Hollis)

Instead of accusing the character of vegetal numbness, I interpret her capacity to remain composed as a sign of being grounded in "response-ability"[9] towards her cacti offspring. This scene marks a radical severing of the lingering ties between Pamela and the realm of anthropocentric desires, i.e. future-oriented normative fantasies organized around the figure of the (proper) Child. The narrative's promising alternative, discovered through intimate entanglement with plants, is to derive a sense of belonging from eco-queer/crip relationality. This insight takes on particular urgency in the Anthropocene, as continued adherence to productivity-obsessed heteropatriarchal trajectories increasingly points toward "no future." If, however, any futures remain attainable, they will require queer transgressions of heteronormative scripts and ableist fantasies, alongside commitment to more-than-human cooperation.

"DESFLORACIÓN": MESSAGE OF SOLIDARITY FROM MARTYR SAINT OF QUEER ECOLOGIES

Simultaneously succinct and poetic, "Desfloración" is structured in three parts, set decades apart (in 2019, 2035, and 2101, respectively). Each depicts a critical phase in the life of a queer protagonist. This narrative construction allows Néstore to showcase the erosion of the social environment without compromising the centrality of Iris's experiences. While the relaxed, convivial atmosphere of the geographically indeterminate small-town community recedes under the pressure of politically-charged anxieties around difference, the character's evolution takes an opposite direction, leading her to embrace more-than-human alterity. The turning point in Iris's trajectory is the realization that her body is intimately entwined with a plant.

Occurring during puberty, this pivotal episode reveals how, instead of developing into female sexual organs, Iris's intimate parts are overtaken by vegetation:

> [W]hen she reached sixteen, tiny, shy greenish hairs began to sprout from her clean and scantly covered pubis, something that, at first, already seemed serious and horrified even her, who had always been a weirdo. Day after day, however, those strands grew thicker and thicker, and more vigorous, until they became long, strong filaments, resembling the stamens of a flower. . . . One sultry summer morning . . . in front of the

[9] Understood, after Haraway, as an attunement to more-than-human relationalities and an accountability for one's role in sustaining complex webs of kinship, "response-ability" names a feminist ethical orientation "in which questions of species difference are always conjugated with attentions to affect, entanglement, and rupture" ("Symbiogenesis" M32).

> mirror, she sensed with a blurred vision that some white and corpulent petals had invaded her crotch . . . a magnolia caressing her young thighs. (Néstore)

The fact that the character's body is inhabited by a flower not only confounds the rigid distinction between the species, challenging the post-Enlightenment vision of subjectivity, but also establishes the text as a narrative of queer becoming. Given the prominence of a mirror reflection for grasping Iris's true hybrid nature, this fragment seems to intentionally mock the normative, anthropocentric model of the self—formed along the lines and stages identified by Lacanian psychoanalysis. The model that is partially to blame, according to many contemporary thinkers, for the human's exploitative approach towards all those who fail to fit into such a narrow definition of the subject (e.g., Deleuze and Guattari 232–309).

The queer nature of Iris's awakening is suggested by the clear affinities between this episode and the nonfictional experiences of some queer people, specifically, a sense of dissonance produced by the mismatch of their gender/sexual identities with their physical embodiment. Yet, what ultimately legitimizes such a reading is the vegetal aspect of the protagonist's transformation. The botanical details of this hybridization—the fact that the character's floral genitalia exhibit both male and female reproductive organs of flowering plants, i.e. pollen-producing stamens and an ovule-bearing pistil—reinforce its queer dimension by evoking the transgressive nature of plant sexuality, non-conforming to the heterosexual binary vision of gender and reproduction (see Baumann). In short, the mature form of Iris's *becoming* proves to be an entanglement constituted, in part, by a hermaphrodite flower—a revelation which not only queers the character, but also "expos[es] the monstrous face of nature itself in the undoing of naturalness" (Barad, "Transmaterialities" 413).

Initially, the corporeal monstrousness horrifies Iris who, unlike the protagonist of "Seedlings," had no intention to become a vegetal hybrid. She even tries to rip the flower off, yet the pain makes it impossible. In search of an alternative solution, the protagonist "dipped her fingers into the heart of the flower: the pistil sucked in those little tentacles, releasing a thick and sticky nectar, which sent a shiver of pleasure through her whole body, a sudden and intense electric discharge" (Néstore). Thus, Iris discovers sexual pleasures offered by her weird, hybrid body; pleasures intimately entwined with the plant realm, achieved through the stimulation of her vegetal genitalia. Much in the spirit of ecosexual experimentation (Sprinkle and Stephens), this scene hints at the possibility of considering the flower as an active agent of pleasure. The author's choice to conceptualize orgasm by reference to "electric discharge" could be read

as a humorous gesture of including the vegetal voice, based on the fact that electric impulses constitute an important channel of plant communication. Crucially for our interpretation, though, this specific phrasing highlights Iris's affinity with Frankenstein's monster, in line with Barad's reflection ("Transmaterialities" 388–91). Just like in the queer reinterpretation of Frankenstein's laboratory, in "Desfloración" an electrical discharge (of more-than-human pleasure) shocks the queer monster to life, illustrating the potential for ecstatic self-birth of agents whose mere existence disturbs the hetero-patriarchal social order.

The disciplinary apparatus of this order instantly targets Iris:

> No doctor was able to find a scientific explanation for Iris's strange case, but there were many who labelled her as perverse, savage or barbaric, pushing her beyond the boundaries of the human. Her few friends, facing such doubt, stopped hanging out with her for fear of a hypothetical contagion, and her parents, terrified, encouraged her not to leave the house. . . . And her pleasure became more and more solitary. More solitary and monstrous. (Néstore)

This passage epitomizes the power-knowledge's ability to weaponize morally charged diagnosis against potentially subversive entities, leading to stigmatization and isolation. Here, accusations of perversion are explicitly tied to Iris's bodily abnormality,[10] allowing us to read her as a crip character. This framing, in turn, reveals a particularly fraught entanglement between disability and vegetation; one that emerges in the context of diagnoses and problematizes identification with plants—the horror of plant-diagnosis. As Ewelina Godlewska-Byliniak demonstrates, for people with disabilities whose existence is routinely devalued through comparisons to vegetation, a plant affinity evokes rather fear of "vegetating" and recollections of stigmatizing representations[11] than hopes for emancipatory alliance. This tension resonates with Iris's initial rejection of the flower, whose ineradicability forces the character to embark on, to use Godlewska-Byliniak's turn of phrase, "a complex process of negotiation with plant(other)ness in the process of constituting one's identity." Such negotiation requires not only dismantling ableist stereotypes of disability and reductive visions of plant life, but also freeing

[10] But, as Kafer reminds us, socially disabling effects of diagnoses traverse identity lines: "Queer kids, kids of color, street kids—all of the kids cast out of reproductive futurism—have been and continue to be framed as sick, as pathological, as contagious" (32).

[11] Perhaps best expressed by the direct citation from the performance of Aleksandra Skotarek, actress with Down Syndrome, which Godlewska-Byliniak analyses in her article: "Plant, this is my life. Plant, don't take away my rights, I won't let you shape me, I am of human needs."

the self from anthropocentric constraints. For Iris, and perhaps not for her alone, this emancipation unfolds through the reevaluation of plantness and more-than-human intimacy.

To this end, the narrative mobilizes a classic crip/queer activist strategy of creative takeover, targeting both the content of moralizing sexual discourses and the narrative structures through which they have historically operated. The former type of hijacking targets plant-sexualizing discourses, redeployed against their original disciplinary intent as a validation of ecosexual queer pleasures. Indeed, the story is fueled by a counter drive to a persistent tendency in post-Darwinian cultural production that buttresses heteronormativity by "infus[ing] plant reproduction with human notions of erotic pleasure and moral aberrance" and presenting botanical findings in ways that "paint plants . . . as sexual deviants" (Jacobs 171). Néstore, in turn, infuses human sexuality with "libertine" plant sex, thereby freeing erotic pleasure from stifling moral frameworks. Thus, "Desfloración" not only recovers sexual pleasure for queers and crips, but also frees nonhumans from the cultural filters imposed on them, opening the possibility of intimate environmental connections. The same reappropriative trickstery operates on the formal, narrative level. Drawing on Christian tradition—abounding in exemplary storytelling designed to discipline deviation—Néstore models their counternarrative on hagiography. Through a blasphemous travesty of this morally instructional genre, the text seeks to inspire devotion for a new kind of prophet—a crip/queer ecological saint.

The portrayal of Iris follows the hagiographic pattern from the start, including the recollection of her birth, during which "intense scent of wildflowers filled the room" (Néstore). This miraculous event foretells the character's exceptionality, as if she were destined to tread a different path, filled with metaphysical musings and search for the divine. Indeed, Iris turns into a pensive child, suspicious of dominant discourses, particularly those regulating what it means to be and act "as a human." From the outset, the protagonist is also depicted as an example of posthuman piety, bonding with nonhuman entities, such as animals and dolls, with an intensity that marks her relational capacities as "divine," located beyond human—or at least anthropocentric—reach.

It is precisely this message of solidarity with the abject(ed) Others[12] that constitutes the essence of Iris's subversive teachings. Even in her

[12] Aligning with the "cripistemological" urge to "attend to rejected and extraordinary bodies," articulated in recent disability scholarship that assumes a non-essentializing, intersectional understanding of crip(ped) subjects, extending to all beings pushed into the structural position of precarity and debilitation (Johnson and McRuer 134–35).

final moments—pursued by a bloodthirsty mob determined to "purge" their community of her deviant presence—the character enacts a mode of kinship that eschews the conventional vectors of identification, extending instead to those whose humanity has been put into question:

> she was awakened by the increasing clamor of the mob. She noticed that a sticky nectar had trickled down her right leg. . . . She traced the path of the transparent liquid with her hand and, in a surge of nostalgia, thought of the children-not-children in the Gaza Strip, of the people-not-people seeking refuge cradled by the waves of the Mediterranean, as she lifted her wet finger to her nose. The dense, unmistakable scent of her sex mingled with the gentler, fresher scent of the grass on which she reclined.

The force of this passage lies partly in its abrupt turn to metonymy: in an otherwise lyrical, elliptical, and only vaguely localized narrative, Néstore suddenly invokes Gazans and refugees crossing the Mediterranean. They appear not as interchangeable metaphors for alterity as such, but as historically specific figures through which ongoing practices of dehumanization become legible. By explicitly referencing pushback-facing refugees alongside Palestinians under Israeli occupation—prior to the current escalation of the genocidal campaign—the passage confronts the reader with the contemporary dynamics of state violence. It strongly resonates with crip theorizations of biopolitical control exercised through the expansion of vulnerability, particularly with the insights of Jasbir K. Puar. In *The Right to Maim*, she demonstrates how the Israeli state asserts dominance by maintaining Palestinians in a condition of perpetual exposure to harm, "rendering populations available for statistically likely injury" (xviii). Gaza thus becomes a paradigmatic site where neoliberal racial capitalism manufactures and profits from (spectres of) disability, implementing a logic Puar terms "biopolitics of debilitation" (72–73). In the optic proposed by "Desfloración," debilitation emerges as a potential line of alliance beyond standardized identities—a conviction internalized by Iris, as she stands in solidarity with those rendered expendable. Crucially, Iris's solidarity is anchored in corporeality, in the shared, vulnerable *zōē*, materialized through the nectar secreted by her vegetal genitalia. By conflating plant sap with intimate human fluids, this nectar constitutes an amalgam of liquids essential for life. Paradoxically, Iris's unique capacity to sustain life across difference precipitates her death, completing her transition into a queer vegetal martyr.

Yet, just as the story is about to culminate in a lynching, a conventional hagiographic trope, a queer ecological miracle happens, offering Iris a peaceful death. The character physically dissolves into her surroundings:

> The wind carried the screams of terror, which hit Iris's exhausted face as she placed one hand on her flower and with the other dug a small hole in the damp and submissive earth. She was aware that, before long, that human flame would reach her. . . . In a torpor akin to sleep, Iris pushed her fingers in and out of her body at a vertiginous rhythm. . . . As the mob advanced through the lawn to conquer her, it found a vast field of magnolias in bloom. (Néstore)

Faced with the imminence of her own demise, Iris turns to the very aspect of her embodied self that renders her monstrous and expendable in the eyes of her perpetrators—the magnolia between her thighs. She also invites the earth itself into this erotic entanglement, digging the hole in the ground, perhaps in preparation to plant her seed. In search of protection, Iris enters into a sexual communion spanning human, vegetal, and elemental realms, guided by queer ecological conviction that true intimacy is achieved through "pleasures that are not heteronormative, not genital, not geared to ideologies about where the body stops and starts" (Morton 280). Finally, as if completing a sacramental rite, Iris orgasms for the last time, an instance in which her human form disperses into a colony of plants, symbolically embracing the plurality of vegetal being and her non-identity of compost, now nourishing her more-than-human community of followers.

Iris's piously queer life and miraculous passing establish her, even if ironically, as a veneration-worthy figure: an ecosexual saint and a crip heroine of the ever-resurging vegetariate. "Desfloración" can thus be viewed as a blasphemous parable of more-than-human regeneration, attainable through the solidarity among the subaltern and intimate alliances with the environment. Iris, the prophet of queer ecological lovemaking, preaches that as long as there remain any entities for us to love and care(ss), the chances for more livable futures are not all lost.

CONCLUSION

The analyzed narratives portray fabulated forms of crip/queer ecological resistance anchored in an affective, response-able approach to plants. While all three texts can be read as instances of Haraway-inspired "storytelling for earthly survival" (see *Staying* 143), each offers a different yet complementary perspective on multispecies intimacies endangered by the disabling of social and ecological environments. "Water" portrays a human-plant romance entangled in colonial and ecological exploitation. "Seedlings" describes corporeal transformation that challenges heteronormative and ableist templates for desire and reproduction. Finally, "Desfloración" frames ecosexual devotion to more-than-human kin as a counterforce to the systemic debilitation and

persecution of otherness, feared for its capacity to destabilize the status quo. Together, these three narratives expand the imaginary repertoire of subversive intimacies between humans and plants, emphasizing human—essential but not privileged—involvement in multispecies assemblages.

The article demonstrates that plant-fictional engagements with intimacy do more than unsettle normative models of pleasure, embodiment, identity, and relationality: they chart speculative pathways toward more livable futures by "following plants into much queerer territories of living and relating" and revealing the potential of vegetation to inspire "new, 'anthro-decentric' possibilities" (Sandilands, "Fear" 426). The proposed readings give more substance to the premises of queer ecologies, trans*planting* the scope of queer critique into explicitly multispecies terrains, and framing intimacy as a force of ecological resistance. At the same time, my analysis shows how attention to the vegetal can advance crip theory's goals of reclaiming pleasure and environmental connection for disabled subjects. These narratives reveal models of intimacy that oppose the ableist trope of triumph over nature, instead promoting ecological practices of "caressing it, gazing upon it, breathing with it" (Kafer 143). Taken together, these interventions extend the conversation across disciplines, positioning speculative plant fiction as a vital archive for imagining strategies of more-than-human survival in times of planetary crisis.

Building on these readings, I would like to advance *phytospeculation* as a critical term for naming speculative practices, both in fiction and theory, that foreground vegetal agents and approximate their perspectives, recognizing plants' positionality as offering valuable insights about the world. In short, phytospeculation means inviting plants to share their experience as part of multispecies entanglements, significantly impacted by the discursive and material effects of human activity. The introduction of plants into storytelling and "storying"—a term Haraway treats as synonymous with "worlding," in that it ensures that our precarious world(s) continue to exist (*Staying* 40)—functions here not to reinforce human centrality, but to question it and encourage non-anthropocentric modes of understanding. Phytospeculations thus emerge as fictional rehearsals of urgently needed scenarios of resistance and flourishing, grounded in more-than-human solidarity.

Works Cited

Barad, Karen. Interview by Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn. *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, edited by Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, Open Humanities P, 2012, pp. 48–70. http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/ohp.11515701.0001.001

Barad, Karen. "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2–3, 2015, pp. 387–422. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2843239

Baumann, Céline. "Queer Nature." *Archithese Schriftenreihe*, 2020, pp. 80–83.

Brylska, Aleksandra. "Społeczne uchwastowienie. W poszukiwaniu sposobów bycia z odrzuconymi." *Prace Kulturoznawcze*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2020, pp. 77–91. https://doi.org/10.19195/0860-6668.24.3.5

Cella, Matthew J. C. "The Ecosomatic Paradigm in Literature: Merging Disability Studies and Ecocriticism." *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, edited by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara, U of Nebraska P, 2017, pp. 168–200. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1p6jht5.9

Clare, Eli. "Notes on Natural Worlds, Disabled Bodies, and a Politics of Cure." *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, edited by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara, U of Nebraska P, 2017, pp. 242–66. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1p6jht5.11

Clare, Eli. "Yearning toward Carrie Buck." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2014, pp. 335–44. https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.26

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi, Continuum, 2004.

Dooren, Thom van, and Deborah Bird Rose. "Lively Ethography: Storying Animist Worlds." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 77–94. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527731

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke UP, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822385981

Fritsch, Kelly. "Cripping Neoliberal Futurity: Marking the Elsewhere and Elsewhen of Desiring Otherwise." *Feral Feminisms*, vol. 5, 2016, pp. 11–26.

Fritsch, Kelly. "Toxic Pregnancies: Speculative Futures, Disabling Environments, and Neoliberal Biocapital." *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, edited by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara, U of Nebraska P, 2017, pp. 359–80. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1p6jht5.16

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia UP, 1997.

Godlewska-Byliniak, Ewelina. "From Plant-Diagnosis to Plant(other)ness: Around the Performance *I'm Not a Plant*." *Didaskalia* (*English Issue*), 2024, n.pag., https://didaskalia.pl/en/article/plant-diagnosis-plantotherness-around-performance-im-not-plant, accessed 20 Dec. 2025.

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene.* Duke UP, 2016. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q

Haraway, Donna J. "Symbiogenesis, Sympoiesis, and Art Science Activisms for *Staying with the Trouble*." *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, edited by Anna Tsing et al., U of Minnesota P, 2017, pp. M25–M50.

Hollis, Audrey R. "Seedlings." *Strange Horizons*, 3 Sept. 2018, https://strangehorizons.com/wordpress/fiction/seedlings/, accessed 15 Feb. 2026.

Irigaray, Luce, and Michael Marder. *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives*. Columbia UP, 2016.

Jacobs, Joela. "Plant Parenthood: The Fear of Vegetal Eroticism." *Imperceptibly and Slowly Opening*, edited by Caroline Picard, Green Lantern, 2016, pp. 166–72.

Johnson, Merri Lisa, and Robert McRuer. "Cripistemologies: Introduction." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2014, pp. 127–47. https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.12

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana UP, 2013. https://doi.org/10.2979/6841.0

Kaiser, Birgit M. "Worlding CompLit: Diffractive Reading with Barad, Glissant and Nancy." *Parallax*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2014, pp. 274–87. https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2014.927634

Luciano, Dana, and Mel Y. Chen. "Introduction: Has the Queer Ever Been Human?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2–3, 2015, pp. 182–207. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2843215

Marder, Michael. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. Columbia UP, 2013.

Marder, Michael. "Resist like a Plant! On the Vegetal Life of Political Movements." *Peace Studies Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2012, pp. 24–32.

Margulis, Lynn. "Symbiogenesis and Symbionticism." *Symbiosis as a Source of Evolutionary Innovation: Speciation and Morphogenesis*, edited by Lynn Margulis and René Fester, MIT P, 1991, pp. 1–14.

Meeker, Natania, and Antónia Szabari. *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction*. Fordham UP, 2019. https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823286638.001.0001

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. "Precarity and Cross-Species Identification: Autism, the Critique of Normative Cognition, and Nonspeciesism." *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, edited by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara, U of Nebraska P, 2017, pp. 553–72. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1p6jht5.24

Møller-Olsen, Astrid. "Companion Plant Reading: Translating Vegetal Voices." *Plant Perspectives*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2024, pp. 120–44. https://doi.org/10.3197/whppp.63845494909709

Mollow, Anna. "Is Sex Disability? Queer Theory and the Disability Drive." *Sex and Disability*, edited by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow, Duke UP, 2012, pp. 285–312. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smzjb.18

Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona, and Bruce Erickson. "Introduction: A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Indiana UP, 2010, pp. 1–47. https://doi.org/10.2979/5988.0

Morton, Timothy. "Guest Column: Queer Ecology." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 125, no. 2, 2010, pp. 273–82. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.2.273

Neerven, Ellen van. "Water." *Heat and Light*, U of Queensland P, 2014, pp. 67–123.

Néstore, Ángelo. "Desfloración." *Asalto a Oz. Antología de relatos de la nueva narrativa queer*, Dos Bigotes, 2019, n.pag.

O'Brien, Gerald. "Anchors on the Ship of Progress and Weeds in the Human Garden: Objectivist Rhetoric in American Eugenic Writings." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2011, https://dsq-sds.org/article/id/1053/, accessed 30 Mar. 2026. https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v31i3.1668

Ojrzyńska, Katarzyna. "Kalekowanie ekorelacyjnej przyjemności." *Czas Kultury*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2023, pp. 69–80.

O'Neill, Cynthia. "Dandelion Rebellion: Creating Crip Natures." *Leonardo*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2024, pp. 141–46. https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_02494

Price, Margaret. "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain." *Hypatia*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2015, pp. 268–84. https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12127

Puar, Jasbir K. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Duke UP, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372530

Ray, Sarah Jaquette, and Jay Sibara. Introduction. *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, edited by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara, U of Nebraska P, 2017, pp. 1–26. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1p6jht5.4

Sandilands, Catriona. "Fear of a Queer Plant?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2017, pp. 419–29. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-3818477

Sandilands, Catriona. "Vegetate." *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking*, edited by Lowell Duckert and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, U of Minnesota P, 2017, pp. 16–29. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1pwt70r.5

Schneekloth, Lynda H. "Plants: the Ultimate Alien." *Extrapolation*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2001, pp. 246–54. https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2001.42.3.246

Shelton, Stephanie Anne. "The Influence of Barad's 'Transmaterialities' on Queer Theories and Methodologies." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2019, pp. 119–24. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-7275614

Sprinkle, Annie, Beth Stephens, and Jennie Klein. *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover*. U of Minnesota P, 2021. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1v3gr06

Taylor, Sunaura. *Disabled Ecologies: Lessons from a Wounded Desert*. U of California P, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520393073

Tsai, Wen-Chieh, et al. "Molecular Biology of Orchid Flowers: With Emphasis on Phalaenopsis." *Advances in Botanical Research*, vol. 47, 2008, pp. 99–145. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2296(08)00003-7

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton UP, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400873548

Vaidya, Anuj. "Larval Ecologies: Femi-Queer-Crip Performance Practice at the Edge of the Sixth Extinction." *Milestones in Feminist Performance*, edited by Tiina Rosenberg, Fawzia Afzal-Khan, and Sandra D'Urso, Routledge, 2024, pp. 134–52. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003347897-8

Gabriela Kozakiewicz is a PhD candidate at the University of Warsaw, where she researches "phytospeculations"—speculative fictions that venture to render plant perspectives, explore the specificity of vegetal being and community-making, or otherwise infect the human with plantness. She holds an Erasmus Mundus Master's degree in "Crossways in Cultural Narratives," completed at the University of St Andrews, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, and Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. Literary and Cultural Studies researcher by training, philosopher at heart, and a proud alumna of the interdisciplinary Artes Liberales College at the University of Warsaw. Her wide-ranging interests include literature, posthumanist thought, dance studies, totalitarian architecture, wine, and all things Portugal.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1884-4768

gj.kozakiewicz@uw.edu.pl

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.08

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Aleksandra Kamińska
Jagiellonian University, Kraków

"May the earth heave up to bring us close": Landscaping Bodies in Petra Kuppers and Neil Marcus's *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story*

ABSTRACT

Rooted in the conviction that landscapes embed the performance of gender and sexuality, the article explores the potential of real and imaginary landscapes for fostering intimacy and erotic expression as depicted in Petra Kuppers and Neil Marcus's *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story*, where the lovers become travellers, "wayfarers," and "seafarers," traversing physical and imaginary landscapes and exploring various modes of erotic mobility along the way. In the poems, desire transforms the lovers' bodies into landscapes, with extensive imagery pointing to waterscapes and stressing their transformative and liberating potential. Finally, the movement of imagination as a sensual gesture is reflected in the landscape of the text: the flow of words on the page often reflects the freedom of movement reclaimed and established through (landscaped) erotic pleasure. The article discusses the three layers of landscaping present in the text—bodies *in* (physical and imaginary) landscapes, bodies *as* landscapes, and textual landscapes—focusing on the authors' employment of ecorelationality as a strategy of fostering intimacy and crip sexuality.

Keywords: *Cripple Poetics*, Petra Kuppers, Neil Marcus, poetry, love poetry, landscape, ecorelationality, ecosexuality.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 1 Sept. 2025. Verified: 4 Mar. 2026. Accepted: 17 Mar. 2026.

INTRODUCTION: FROM LANDSCAPED BODIES TO LANDSCAPING CRIP INTIMACIES

The use of landscape imagery in love poetry has ancient roots; still, in the Western tradition, it typically concerns depicting female bodies as landscapes ready to be explored and conquered by men. In the Song of Solomon, the bride is likened to "a garden inclosed," waiting for her beloved to enter and collect her "pleasant fruits" (4:12); in "Elegy 19. Going to Bed," John Donne imagines the body of his lover as his "America" or his "new-found-land" (1084), associating erotic pleasures with the joy of geographic discovery and conquest. The patriarchal and colonial undertones of such a use of landscape metaphors have been exposed by ecofeminist scholars;[1] now, with the growing sensitivity to the reality of landscapes as loci of intimate entanglements involving more-than-human lives, a different mode of poetic language becomes available, foregrounding intimacy and celebrating relationality.

In Petra Kuppers and Neil Marcus's *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story* (2008), advertised as "a love story for crip culture" (Kuppers and Marcus n.pag.), the immersion of bodies in landscapes and reimagining of bodies as landscapes become the primary source of sensual pleasure and a model for fostering crip intimacy, which is then mapped onto the loving relationship between the two authors, who are featured in double roles as both creators and subjects. The volume—usually described as a poetry collection, but in fact offering a free-flowing combination of poems, recorded conversations, snippets of essays, and life writing—records Kuppers and Marcus's love story through a combination of text and photographic material (contributed by Lisa Steichmann). Kuppers, who is a performance artist and a disability culture activist as well as an author and academic, and Marcus (1954–2021), author, activist, and performer, created a work both intimate and personal as well as having a wider resonance, extending, as one critic notes, "to the disability community as a whole, and to the nature of disability art and culture itself" (Sandahl n.pag.).

Published in 2008, *Cripple Poetics* has attracted some critical attention and appreciation, centred especially on the collaborative character of the volume and its experimental, creative form, informed by both authors' prior experience in performing arts (see e.g., Sandahl; Gould). In her thoughtful review published in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Carrie Sandahl notes that Kuppers and Marcus's poetry "has a performance quality to it," as the authors "explore the interrelatedness between movement, speaking, and writing" (n.pag.). In Sandahl's reading, the juxtaposition of

[1] See e.g., Kolodny or Merchant.

natural settings and textual forms shaped by "electronic modes of long-distance communication" (n.pag.) produces a unique form of discourse, allowing the authors not only to resist the dominant culture's tendency for the medicalisation of the disabled body, but also push the boundaries of the poetic genre to "develop a method of writing collaboratively that accommodates [the other person]'s impairments" (n.pag.). In this article, I propose a reading focused on the exploration of landscapes in *Cripple Poetics* in order to examine the ways in which the poets enlist the natural world as their primary ally in discovering new ways of exploring their physical and emotional connection. The sections of the book—one of which is, significantly, titled "Landscape"—reflect their intense enjoyment of relationality, encompassing both one's partner and the entire more-than-human world, as well as their expanding reflection on the importance of ecorelationality for crip and queer sexuality and intimacy.

This article explores three layers of landscaping present in the text—bodies in (physical and imaginary) landscapes, bodies as landscapes, and textual landscapes—drawing on theoretical reflection associated with bodyscaping, ecorelationality, and ecosexuality. In the following sections, landscaping and ecosexuality are discussed as crucial components in fostering crip and queer intimacies, followed by a discussion of various modes of landscaping present in the text.

CRIP AND QUEER INTIMACIES IN (SPECULATIVE) LANDSCAPES

The association of landscape with the body is primary, rooted in the simple fact that, as Douglas Porteous explains in his foundational work *Landscapes of the Mind*, "the human body is the first landscape we encounter and explore" (84). The connection is evident in corporal metaphors that we commonly use to describe various landscapes—we speak of "a neck of land," "the mouth of the river," "the face of the earth," etc. (76–77). At the same time, we inscribe various characteristics of landscape and landscape-related activities onto the human body. In his book, John Wylie (6) draws attention to the meaning ascribed to *landscape* as a verb, meaning to "physically shape" and "modify" with a view of "improving the land," thus strongly hinting at disciplining practices. Introducing the term *bodyscape*, Porteous explains how the body "becomes a personal landscape to enhance" (71), and corresponding landscaping practices may include clothing, hairstyling or hair removal, makeup, weight loss or gain, bodybuilding, aesthetic surgery, tattooing, scarification, etc. The argument that Porteous does not raise, however, is that these bodyscaping practices

are not equally available to every body, with factors such as age, health, or dis/ability playing a major role. This becomes especially important, considering that the abovementioned practices are socially and culturally significant, as they allow individuals to signal their values and social status, but also to perform their gender and sexuality.

The tendency to inscribe landscape onto the body and vice versa is also present in commonly used sexual metaphors, especially those linked to the female body; to the point that, as Porteous suggests, the culmination of the "body as landscape" is "pornotopia" (70). Viewing naked bodies and their artistic representations as "a kind of fleshly landscape" (71) is especially problematic since it often implicitly promotes patriarchal sexual norms. Bodies inscribed as landscape are thus "explored" and "penetrated" (71), conquered, shaped, and disciplined. The links between this mode of thinking and colonial exploitation or misogyny have been exposed by such feminist critics as Annette Kolodny or Carolyn Merchant; it merits a commentary, however, that the typical conceptualisations of bodies as landscapes are seldom open to queerness, fluidity, and relationality.

At the same time, as queer theorist Sara Ahmed argues, sexuality can never be separated from landscape, as "bodies are sexualized through how they inhabit space" (67). In other words, how we are "orientated sexually" is determined not only by the "objects we are orientated towards, but also how we extend through our bodies into the world" (68). In her essay "Is Landscape Queer?," Kate Thomas argues that "bodies are produced by landscape, just as landscape is made by us," and the queerness of landscape depends on rejecting ontological difference and instead exploring "shifting relationality in and of and across landscape" (235). Thomas suggests that contrary to a (normative) detached view of the cartographer, queerness is embedded in landscape perceived from close proximity, as this perspective illuminates its complexity and biodiversity, its enmeshed nature rooted in a variety of entangled life forms, which permits—and is dependent on—variation and plurality.

This is not to say that all landscapes are equally conducive to crip intimacy and sexuality. As David Bell and Gill Valentine argue in *Mapping Desire* (1995), landscapes can be either "liberatory or oppressive sites for the performance of our sexed selves" (87), and this remains true with respect to both physical and cultural landscapes. As Katarzyna Ojrzyńska, among others, points out, the image of a person with a disability as a suffering individual who is denied access to pleasure has become established in culture ("Kalekowanie" 71); the same sentiment is expressed by s. e. smith in the essay "Skin Hunger and the Taboo of Wanting to be Touched": "There is a popular sense that disabled people are un-date/touch/knowable, that we neither want to establish romantic and sexual relationship nor are we capable. To put it mildly, *dating in this landscape is challenging*" (120, emphasis mine).

The difficulties associated with the performance of crip sexuality can equally be linked to physical landscapes, posing challenges not only in terms of travel and commute, essential components in LDRs (long-distance-relationships) and LATs (living-apart-together, i.e. non-cohabiting) relationships, which are increasingly common forms of romantic and sexual involvement in contemporary Western culture, but also by limiting access to social events offering an opportunity to meet potential partners. In *Cripple Poetics*, Kuppers presents an account of what she describes as a "very upsetting experience" (43), when she found herself separated from her friends at a concert and unable to navigate the venue without their assistance. In her description of the incident, a clear link is established between the sense of disempowerment resulting from the daunting confrontation with a space with insufficient access and the sense of emotional isolation, prohibitive for intimacy: "Independence was out of my crip reach. Loneliness fell over me" (44).

Conversely, certain physical landscapes may, through their characteristics, have a liberating effect, fostering crip and queer intimacies. In recent studies, ecosexuality and ecorelationality have been discussed as potential strategies of seeking out such favourable landscapes in natural environments (as opposed to disciplined, terraformed landscapes). Ecorelationality, described by Ojrzyńska as a way of relating to the world rooted in "a lived experience of unity and (inter)dependence with the environment and an encounter with the nonhuman (or dehumanized) Other" ("Ecorelational Aesthetics" 491), foregrounds the sense of connection and vulnerability. Instead of patriarchal hierarchies and domination, it creates space for non-anthropocentric exchanges and interactions, where no modes of embodiment, mobility, and sexuality are framed as inferior to others. For this reason, as Ojrzyńska explains, ecorelationality can provide a fruitful ground when combined with a disability perspective, as more-than-human alliances "facilitate dismantling ableism and anthropocentrism as well as help us build a new, more equitable and closer relationship with the environment that we live in as well as with ourselves—as fragile and vulnerable subjects" (492).

As a result, the sense of isolation and exclusion permeating some of the abovementioned accounts of crip sexuality can be replaced by what Ojrzyńska describes as "ecosexual pleasure" (see English abstract to "Kalekowanie"), stemming from a pervading sense of lived interaction with the natural environment, and the perception of nature as pluralistic and collaborative, rather than driven by the logic of sameness and competition. Ecorelational pleasure, as Ojrzyńska explains, is open to "alternative modes of being in the world" ("Kalekowanie" 70, translation mine) and as such is close to the concept of ecosexuality as discussed by Annie Sprinkle

and Beth Stephens, who argue that it requires "a more expanded" view of sexuality and sexual pleasure that goes "beyond mainstream definitions" (*Assuming the Ecosexual Position* 2); it is thus essentially queer. In their *Ecosex Manifesto*, Sprinkle and Stephens insist that the performance of sexuality should be founded on "collaboration with nature"; it can also expand the notion of sexuality, as Greta Gaard suggests, to encompass the "eco-erotic bricolage of gender, species, nature" (266). As Louis van den Hengel points out, ecosexuality "acknowledges that human sexuality is always already entangled with the entire material world," as well as offers a way of expanding the view of sexuality as a distinct property of humans "towards a more holistic view on erotic desire as an irreducible intermeshing of human and nonhuman intimacies" (332). As a result, ecosexuality is, as Ewelina Jarosz explains, an attitude of openness to "expanding the queer politics of identity to include more-than-human worlds" (268). From an ecosexual perspective, Jarosz argues, nature becomes "a desired, positive and diverse ally" (269) in seeking sexual expression and intimacy.

Although the sense of deep interconnectedness with natural landscapes and more-than-human actants that is essential to ecosexuality is an embodied experience, my argument here is that it can also become part of imagined landscapes of intimacy, fostering crip and queer sexualities. As Catherine Belsey indicates in her study *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (1994), desire "can go anywhere" (16)—moreover, it allows us the freedom to explore "what it would be like to occupy a space that cannot exist" (89). Ojrzyńska concedes that "reclaiming the right to pleasure is often a difficult and complex process" ("Kalekowanie" 71, translation mine), and mediation through imagination appears to be especially important for crip sexuality. In her essay "Republics of Desire: Disabled Lineages of Longing," Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha suggests that "in a world where disabled people are some of the most vulnerable to both rape and rejection, perhaps sometimes we use pining and fantasy . . . as a way to create a freedom space of dream that is safe. Perhaps . . . we sometimes have sex and access pleasure in ways that stay in fantasy" (153).

In their work, Kuppers and Marcus show how ecorelational imagination—both rooted in actual ecorelational experience and purely speculative—can be a powerful ally in exploring and enhancing crip intimacies.

BODIES IN LANDSCAPE AND LANDSCAPING BODIES

The crucial role of landscape imagery in *Cripple Poetics* is made evident from the outset. The opening poem in the volume, titled "The Metaphor of Wind in Cripple Poetics," depicts cripple as simultaneously "flesh and

bone" *and* landscape. The lines "There is always wind in my cripple / Off shore breezes" (7) construe "cripple" as a natural space, offered up for the interplay of the elements. The closing lines of the poem, picturing "cripple" as "a blown about newspaper" and "an ox in a rice field, ploughing earth" (7), add yet more complexity, establishing "cripple" as a shapeshifter, freely transgressing the boundaries between human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, bodies and landscapes.

The poem sets the tone for the entire collection, in which intimate encounters between the two lovers are accompanied by their loving interactions with the more-than-human world. The whole text is permeated by a deep sense of (s)kinship with nature and other living beings. The sentiment expressed by Marcus in one of the exchanges is that of feeling safe and supported ("the whole natural world is watching over us" 22), while Kuppers writes about the "generosity" (21) of sand and natural landscapes, ready to welcome and support the lovers.

Similarly to the opening poem, other pieces also describe the alchemic transformations of the lovers' bodies. At times, the boundaries between the human and the more-than-human begin to blur, for instance, when Kuppers writes about skin becoming dust and dust becoming clay, or when a tallow candle allows bones to become "warmth" and "light" (21). Life forms become fluid and unconstrained, freely morphing one into another, with ultimate ease of movement and becoming.

The same vivacity is ascribed to the planet, as Kuppers writes about "the movement of Gaia" (21). Instead of static, disciplined, and objectified land that is owned and cultivated by its human inhabitants, Kuppers chooses to speak about the personified Gaia, full of agency and feeling, thus emphasising—in accordance with James Lovelock's famous Gaia Hypothesis—that all of us living beings on the planet "are parts of a greater whole" (Lovelock x).

For Kuppers and Marcus, Gaia becomes an ally but also a crucial participant in their crip intimacy. In their poetry, the boundaries between the lovers' bodies and the more-than-human world are dissolved, a dispersion that is presented as a source of strength and potential for increased intimacy. In the lines "If your hand does not move, / let the nerves of the air knit a web" or "if your back does not bend, / may the earth heave up to bring us close" (25), the elements are described as living creatures, possessing organic tissues ("nerves") and capable of purposeful (and supportive) action.

In the poem, mutual desire, but also the desire to engage in close contact with the elements and other living beings ("Imagine touching the belly of a snake. And the comfort of elephants" 22), transforms the lovers' bodies into landscapes ("wet clay land" 20), while they also become

travellers and explorers, "wayfarers" and "seafarers" on a journey full of joyful discoveries. Just as the more-than-human world acts on the lovers' bodies, so too the human lovers are attributed the capacity for action on a planetary scale: "our breaths travel the star distances, / molecules surf on the moisture between planets" (25). Experiencing the "tenderness" (25) of the living world, the lovers appear to expand infinitely.

The blurring of the boundaries between the lovers' bodies and the natural landscape can also be observed in the accompanying black-and-white photographs by Lisa Steichmann: the images represent Kuppers's and Marcus's naked bodies situated in green spaces, erotically entangled with each other, but also with plants, twigs, and soil. One of the photographs (27) shows a thicket of entangled limbs, naked hands and legs intertwined as densely as brambles. With the rest of the bodies left out of the frame, the naked limbs may not be immediately recognised as human body parts, resembling instead strange plants or animals. The bare skin appears to be painted in an intricate pattern by the sun shining through the leaves. Consequently, the natural landscape becomes not so much a setting but rather a participant in Kuppers and Marcus's loving encounters, as the boundaries between humans, plants, and soil constantly shift.

The photographs, as an integral part of the volume, provide a visual narrative which runs parallel to the textual layer, overlapping with the poetic representation of bodies *in* and *as* landscapes as well as reinforcing it. Though the photographer herself remains invisible, always positioned outside of the frame, her constant gaze becomes an important element of the lovers' encounter. Hers is not a distanced, nonpartisan perspective of a documentary maker, nor does she appear to uniquely prioritise the aesthetic aspect of the representation (although the latter element is obviously also significant, as the images present the beauty and serenity of human bodies held and protected by the landscape, exploring the affinities between various bodies with aesthetic precision reminiscent of Laura Aguilar's nature self-portraits)—instead, the focus is placed on relationality. Steichmann's biographical note at the end of the volume reveals that she is a friend of the couple; she also apparently shares her passion for water with Kuppers, and the two of them frequently swim together (121). As a result, the ecorelationality foregrounded in *Crippled Poetics* extends to the composition of the photographic material: the sunlit, airy spaces documented in the images encompass both the lovers and the photographer, who accompanies them in the green space, together with plants, soil, and rocks. In the biographical note, Steichmann declares that, as she worked on the photographic material for the volume, she was "delighted" by Kuppers and Marcus's "joy in each other and the friendship in the circle, the laughter, the hugs" (121), indicating that this broad frame

of relationality extends not only to the relationship between the couple and more-than-human participants but also to the affective and physical contact between the photographer and her subjects.

Steichmann's declaration that in her visual contribution, she portrays "this human touch and the depth of friendship" (121) draws attention to the significance of the word *touch*, which here evokes both associations with the erotic touch documented in the images and the human touch interpreted as a broader (eco)relational attitude assumed by the lovers in their approach to the surrounding environment and all other living beings. While Kuppers and Marcus's loving relationship obviously foregrounds their own emotional and erotic union, the joy of their coupling is meant to be shared, thus enhancing their (eco)relationality with the surrounding world, including not only the landscape, but also the photographer as well as the readers of the volume.

That both Kuppers and Marcus associate green, living landscapes with love and intimacy is evident, and the crucial role of imagination in this process is well exemplified by two poems inspired by a shared bed. Marcus describes it as a piece of furniture ("There are two beds in my room / One, the more recent is a hospital bed" 59). The speaker explains that he "hates its image in [his] mind" (59) due to all the connotations it evokes. The other bed, at some point considered an unnecessary item, is transformed once he begins to share it with his partner, and then its description changes as it is referred to as "[his] nest" (59).

Kuppers, in her poem, goes a step further, suggesting: "What if this world were a four-poster bed and we the seafarers on an adventure" (60). In *Cripple Poetics*, the room is transformed into an imaginary landscape full of beauty and promise. Importantly, the lovers actively form that landscape ("we excavate, mould, shape a new island, / we lick clay into shape" 60). The creation of the imaginary landscape for a scene of intimacy is presented as an erotic act in itself. The freedom seems infinite, with the lovers' bodies capable of fantastical transformation ("let's grow aqualungs" 60). Watery immersion, as a way of reimagining the landscape of the body, is a recurring motif in the entire volume.

FROM WATERSCAPES TO OTHERSPACE

While the photographic material included in *Cripple Poetics* concentrates on the lovers' bodies immersed in soil and greenery, some of the most important references to more-than-human spaces in the volume are to waterscapes. Watery spaces, with the freedom of movement that they offer and the joy of literal immersion in the more-than-human world, become

important allies for Kuppers, Marcus, and their intimacy, offering them a sense of independence and safety, in contrast to some more difficult land-bound experiences.

It is no coincidence that Kuppers juxtaposes her account of the unpleasant experience at a concert with a memory of Marcus and herself swimming and relishing the pleasure of "delicious drift":

> Neil floats in green water. . . We will ourselves to enter this different element and yet capture the freedom of water, where we both move without pain. There are moments of delicious drift. For seconds, we are at stillness, with held breath. Our muscular limbs darting down into the water are no longer awkward. Hope. (43)

In the passage above, it is evident that the waterscape allows the lovers to experience a transformation of their physical sensations and their mobility: movement is no longer awkward or painful; instead, their motions are quick, sure, and free, a source of intense pleasure. Kuppers expresses a similar sentiment in her article elaborating on the importance of swimming for the crip culture: "[while swimming,] I am mobile in ways I cannot be out of the water. Nothing straps me down, and I have the privilege of movement, sidewinder, undulating, rolling in the pleasure of my round strong limbs. In the water, pressure deforms" ("Swimming" 126).

On the one hand, this transformation can contribute to a heightened sense of self and enjoyment of one's body as it is. This is an important aspect of immersion in waterscapes for Marcus: "I can . . . fall. my body be itself. just who I am. me Spastic . . . falling. turning, twisting, writhing. its o.k. water" (qtd. in Kuppers, "Swimming" 127–28). On the other hand, it is also an opportunity to expand that sense of self and allow the boundaries to dissolve, thus opening up space for intimate encounters.

Both Kuppers and Marcus were among the active participants of the Salamander Project, using swimming as a means of exploring "the wild aesthetic of water," with the participants seeking to "deform [them]selves through sleek unhinged control" (Kuppers, "Swimming" 120). Essentially, the project stressed the potential of waterscapes as "edge zones" (ibid.), encouraging unrestricted exploration and readiness to redefine one's sense of physicality and movement.

Significantly, this redefinition is associated with openness to blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman embodiment. As Kuppers and her collaborators put it, "[i]n water, otherspace can make us imagine manatees and otters, fantasies of non-realist embodiment give us gills, and knit new sensations into our skins" (Kuppers et al. 40). The swimmers' descriptions of their experience in the water is frequently expressed

through identification with more-than-humans (in Kuppers's words: "In the water, I am salamander," "Swimming" 126). By becoming the other, the participants were not only able to develop increased sensitivity to the living world, but also to let go of their predetermined notions of the available modes of moving, feeling, touching, and being touched, recognising (and revelling in) ecorelational pleasure.

Through their awareness of "water and flesh as connective media" (Kuppers, "Swimming" 124), the swimmers in the Salamander Project were encouraged to consciously experience "being touched by elements and penetrated by our shared world" (122). The references to touch and penetration present in this description, with their potential erotic connotations, suggest that the Salamander Project advances both perspectives at once: posthuman and ecosexual.

In *Cripple Poetics*, the authors' shared experience of watery immersion as entering "otherspace," in which embodiments and identities become fluid and species boundaries can become permeable, appears to seep directly into their poetic language, full of more-than-human affinities and identifications. "I am salmon," declares the speaker in one of Marcus's contributions (38). In another poem, contributed by Kuppers ("Velvet green embraces as we sink. . ."), wet skin becomes "a link to a Jurassic age" (62), as if swimming was allowing the lovers to regress to earlier forms of evolution, erasing accumulated baggage and blurring the distinctions between more-than-human lifeforms. It is clear that for the speaker in the poem, immersion in water is a way of making kin with other living beings:

> cool, fellow feeling
> drowned in the wet face world of strangers
> touch, sink, nip and touch again,
> asserting companionship. (62)

Significantly, it is through touch—its significance marked by repetition in the fragment quoted above—that "the world of strangers" is familiarised and becomes a space of "companionship."

When the lovers move away from each other in the water, their movements are indicative of freedom and enjoyment: one person "sails into the green growth" (62), while the other "cartwheels to the lily pads" (62). The pleasure they obviously experience is linked to the ease with which their bodies can move, but it is also ecorelational: the vegetation with which they interact is velvety, welcoming, and companionable. The erotic undertone of the situation culminates in the final line of the poem, as "an inelegant kiss opens the flower" (62). The ambiguous meaning of the "flower" in that line encompasses both the lilies in the pad and the speaker's body, ecosexually

linking physical contact with the more-than-human world and erotic pleasure. The image of an opening flower suggests letting go of constraints and inhibitions, which is further enhanced by the description of the kiss as "inelegant," celebrating its imperfection and rawness.

In the poem, the speaker and her lover allow their bodies to become transformed by the waterscape, and the celebration of biodiversity and multispecies kinships becomes an essential part of their shared intimacy and erotic enjoyment. The same elements also influence the textual landscape of the volume.

INTIMATE ENCOUNTERS IN THE LANDSCAPE OF THE TEXT

In his article on the links between landscape and literature, Gareth Doherty argues that, in fact, "the writer and landscape architect use similar tools" (39)—both making matter consolidate into a desired shape. Another claim made by the landscape scholar is, however, more problematic. According to Doherty, in contrast to landscape, "literature privileges the word and not the visual or sensual" (38). In this section, I would like to suggest that in her contributions to the volume, Kuppers actually draws from her affinity with water and intimate closeness experienced in waterscapes, and allows these sensations to inspire a very sensual landscaping of her poetry.

This is exemplified by the poem "Swimming in the figure eight. . .," where Kuppers reimagines her first meeting with Marcus by setting it in a waterscape, reflected in the form of the poem. The meeting scene and the first touch between the future lovers is described in realistic terms, but their movement is already expressed in language suggestive of swimming: "sinking down onto the floor together" and "moving [their] arms together" (14). The rest of the poem meanders like a river and becomes reminiscent of undulating seaweed as the movement of arms smoothly morphs into "Kelp flow" (14). The text seems to dance on the page as the spaces between individual words and letters expand and fluctuate. The reimagination of the floor as a waterscape thus facilitates freedom of movement, underscored by evocative images of otters and jellyfish.

The weightlessness of the jellyfish, described as "colored puff-balls" (14), is immediately linked to "ballet" (14), evoking both the festive feeling of a ballroom and ballet as the most physically demanding form of dance, requiring exceptional physical strength and flexibility. Seemingly, the poetic transformation of the realistic setting (the floor in a university space in Michigan) into an imagined waterscape replaces the heaviness and gravity that makes the bodies "sink" with joyful freedom of movement.

Kupper's playful breaking of the line with "in / visible creatures" (14) draws the reader's attention to the duality of the image: the two dancers are "visible" and "invisible" creatures at the same time. As much as they are visible as performers dancing in front of an audience, there is also the invisible dance playing out against an imaginary, fluid landscape. The final lines of the poem, referring to "the inference of watching" (14), seem to indicate the inaccessibility of the latter dimension to the onlookers, as it becomes a private experience reserved for the two dancers.

Moreover, "watching" highlights the strong presence of visual imagery with mentions of "silver" otter coat, "colored" jellyfish, and "rainbow light" (14), indicating a heightened sensuality of the imagined watery space. As a result, the poem feels almost glittery—an impression enhanced by the serpentine, liquid line of words on the page, as if individual words could change their place any time, swimming this way or that, creating new meanings and associations, celebrating the freedom of movement.

Another great example of textual landscaping is the poem "Alchemy," which invites readerly exploration in a circular manner, starting from the top, or, alternatively, from the bottom. Consistent with the title, the four "corners" correspond to the four elements with apostrophes "remember earth," "remember air," "remember fire," "remember water" (8), evoking the magical, transformative properties attributed to these forces of nature by ancient and medieval alchemists. Kuppers, notably, associates these elements with the body: earth with the flesh, air with breath, fire with laughter, and water with "hot blood" (8).

As a result, the boundaries between the body and the more-than-human world become blurred, and the resulting ecorelational pleasure is heightened by various sensory experiences evoked in the text: delighting the sight with a "bejeweled branch," touching the "softness of the flesh, and the "tremor of . . . heaving life," hearing "the breath whistle" (8). Contrary to Doherty's view that "visual or sensual" aspects are secondary in literature, the poem exudes lightness and buoyancy, its shape reminiscent of a water bubble through the poet's deft use of blank space on the page.

Read from the top, the last word of the poem is "flow," and the lack of a full stop at the end of the sentence (in contrast with the other sentence of the poem, which follows standard punctuation rules) prompts the reader not to stop here and continue with the circular motion, allowing the words to keep spinning. The poem is also accompanied by a photograph by Steichmann, which shows Kuppers's and Marcus's naked bodies joined in a loving embrace. With their knees bent and their backs curled, lying on the ground among green ferns, the lovers form a quasi-circular shape, which corresponds with the form of the poem. The mirroring effect enhances the impression of sensuality and dynamism achieved in the text.

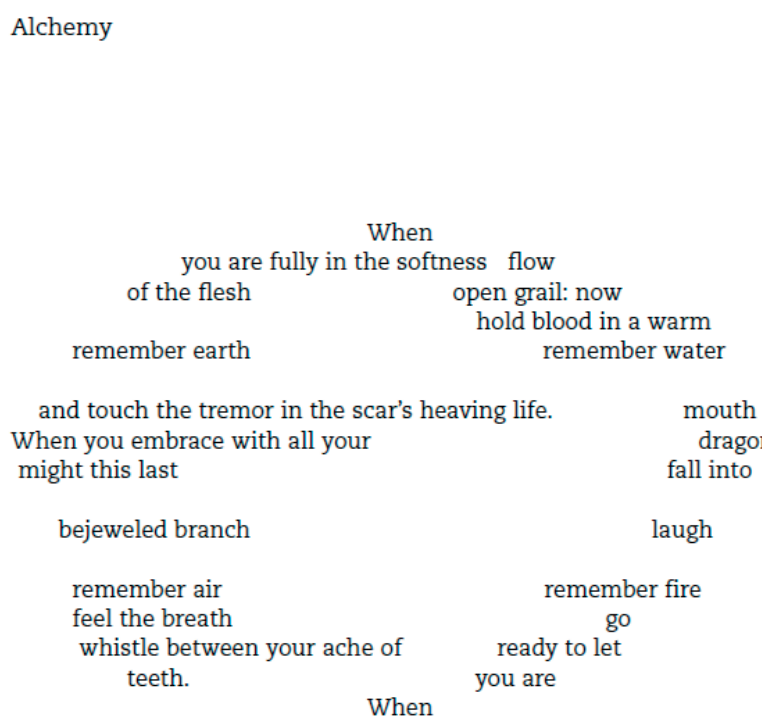

Fig. 1. Petra Kuppers and Neil Marcus, "Alchemy," *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story*, Homofactus, 2008, p. 8. © 2008 by Petra Kuppers and Neil Marcus. Reprinted with the permission of copyright holder.

In *Cripple Poetics*, the authors explore a whole range of possibilities to be found in "landscaping" the words on the page—the airiness, ease, and movement of "Alchemy," for instance, can be contrasted with the firm wall of Marcus's "love yous" covering an entire page (67) further in the volume. The resulting impression of the reliability and permanence of his affection for his partner stems not so much from the number of repetitions, but rather from the visual effect, causing the words to resemble bricks or stones in a durable structure.

But perhaps the most significant visual aspect of the volume is the authors' choice to use different fonts for poems and other exchanges, as well as for the two contributors, and their decision not to standardise spelling and punctuation through normative proofreading. As a result, the authors' physicality, including their particular mobility and its impact on their typing capabilities, is inscribed onto the landscape of the text, shaping its texture, while also influencing the pace and pathways of the

reader's journey. In this respect, *Cripple Poetics* transcends the tradition of concrete poetry, which it evokes through its iconicity and foregrounding of visual experience, as the typography becomes almost an extension of the authors' modes of mobility and embodiment. The different rhythms and paces of Kuppers's and Marcus's typed contributions complement the photographs documenting their embraces and physical closeness, which adds to the impression of sensuality and authenticity conveyed by the text. The words on the page undulate and dance, but sometimes also halt or stumble, creating a sense of living, varied landscape in which the two lovers not only meet each other, but also undergo alchemical transformations, morph into different lifeforms, and connect with the more-than-human world on multiple levels, allowing their ecorelational pleasure to sustain and enhance their mutual connection. Consequently, the textual landscape does not feel disciplined or terraformed, but rather lovingly shaped through leaning into natural rhythms and patterns with their joyful unpredictability and authentic imperfection. The resulting landscape of the text is, actually, deeply visual *and* sensual, not only documenting the authors' crip intimacy, but also inviting the reader to engage in an intimate encounter with the words on the page.

CONCLUSION: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF LANDSCAPED INTIMACIES

Cripple Poetics can be viewed as a piece that draws on the rich tradition of landscape love poetry and subverts it to establish new modes of crip intimacy. Rather than employing the patriarchal imagery of terraforming, penetration, and conquest, Kuppers and Marcus describe both physical and imaginary landscapes that become *otherspace*, fostering more-than-human relationality and crip-queer couplings. Erotic pleasure in the collection is drawn from both physical encounters with natural landscapes (as evidenced by the accompanying photographs) and the lovers' bodies. Immersion in different kinds of landscapes (textured greenery, water) is not only a source of pleasant sensory experience, but also an opportunity to explore different modes of mobility and physical contact. The lovers' bodies undergo various transformations, both physically, impacted by embodied ecorelationality (for instance, when the sun paints their skin in various patterns), and by landscaping imaginary spaces through poetic imagery.

The resulting freedom of movement, touch, and embodiment finds its iconic representation in the way Kuppers and Marcus shape the landscape of the text. Their effective use of varied fonts allows them to register free

movement across different genres as well as reflect ecorelational pleasure and fluidity of feeling and embodiment within individual pieces. The preservation of spelling irregularities indicative of restricted mobility is paired with creative spellings suggestive of unlimited freedom of creativity and imagination, which invites reflection on diversity and normativity, and their links with dominant notions of pleasure and intimacy. Consequently, by combining three different layers of landscaping—bodies *in* (physical and imaginary) landscapes, bodies *as* landscapes, and textual landscapes—Kuppers and Marcus shape a textual and conceptual environment that fosters intimacy and crip sexuality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author expresses her thanks to Petra Kuppers for her kind permission to reprint one of the poems.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke UP, 2006. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388074

Bell, David, and Gill Valentine. *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*. Routledge, 1995.

Belsey, Catherine. *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture*. Blackwell, 1994.

The Bible. *Bible: King James Version*, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/k/kjv/, accessed 21 Feb. 2026.

Doherty, Gareth. "Is Landscape Literature." *Is Landscape. . .? Essays on the Identity of Landscape*, edited by Gareth Doherty and Charles Waldheim, Routledge, 2015, pp. 13–43.

Donne, John. "Elegy 19: Going to Bed." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Volume 1*, 5th edition, edited by M. H. Abrams, W. W. Norton, 1986, p. 1084.

Gaard, Greta. "Toward New EcoMasculinities, EcoGenders, and EcoSexualities." *Ecofeminism, Second Edition: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, edited by Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, pp. 265–80. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501380808.ch-014

Gould, Declan. "Disability Aesthetics and Poetic Practice." *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First-Century American Poetry*, edited by Timothy Yu, Cambridge UP, 2021, pp. 106–19. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108699518.009

Hengel, Louis van den. "Queer Ecologies of Love: Ecosexuality and the Politics of Nonhuman Desire." *The Routledge Companion to Gender, Sexuality and Culture*, edited by Emma Rees, Routledge, 2022, pp. 330–45. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367822040-33

Jarosz, Ewelina. "Ecosexuality: Art Practices for Queering the Earth, Healing and Recovering." *Routledge Handbook of Sexuality, Gender, Health and Rights*, edited by Peter Aggleton et al., Routledge, 2023, pp. 267–77. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003278405-32

Kolodny, Annette. *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. U of North Carolina P, 1975.

Kuppers, Petra. "Swimming with the Salamander: A Community Eco-Performance Project." *Performing Ethos*, vol. 5, no. 1–2, 2015, pp. 119–35. https://doi.org/10.1386/peet.5.1-2.119_1

Kuppers, Petra, and Neil Marcus. *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story*. Photographs by Lisa Steichmann, Homofactus, 2008. https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v28i4.134

Kuppers, Petra, et al. "Public Intimacies: Water Work in Play." *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2019, pp. 32–57. https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v8i1.470

Lovelock, James. *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. 1979. Oxford UP, 2000.

Merchant, Carolyn. *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*. Routledge, 2013. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203079645

Ojrzyńska, Katarzyna. "Ecorelational Aesthetics: Embracing Animality and Conserving Disability." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2023, pp. 489–505. https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2023.36

Ojrzyńska, Katarzyna. "Kalekowanie ekorelacyjnej przyjemności." *Czas Kultury*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2023, pp. 69–80.

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. "Republics of Desire: Disabled Lineages of Longing." *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2024, pp. 144–59.

Porteous, Douglas J. *Landscapes of the Mind: Worlds of Sense and Metaphor*. U of Toronto P, 1990. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487579548

Sandahl, Carrie. "Petra Kuppers and Neil Marcus, *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story*." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2009, n.pag. https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v29i1.177

smith, s. e. "Skin Hunger and the Taboo of Wanting to Be Touched." *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2024, pp. 119–24.

Sprinkle, Annie, and Beth Stephens. *Ecosex Manifesto*. *Sprinkle & Stephens*, https://sprinklestephens.ucsc.edu/manifestos/, accessed 20 Aug. 2025. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003440987-61

Sprinkle, Annie, Beth Stephens, and Jennie Klein. *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover*. U of Minnesota P, 2021. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1v3gr06

Thomas, Kate. "Is Landscape Queer?" *Landscape Is. . . Essays on the Meaning of Landscape*, edited by Gareth Doherty and Charles Waldheim, Routledge, 2024, pp. 235–49. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003148142-13

Wylie, John. *Landscape*. Routledge, 2007. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203480168

Aleksandra Kamińska (PhD) is Assistant Lecturer in the Institute of English Studies at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland. She is a co-editor of *Gender across Media Landscapes* (Brill, 2026). She is also a literary editor and translator. Her translation work includes rendering Petra Kuppers and Neil Marcus's *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story* into Polish (Fundacja Teatr 21, forthcoming).
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8147-4133
aleksandra.kaminska@uj.edu.pl

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.09

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Katarzyna Ostalska
University of Lodz

ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS: Crip-Queer Rural Intimacies with More-than-Human Worlds

ABSTRACT

The article is the first full-length analysis of the artistic and literary works of ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS, the Queer and NeuroDiverse Collective, comprising Aslan and Chris Gylee, created during their residency in Karelia, Finland. It focuses on the project *Karelia* (2021), the collective's literary works and literary inspirations, artistic practices, performances, and the video film *Alone among the Trees*. ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS' works are explored in the context of the recent queer rural turn, reclaiming the beyond-metropolitan country space for queer residents. The Collective present themselves as deeply and intimately entangled with more-than-human subjects: the land, trees, grass, moss, soil, flowers, etc., into which they weave their identities, love, and desires. To analyse their works, the article draws on Sprinkle and Stephens's eco-sexual approach, which finds joy and pleasure in ecological practices and the natural world, respecting plants' agency and acknowledging their agential sexuality. The Collective's NeuroQueer ontological and epistemological position recognises queerness and neurodiversity as a meaningful and indispensable part of biodiversity. The article examines their non-universalising, individual methodological approach outlined, for instance, in "Crip-Queer Rurality as an Artistic Methodology" and Aslan's own insightful project "'Autistic Long-Form' as an Artistic Methodology," inspired by Piepzna-Samarasinha's *The Future is Disabled* (2022). Adopting the maxim "Access is Love" as their coda, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS reads access as the exchange of ideas permeated with mutual respect and affection, not a political declaration. Finally, nearly 20 years after the publication of Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009), the article situates *Karelia* within the present-day debate on crip-queer futurity.

Keywords: ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS, crip-queer, NeuroQueer, neurodiversity, ecosexuality, crip-queer futurity, the Queer Rural Turn, Karelia.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 22 May 2026. Verified: 5 June 2026. Accepted: 16 June 2026.

CRIP-QUEER INTIMACIES

Critics agree that it is almost impossible to define crip-queer intimacies in a way that would be acceptable to all members of both communities and to scholars alike, and to avoid, at the same time, homogenising and essentialising, which disregards the ongoing process of volatile identifications over time in a given culture. Freed of their previously pejorative connotations, the terms "crip" and "queer" are intended to "make people wince[1] . . . jolt out of their everyday understandings of bodies and minds, of normalcy and deviance" (Kafer 15). Butler explains how subjects of queer theory are re-constituted by former "shaming interpellation," arguing that "'Queer' derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult" (12). The same mechanism can be applied to the term "crip."

Employing this correspondence, when faced with "the potential risks and exclusions," queer and crip theories exhibit a nonconforming and uncompromising approach (Kafer 15). With the above in mind, queerness tends to be conceptualised as an extensive, inclusive, and shifting category; it becomes elusive and defies clear-cut definitions (see Butler; Sandahl; McRuer; Kafer; Muñoz). Its inclusiveness constitutes a major strength, but it also embodies a potential threat of what Sandahl calls "dissolving" the edges (27). On the one hand, queerness is related to non-normative gender and sex categories and non-stable identities. On the other, it has a political dimension that works alongside. In "Critically Queer," Butler describes this dual mechanism:

> If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively. (14)

With a broader agenda in mind, crip studies embrace not only people with movement disabilities but also those with mental health issues, the neurodiverse, d/Deaf, and those and with other sensory impairments (Sandahl 27). Centred around politics, with connectivity as its goal, such an approach encourages one to "contextualise, historically and politically, the meanings typically attributed to disability, thereby positioning "disability" as a set of practices and associations that can be critiqued, contested, and transformed" (Kafer 9).

---

[1] After Nancy Mairs.

In this vein, Alice Wong in *Disability Visibility* defines disability as a heterogeneous concept open to redefinitions:

> Disabled people have always existed, whether the word *disability* is used or not. To me, disability is not a monolith, nor is it a clear-cut binary of disabled and nondisabled. Disability is mutable and ever-evolving. Disability is both apparent and nonapparent. Disability is pain, struggle, brilliance, abundance, and joy. Disability is sociopolitical, cultural, and biological. Being visible and claiming a disabled identity brings risks as much as it brings pride. (Introduction)

Crip-queer theory aims to challenge the social perception of disabled and non-heteronormative bodyminds as pitiable by default and inherently less preferable (McRuer 9). Moreover, it brings into focus multifaceted, seemingly contradictory experiences. In her 2017 lecture "Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice" published on her blog *Leaving Evidence*, Mia Mingus, a Disability Justice activist, declares: "I love being disabled ***and*** my history of disability has been so drenched in trauma and sorrow, pity and isolation, silence and pain, shame and guilt, violence and abuse" (bold and italics in the original).[2]

Binary hegemonic regimes of "compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer 18) work in tandem to mask the intersectional dimension of both queerness and cripness: in McRuer's terms, "the system of compulsory able-bodiedness which in a sense produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness: that, in fact, compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness, and vice-versa" (2), both working in favour of what Piepzna-Samarasinha calls the mainstream "white supremacist capitalist colonialist ableist patriarchy" of the "white/cis/abled" (*Care Work*).

In line with this thinking, Coráñez Bolton emphasises the need to elaborate McRuer's ideas, drawing on colonial, international relations, and the critique of imperialism. His study examines "the queerness of disability that colonialism attempts to rehabilitate and normalize through either heteronormative marriage, liberal education, or racial capitalist political economy" (9). With regard to the "racial capitalist political economy," Pickens in *Black Madness and Mad Blackness* argues that normativity tends to equate Blackness with disability, and therefore, at first, one needs to disentangle one from the other by applying an intersectional queer perspective (17).

[2] See https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/

Furthermore, cripping and queering can also be explored as creative and artistic practices. Sandahl understands queering as subverting institutionalised homophobia, bringing into light dormant queer implications that were intentionally concealed or distorted by heteronormativity (37). Correspondingly, cripping interrogates the hegemonic system of able-bodiedness, which labels crip-queer bodyminds as deficient (ibid.). According to Sandahl, queering and cripping disclose the arbitrariness of the socially constructed normalcy, aberrance, and deficiency to "disarm what is painful with wicked humor, including camp" (ibid.).

Crip-queer intimacies aim to create safe spaces that are both inclusive and imaginative. Such empowering areas operate around the creative love in action praxis. Drawing upon Sins Invalid, Kafai in *Crip Kinship* explains: "A crip-centric liberated zone is a multidirectional community love practice. It is a place of our own creation where we, the disabled, queer of color many, can exist and thrive liberated from the oppressions that relegate our daily lives." In such zones, crip-queer intimacies can be realised through activism, self-love, and/or mutual aid, but also through storytelling, performance, art, poetry, creative practice, and intimacy. Wong's *Disability Intimacy* demonstrates that intimacy is an inclusive term that embraces a spectrum of sensations and experiences, ranging from the need for various forms of contact, or its lack, to (dis)engagement in particular sexual or sensuous practices. The crip-queer intimacies explored in this text are "biosexual," non-linear, multi-layered, more-than-human, and intimately spread across different past, present, and future temporalities and spatiality, intersecting on numerous platforms, sometimes overlapping with Wong's categories and sometimes exceeding them.

ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS AND CRIP-QUEER INTIMACIES

The article will analyse the crip-queer rural intimacies developed by ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS, a crip-queer (Queer and NeuroDiverse) collective consisting of Aslan[3] and Chris Gylee, and the work that they created during their first residency in the forested land of Finnish Karelia in 2021. Over ten years of art and life partnership, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS have explored diverse artistic practices, from live performances, theatre plays, exhibitions, and installations, through films, videos, social media events, to poetry, fiction writing, and many more. The artists acknowledge their

[3] Unlike Chris Gylee, Aslan does not provide his full name on the website and it appears that he chooses to be identified by a single-word appellation.

affinity with Disability Justice and Sins Invalid whose legacy inspired their own practice. In "Working as a NeuroQueer Artist," ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS enumerate the principles according to which they structure their lives: "*Nothing about us without us! Access is Love! Hoping for the best is not a strategy! Access is a conversation! Normal is an Ideology*" (1).

The Collective's motto, "*Access is Love*" ("Access"), consciously echoes Mingus's access intimacy, which does not limit itself to erotic closeness but embraces any kind of loving contact, an "elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs" (Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link"). Accordingly, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS define access intimacy as "an ongoing loving conversation rather than a policy, manifesto, or best practice formulation" ("Access"). In their projects, Aslan and Chris Gylee ensure that this access dialogue is implemented before the production stage in their collaborators' commitments, budget planning, and, finally, in the stage performances—they aim to keep in sync with the audience's needs regarding seating, admission, entrance, mobility, etc. ("Access"). In Interview Two carried out as part of "'Autistic Long-Form' as an Artistic Methodology" project (2023–24), supported by Fonds Darstellende Künste, whose aim was to explore how neurodiversity affects his creative practice as a live performer and a writer, Aslan admits that access policy addresses not only material obstacles but also conceptual ones: "So it's not only the physical space that needs to be designed, it's also the conceptual space and the temporal space and the procedural space." Access also involves accommodating the emotional and physical needs of a neurodiverse performer during rehearsals and performances and ensuring a sense of safety ("Working").

NEUROQUEER INTIMACIES: QUEERING NEUROCOGNITIVITY AND NEURODIVERSITY AS QUEERNESS

ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS define themselves as a Queer and NeuroDiverse Collective. The term neurodiversity, coined by Singer, emerged from the concept of "neurological pluralism" (Chapman 126). Singer's studies challenged the model of a single preferable neurotypical brain against which all others should be compared and situated (4–5). Moreover, she advocated treating neurodiversity on a par with other categories, such as race, sex, and gender, and creating systems to preserve neurodiverse behavioural patterns (126). In *Empire of Normality*, Chapman refers to Singer's theory arguing that a wide spectrum of human neurodiversity (modelled on biodiversity) abolishes the alleged supremacy

of the neurotypical mind which is regarded as preferred over other types (4–5). Contemporary scientific research (e.g., Thurman) proposes a new sensory-cognitive model of intelligence, grounded in neurodiversity studies, that might adequately correlate with the current evolutionary stage of humanity. Such an approach encourages pride in neurodiversity instead of perpetuating stigma and pathologisation. In sync with that, in Interview Three of "'Autistic Long-Form' as an Artistic Methodology," Aslan, diagnosed in 2023 (at the age of 47), refers to the freedom that comes from no longer attempting to pass as a neurotypical person as "unmasking" and "a big relief." Similarly, Piepzna-Samarasinha in *The Future is Disabled*, refers to her diagnostic experiences as "homecoming" and "figuring it out" ("*when I came home/when I figured it out*" instead of "when I was diagnosed with autism").

Aslan identifies as NeuroQueer, but this appellation has become widely recognised relatively recently. Walker was one of the first to introduce the concept in 2008, elaborating it in an essay (2015), then expanded and included in his book *Neuroqueer Heresies* (2021). According to Walker, the concept refers to "the practice of queering (subverting, defying, disrupting, liberating oneself from) neuronormativity and heteronormativity simultaneously." Yergeau, together with other bloggers (Michaels-Dillon and Grace), claims a dispersed authorship of the term and argues that every autistic experience is neuroqueer in the sense of challenging social norms (27). Similarly, Walker encourages exploring the entanglements, intersectionality, and performativity of NeuroQueerness, its subversive, artistic, and literary potential, queering neurocognitivity, and thinking of neurodiversity as queerness.

"A VISION:" THE POEM AS AN ARTISTIC CODA OF THE ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS

As argued earlier, Aslan's autism diagnosis necessitated redefining self-identifications and professional routines in order to accommodate neurodiverse emotional and physical needs. To avoid congestion and stress and to lower the carbon footprint, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS "travels slowly" with stopovers and hardly any luggage, acts without unnecessary mise-en-scène, rehearses in two-hour intervals, and does not perform when overcome with illness ("Working"). In the poem "A Vision," the Collective summarises their artistic and neurodiverse practices. "A Vision" resembles the Autistic Long-Form theory developed by Piepzna-Samarasinha in *The Future is Disabled*; according to her, the performance text by a neurodiverse artist wanders in a way comparable to a river current on whose path there

may be obstacles, twists and turns, sedimentation, but it always follows its own internal, flowing, non-linear rhythm. Piepzna-Samarasinha calls this way of communicating "a de-capitalization of time" because the artist roams freely and in an extended way, sometimes going back in circles, digressing or returning to the previous threads or ideas. Aslan, who studied this form in his solo project (2023–24), recognised it as a familiar creative pattern of performing as well. In his own words, it corresponds to the way his brain tends to contextualise things: first creating a grid and, from this pattern, deducing words and situations. Aslan sums it up that his neurodiverse mind works by structuring and patterning: "I think where my autistic brain comes into the equation is this recognition and creation of pattern" (see Interview One in "'Autistic Long-Form'"). In the same interview, he compares his creative practice to a multilayered narrative woven rigorously from different threads. To some extent, weaving seems to be a comparable metaphor to Piepzna-Samarasinha's undulating river. In the poem "A Vision," ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS introduce themselves to the audience as contemporary troubadours or bards of what they call Queer Myths beyond time, always on the move, not needing much apart from a place to perform, in the woods, on the stage:

> *We reimagine ourselves as 21st century travelling players.*
> *Living novels.*
> *We will hold a repertoire of stories in our bodies, ready to be told.*
> *It is our magic that we can see the edges of other worlds, hear the words spoken there, feel it all keenly under our skins*. ("With Forests," emphasis in the original)

Identifying themselves as "living novels," the Collective assert the corporeal roots of their poetry; it is poetry that comes from bodily experiences and sensations. Crip-queer bodies have become textualised to record sensuous narratives for Crip-queer futurity. "*We become an archive, a song /. . . . Our stories will be heard wherever they are needed*" (ibid.). Turning themselves into living libraries, the Collective offer their work to potential readers. They are at the community's disposal but need to be summoned because their audience needs to be open to their stories and willing to listen to them. Pixelated, in print or word of the mouth, they travel via physical space and cyberspace, trying to reach as many people as possible: "*Our bodies can travel to multiple places and times, as copies, traces, digital signatures*" (ibid.). The Collective's goal is to heal crip-queer communities from the wounds of "compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer 18): "*We are faith healers, not just of flesh, but as words on a page, shapes on a screen, vibrations from a machine*" ("With Forests," emphasis in the original).

The content of the "living novels" constantly changes, grows organically with every new journey, and expands:

> *Ghosts. Journeys through the stars. Strange grammar. Sex and starships.*
> *Every time we tell our stories, they change form, take on new orders.*
> *They are never the same twice.*
> *Sometimes they are urgent; sometimes pulled up like strange fish from muddy waters;*
> *sometimes hanging in the air, bright and transparent*. (ibid., bold mine)

The alliterated "stars/strange/sex/starship" captures the essence of the Collective's creative practice: their focus on futurity, playfulness, glitter, sensuality, desire, and access intimacy. Crip-queer performances take a fluid form, shifting, refusing a single interpretation, adapting to new conditions, and constantly evolving. ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS effortlessly entangle the vision's structure with more-than-human entities ("pulled up like strange fish from muddy waters") and intuitively recognise it as emerging from the specific aura of the geographical location ("air, bright and transparent"). They listen to the "*forested planet*" (ibid.), and the stories are there to be told. As a matter of fact, Karelia has been associated historically with the oral tradition of storytelling. The Karelian region has many stories still waiting to be told: divided into the Northern Finnish part and the Russian Republic of Karelia, it is populated by Karelians, Vepsians, and the Sámi, the only indigenous people in the European Union. The region is also known for its ecological biodiversity and its forests.

"A Vision" is structured across the starry universe, beyond human scale, "*brought back from a place that exists outside of time; an elsewhere; a simultaneous layering of future, present, and past*" (ibid.). Wong defines intimacy as "an ever-expanding universe composed of a myriad of heavenly bodies" (*Disability Intimacy*). In the poem, the Collective relate how the stories arising from their crip-queer bodies are preceded by concentration and meditations: "*We close our eyes, take a deep breath, open our mouths. / A forested planet emerges*" (ibid.). Words acquire physical properties when uttered intimately. The intimacy of "sharing stories and sharing hearts" (Nijkamp) in the case of ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS takes the form of sensuous narratives about the "*forested planet*" of the new Karelia.

For ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS, crip-queer rural intimacies are practised with the more-than-human world, including the Karelian forest, the undergrowth, the air, the stars, minerals, rocks, seeds, the soil, and the air. The article examines Aslan and Gylee's first encounter with Finnish rurality, which has found its artistic expression in the project *Karelia: A Queer Fantasy in Two Parts* (2021). In its three-fold manifestations (a live performance, a booklet, and the video film *Alone among the Trees*),

the project embraces Present Tense (a desirous encounter with more-than-human realities of the forest), Past Tense (the forest as a refuge from the persecution of the non-normative people to which the performance refers), and Future Tense (New Karelia: the Queer Planet). *Karelia* includes, among other elements, monologues, dance, songs, love letters from famous queer people, and epistolary and speculative fiction, e.g., Ursula Le Guin's *Worlds of Exile and Illusion*.

CRIP-QUEER INTIMACIES AND THE RURAL TURN

Aslan and Chris Gylee were both born in the UK and lived primarily in London. Before moving to Finland, the Collective travelled extensively, residing and performing in many countries, preferably in large cosmopolitan cities, such as Tokyo, Istanbul, Granada, Tanta, and Berlin (where they were living just before Karelia) ("We-Need-To-Talk-About-Britain"). As shown, their former locations were entirely urban, and their lifestyles could be characterised by what Halberstam defines as "metronormativity" (36–37). Metronormativity views large metropoles as preferred locations for queer communities and tends to associate coming out with leaving rural areas and moving to cities. Therefore, for ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS, Karelia signifies a radical "opposite direction" transition from the metropolis to the countryside, which corresponds as well to the queer "rural turn" (Johnson 9; Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 9). This relatively recent phenomenon focuses on exploring queer lives outside large urban areas where nonnormative people have often felt anonymous, secure, and supported by others.

Scholarly works, such as Johnson's *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America*, *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies,* edited by Gray, Johnson, and Gilley, and *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* by Herring, encourage a reconceptualising of the historical image of the countryside as backward, homophobic, and culturally regressive. The past connotations of rural life with heterosexuality and proverbial good physical health (Cartwright 10–17), as well as the hegemonic masculinity associated with rural family providers (55), resulted from the alliance between ableism and heteronormativity. Present-day rurality, however, is often seen as a more inclusive and "astoundingly complex assemblage of people, places, and positionalities" (Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 8) rather than as a one-dimensional location of ignorance, isolationism, and conservatism. In other words, the queer rural turn problematises *traditional* perspectives on rurality, reclaiming the countryside as a territory where queer people may live and flourish. Unlike

the outness of metropoles, the rural crip-queer presence is an outcome of "a delicate balance of nonheterosexuality and localness, putting forth a logic of different-but-similar" (Baker 42), which assumes that, in various social groups, queerness and cripness in rural areas may be blended, latent and/or explicit (Thomsen 66). Therefore, the "social, economic, and political positioning of rural queers forces a kind of synthesis between desire and secrecy. This synthesis, which may be momentary, marks geographic spaces in hostile environments, but also discursively claims ideological space" (Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 15).

In *Karelia*, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS establish an intimate relationship with the audience by being open about the anxieties and vulnerabilities they felt in moving from Berlin to rural Finland, and their sense of what they had left behind: namely, the metropole's anonymity and the backing of crip-queer urban communities (*Karelia*). Moreover, remote, politically divided rural Finland, situated close to the Russian border, signifies the dreaded exposure to the gaze of supposedly normative or even homophobic farmers, which might lead to discomfort, conflict, or aggression. At the same time, Karelia entices them as a utopian, promised land for crip-queer communities. On the one hand, the Collective is aware that their Karelian residency takes place in a sheltered area where artists can regularly enjoy a privileged position in claiming the space: both as people with no movement impairments and as white Europeans with a substantial budget from the grant. On the other hand, the project envisages an imaginary land, between utopia and dystopia, overshadowed by metronormative doubts: "A green horizon. An elsewhere. An other. It was a possibility of an ideal and a utopia, underscored by an unknowing and a dark bubbling of fear. Fear of violence, of isolation. Of men in trucks and hard stares in rural settlements" (*Karelia*).

The poem below visually renders the stages of their emotional and physical journey:

> But then we got on an U-Bahn,
>
> an S-Bahn,
>
> a train,
>
> and then another train. (*Karelia*)

The visual layout resembles the steps but in descent, rather than ascent. The downward movement suggests little hope and a gradual immersion in despair, as in Dante's *Inferno*, peeling away the protective and familiar infrastructure of the city to enter the Unknown Rurality. One of the

main tenets of the *Karelia* project was to explore how the rural turn in Karelia would affect its creators' queerness, and vice versa. This artistic study is very much in sync with contemporary, scholarly research on how rurality affects, interrogates, and constructs sexualities in relation to the environment, space, and locality (Thomsen 67).

THE RURAL TURN AND NEUROQUEER SEXUALITY

Through contact with the more-than-human world, *Karelia: A Queer Fantasy in Two Parts* has enabled the Collective to explore NeuroQueer sexualities in an unfamiliar environment and open up to new "biophiliac" experiences. Starting from July 2021, the Collective realised several short-term residences in Finland: The Old Mine Residency in Outokumpu, July 2022; Silence Residency in Kaukonem, July 2023; Mustarinda Residency in Hyrynsalmi, 5–11 July 2024; Tou Tou Residency in Joutsa, November–December 2024; Saari Residence, Mynamaki. In 2023, the Collective received a grant for the project "Old Growth: 'Crip-Queer Rurality' as an Artistic Methodology" (Saari Residence) financed by the Kone Foundation (Kone Fundation).

Heteronomativity has traditionally positioned queer desire as divergent from the more-than-human world. It has been depicted as "unnatural" or "against nature" (Alaimo 51), while NeuroQueer people have been classified as asexual (e.g., Sala et al.; Dewinter, De Graaf, and Begeer).

However, according to current research, autistic people present a much wider range of diverse non-cis and non-normative, bisexual, homosexual, hypersexual, and asexual behaviours than neurotypical individuals, and they experience gender dysphoria much more frequently (e.g., Sala et al.; Dewinter, De Graaf, and Begeer). The ratio of sexual diversity among autistic people oscillates between 15–35% (Sarris) at the lowest to 69.7% at the highest (Neff).

Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson (drawing on Chisholm) conceive of queer "biophiliac" (using Chisholm's phrase) desire as a prototypical vital agent of evolutionary change, "the quintessential life force . . . the experimental, co-adaptive, symbiotic and nonreproductive interspecies couplings that become evolution" (39). Their idea draws on Alaimo, who argues that queer sexuality, with its biodiverse roots, shows that a "universe of differing naturecultures, propelled by the pursuit of pleasure" does not operate around compulsory heterosexuality, biological determinism, or fixed gender categories (64).

Moreover, the outcome of the Finnish residency has paved the way for redefining queerness and cripness anew. Aslan declares:

> In this rural place I am here and queer and part of nature, nothing "unnatural." The tree embraces me, the biodiversity expects queerness from me as nature is the very definition of non-binary and I am part of it and it is part of me and it takes to heal and it takes time—but I have time for this I make time for this. (*Karelia*)

In order to progress, the human and more-than-human world requires bio/neuro diversity, transcending all forms of the so-called normativity. Living in the countryside has made it palpably clear that queer and NeuroQueer desire have always been an essential part of the biodiverse world. It is much more than a sense of belonging; it is a biological necessity.

As ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS' practices indicate, NeuroQueer desire has the potential to transgress artificial boundaries between humanity and animality, and between culture and nature, being both at the same time. This desire begins with awareness of one's corporeality, embracing human animality, and learning to follow its instincts. Sexual arousal comes from touch, sound, etc., due to the sensory sensitivity that often accompanies autism. This sensory sensitivity is frequently one of the formative and distinctive factors in sex for neurodiverse people. Lazarony stresses that hyposensitive autists need more expressive sexual stimuli, whereas hypersensitive ones may find any form of tactile contact or auditory perception distressing, uneasy, or unwanted.

In *Karelia*, a desiring NeuroQueer body, conscious of its specificity, depends upon its senses and draws confidence and pleasure from the accompanying trees, forests, undergrowth. The spatiality of desire allows for claiming a non-privileged location in the more-than-human world. Aslan writes:

> I am a human animal with senses that **can be trusted** and instincts that **can be trusted** and a body that **can be trusted** when it speaks to me, **I can** listen and hear it. . . . **I can** take up space, there is space for me in this tree, up this hill, in front of this beach there is a horizon **I can** take up space at the same time I am dwarfed by this tree, by these huge skies and mountains and waves and I am not the centre of things. (*Karelia*, bold mine)

The space that a human animal claims is not a dominant or superior location but one on par with that of other more-than-human subjects. Unsupervised by social norms, Aslan's sexuality, and the sensuality he cherishes in the forest, enable him to work out a positive, reassuring relationship with his body and other materialities around him. The fact that he can rely on his senses and desires builds self-confidence and a sense of safety. This awareness is articulated in the passage above in the accumulation of "I can" expressions rendering empowerment and crip-queer agency.

NATURE AS AGENTIAL AND QUEER

In contrast to the romanticised and Romantic idea of a unitary "Nature," always located elsewhere and contrasted with its alleged opposite "Culture," the more-than-human world in general, and specifically in *Alone among the Trees*, is diverse, heterogeneous, queer, and located within *naturecultures*,[4] transcending untrue, simplified dichotomies and beyond compulsory able-bodiedness and heterormativity. The agency of the more-than-human world can be argued on the grounds of Barad's agential realism and the vibrant mattering that Bennett describes in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, which assumes the vitality of matter in contrast to its earlier assumed passivity. Both of these intertwined conceptions see the matter of which, e.g., plants and all human and more-than-human beings are made of as exerting an active influence upon reality. Moreover, in light of recent botanical findings, the agency of soil and plants has become a scientifically verifiable fact. According to Schlanger, plant agency is evident in their ability to adapt to changing conditions and to actively shape them.

Against the overwhelming tendency to ignore plants, treat them as a homogenous green background that is passive and immobile, and situated in a human hierarchy below animals, the study of plants has shown that they are individuals that respond in individual ways to external stimuli. Karban emphasises that plants respond to touch, light, gravity, water, air, nitrogen, hormones, electrical signals, temperature, and sound, to name only the major factors (3–10). Scientists like him underscore that plants communicate by chemical compounds. The chemical, hormonal transmission of information in plants was first observed and examined in *The Power of Movements of Plants* (1880) by Darwin (Trewavas 13–14). Plants do not have a nervous system comparable to animals; nonetheless, as argued by Trewavas, instead of neural networks, they have calcium ion Ca^{2+}-based protein networks that are responsible for a purposeful and "intelligent behaviour" (232).

Plants are not only agential but queer; their sexuality and reproductive strategies are non-normative and diverse. Plants reproduce vegetatively and via flowers (angiosperms) or cones (gymnosperms) by means of pollen, in which the male cells are carried. 72 % of angiosperms are hermaphrodites: they have both male and female reproductive structures (both stamens and pistils) and these cells may develop at a different pace; 7 % are "hermaphrodites plus one other sex type" (184). There exist hermaphroditic plants with male flowers (andromonoecious 1,7%) and hermaphroditic plants with female flowers (gynomonoecious 2,8 %) (ibid.). 5 % are monoecious (unisexual male and female flowers produced on the same plant) (ibid.). Monoecious with male

[4] The concept developed by Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (1–10).

and female flowers is estimated at 3,6 %; 4% are dioecious (unisexual male and female flowers borne on different plants); the list is completed by 3,9 % of "other mixed kinds" (ibid.). Ferns, algae, and mosses produce sperm that moves spontaneously and on its own, and, in aquatic environments, can rapidly reach and fertilise female cells (5). Sexual cells are not the only way to reproduce. Plants can do without pollination and replicate their own genetic material in so-called "clonal colonies" (e.g., Aspen *Populus Tremuloides*) (ibid.). The Gnetales produce two embryos as a result of double fertilisation (57). Plants (e.g., avocado[5]) can also undergo sex transition (184). Schlanger, drawing on Crane's research, reports that ginkgo can change sex, for instance, only in one branch. Last but not least, BBC Earth provides an example of a "squirting cucumber" (*Ecballium Elaterium*) that literally explodes, disseminating seeds at a distance of 6 metres (Riley).

Referring to plants' sexual lives, Schlanger rightly observes: "There is something decidedly queer in all of this—the orchids and aspens and strawberries and antplants and ginkgoes—a sense of sensual entanglement that disregards binaries, runs across the species boundary, and almost gleefully defies heteronormative modes of reproduction." Given the variety and heterogeneity of sexual and reproductive models, it is hard to believe that until recently the sexuality of plants, unlike that of animals, was questioned or ignored, as demonstrated in the pioneering study *Flora Unveiled: The Discovery and Denial of Sex in Plants* by Lincoln Taiz and Lee Taiz. Cultural assumptions about the more-than-human world tend to obscure its sexual dimension. Touching a flower, or even smelling it, very few humans are aware of just how sexual this interaction is:

> What does it mean to smell a flower? It might be a human response to a token of love, gratitude, or mourning; or it could signify a solitary moment of connecting with nature. Yet from the point of view of the flower, it is always also a sexual encounter. The plant's colourful display and scent are attractive and pleasurable to humans, and we respond by smelling its reproductive organs. In terms of consequences, sticking our noses into plant genitals might lead to allergic reactions for humans, but it also holds the potential of pollination for plants. (Jacobs 602)

Respecting the sexuality of more-than-human subjects requires renouncing speciesism and an anthropocentric perspective. Plants are sexually active beings, and their sexual behaviour is diverse, queer, and fluid. Rather than reducing them to simplified, culturally connoted aesthetic objects, one needs to recognise plants' vigorous participation in different sexual practices and developing new reproductive strategies that are useful for their survival.

[5] See Riley.

ALONE AMONG THE TREES: THE PRESENT TENSE AND NEUROQUEER SENSORY ECOSEXUALITY

The film part of the Karelia project, *Alone among the Trees: The Present Tense,* translates ecosexual desire into the language of cinema. In the video, NeuroQueer desire is not directed at another person but at trees, shrubs, leaves of grass, etc. The term "ecosexuality," coined by Sprinkle and Stephens, refers to "coupling ecology and enjoyment" (xi), treating the earth as lover and not as mother (1), having a more diverse and open understanding of pleasure and orgasm, and not confining eroticism or sensuality to humans only (2). In other words, "[e]cosexuality provides alternative ways of thinking about sexuality that go beyond human reproduction, genital sex and human exceptionalism" (19). In this section, I will reference Sprinkle and Stephens's "Dirty Words: An Ecosexual Glossary" (25–27), and the new vocabulary they invented, i.e. "ecobation" (autoerotic behaviour with the earth as the expression of unified more-than-human corporealities), "ecosexual gaze" (perceiving the natural world as the place where sexual activities on a more-than-human level are incessant and relentless), or "e-spot" (a sensation or place related to the more-than-human world that evokes intense arousal).

Alone among the Trees opens with a low-angle shot of the tree branches located above eye level, near the ground. The audience feels that the trees are towering above them, which automatically makes them look up towards the canopy. The image adopts an egalitarian perspective, beyond an anthropocentric standpoint, since it does not privilege the human eyeline. The camera angle signifies an act of recognition of the tree lineage and the role that trees play on our planet. Following this perspective, the people who enter the forest recognise that they are not a unique species but one among many organic and non-organic more-than-human beings and entities. The leaves are rustling, and it is the only sound in the footage. The entire film (32m 24s) features no human dialogue, which further calls into question the primacy of popular human-centric audio narration. The forest's conversation is mediated by the wind, which moves the atoms of the air, leaves, etc. and transmits the vibrant matter (as Bennett calls it) to the walker and the audience.

The person's image is blurred, with the camera focusing on the zoomed-in leaves in the foreground. Shallow depth-of-field produces the bokeh effect that here deliberately decentralises the human silhouette. Aslan appears to be hiding behind the trees, which renders his NeuroQueer presence almost invisible, like a spectral image or an eerie ghost. Aslan's initial, insecure movements on entering the forest seem to imply hesitation, perhaps fear; the trees, however, protect a performer from the viewers'

eyes. The NeuroQueer corporeal image is faint, fragmented, and split, just like human vision. However, after the moment of awkwardness, the male silhouette looms from the blurred background. The film attentively records an ecosexual gaze (the eye of the camera) fixed on the more-than-human sylvan ecosystem. A hand with chipped black-polished nails and tattoos gently caresses the plants, touching the flowers just to feel them, merging the plants' vulnerability with their own. The black polished male nails mingle with the whiteness of the flowers, both of them part of naturecultures. Shifting the pollen on his fingers, Aslan involves himself in the plants' reproductive process. The image in the film is blurred, but the white flowering plant looks like *Ammi Majus*. Aslan touches the sexual organs (multiple umbels) of the flowers, which are hermaphroditic, and they reproduce, among others, by pollination. This desirous gesture can be called "pollen-amorous" (Sprinkle and Stephens 27), as it participates in more-than-human sexual practices.

In his "windplay" (ibid.), Aslan derives pleasure from the wind blowing over his naked body. After the initial shyness, his face and torso appear in a clear frame, relaxed and elated. The film documents the emergence of ecosexual rural crip-queer intimacies among Karelian trees. Joyfully, the NeuroQueer body interacts with the forest layering, unrestricted by socio-cultural boundaries (clothes). "Skin-hungry" (smith), or rather *forest's* skin-hungry, Aslan removes his clothing to experience the sensuous closeness of the undergrowth, soil, twigs, and plants intimately, in accordance with his own sensory needs. This way, NeuroQueer desire becomes the ontological force that redefines the boundary of disability, queerness, humanity, and rurality. By removing the socially marked clothes, Aslan shakes off normative assumptions. The crip-queer body feels at home lying freely on the undergrowth, which fuses biodiverse, neurodiverse, and NeuroQueer ecosystems as necessary to humanity's existence and future evolution. Biodiversity and neurodiversity embrace crip-queer body-minds and their multiple desires and intimacies.

Biosexuality means excitement and arousal by various (not only human) living organisms (Sprinkle and Stephens 25). In *Alone among the Trees*, crip-queerness connects with sensual intimacy with lichens, trees, cobwebs, insects, leaves, clovers, thistle, heathers, bumble bees, and butterflies. The desiring entanglements make the NeuroQueer forest part of this biosexual ecological network. In the film, desire smoothly entwines the tattooed Crip-Queer's hands with the soil, undergrowth, berries, and insects: with living and non-living matter. The forest is a symbiotic and, as Haraway calls it, sympoietic organism composed of diverse more-than-human beings. Bodies co-operate with viruses, bacteria, and other organisms that make up their corporeality and create a sense of belonging.

Seen from an ecosexual perspective, the boundaries of the body/bodies are fluid and arbitrary, and they embrace more than one life form and sex that goes beyond genital contact (19).

The film shows the arousal of ecosexual desire during which the more-than-human world becomes a partner in these sexual interactions. Aslan's hands clutch an "e-spot" (the undergrowth), anticipating the eco-sexual climax. NeuroQueer experiences of the forest are sensuous encounters mediated by desire. Ecosexual desire makes a crip-queer body open to multimodal entanglements with the more-than-human world, acknowledging a human-animal line of descent, allowing for an inclusive, heterogeneous, and creative liberated space. The orgasm visible on Aslan's face, which may ("ecobation") or may not be genital, is derived from experiencing intimacy with more-than-human entities: feeling the texture of the undergrowth, the smell of the decomposing soil, and the sound of the rustling leaves and insects, and from seeing them as an extension of his own body and his body as an extension of the forest. The viewer becomes the voyeur of a very intimate exchange: an elated NeuroQueer face slick with sweat, eyes half-closed, muscles tense, and the bliss on the countenance reveal an ecosexual encounter with the more-than-human world. The film's title, *Alone among the Trees*, thus seems deeply ironic. Aslan is anything but alone among the trees, sharing an intimate connection with them, relating to the undergrowth as to his lover.

Since plants lack a nervous system, their responses cannot be compared to those of human or nonhuman animals. Therefore, one should avoid anthropomorphising more-than-human beings as much as possible. Although some plants appear to put up with tactile stimuli (e.g., aloe), recent studies show that plants mostly react to the touch of any organism with mitochondrial stress and growth impairment, if it lasts longer (Xu et al.). Nonetheless, short-term exposure to limited tactile stimulation is assumed to strengthen plants' resilience and immunity to diseases ("What Happens"). Therefore, the eco-sexual exchange between Aslan and moss, fern, and berries does not seem to be one-sided, even if, instead of an orgasm, plants gain an opportunity to pollinate and become more resistant to external stimuli.

Moreover, plants can initiate sexual contact if it is symbiotically beneficial for them (McKenna). Some orchid species (e.g., Ophrys, Chiloglottis) attract pollinators by employing what Raguso and Kessler call "aggressive sexual mimicry," which involves imitating either male or female pheromones of insects, the scent of their preferred food (i.e. *Epipactis* orchids), or even decomposition (33–35). Plants can also simulate insects' sexual organs to facilitate pollination. Cultural stereotypes tend to promote the view of plants as passive, sexless, and agentless, while scientific studies refute these misconceptions.

Some plants, such as the "fast-moving" and "touch-sensitive plant" (Trewavas 16–17) *Mimosa pudica*, can exhibit such a strongly negative reaction to touch that it becomes discernible even to the human eye. *Mimosa*'s leaves are structured in a complex way, with closely packed leaves that fold under the influence of touch; if unwanted contact is prolonged, the plant needs about 40 minutes on average to fully return to its previous fit state (17). Under the influence of ether, *Mimosa Pudica*, regardless of its nearly iconic touch sensitivity (*thigmomorhogenesis*), stops responding to tactile stimuli at all (Schlanger). Schlanger draws the conclusion that plants are aware of touch and react to it accordingly. Addressing this issue, Whelan argues that touching a plant triggers changes in 10% of the genome within 30 minutes (qtd. in "Plants Don't Like Touch"). Scientific research that Schlanger cites in her book indicates that touch can alter not only the genome but also plants' hormones and even their immune system.

Over the centuries, plants have developed many strategies to resist and avoid unwanted contact (e.g., poisonous ivy). As argued earlier, they are aware of touch and can respond to undesired touch by releasing pathogens. Their active refusal of tactile stimulation is communicated through toxins that they produce, "natural pesticides," and sticky liquids (Trewavas 50). Drawing upon Van Hoven, Schlanger provides an example of acacia, which sends signals to gradually increase tannin levels in its leaves in order to ward off animals that consume them. When animals continue eating them, regardless of the warning (the bitter taste), tannin slowly reaches a critical level, and they die. Plants are multi-dimensional, complicated, resilient and fragile, sexual and asexual, predatory and vulnerable, communicating chemically and verbally silent, at the same time. Taking all these examples into consideration, plants' agency in *Alone among the Trees* cannot be questioned. They definitely have the chemical capacity to resist unwanted contact. For instance, the aforementioned *Ammi Majus* is toxic for animals (cats, dogs, cows, etc.) to eat. What needs to be stressed as well is that Aslan's behaviour in the film is mindful and respectful towards all the vegetation that he cherishes with joy.

ALONE AMONG THE TREES: THE PAST TENSE

NeuroQueer intimacies with ruralities go back deep into "The Past Tense." For centuries, the forest has been a refuge for non-normative people persecuted by hegemonic institutions (i.e. the Church during the Middle Ages). Academic circles speculate on whether some medieval "witches" were neurodiverse, but this hypothesis requires robust factual evidence (Wilkie). In the fictitious letter from the Past, crip-queer desire is subversively presented as dehumanising (in the eyes of the Church), and

then its "animality" is embraced readily by the speaker: "Am I no longer myself? Not human? No, I think the flame was always there, but it was small and weak as I studied scripture or sat in the cold church, half asleep. Now I know that I too am wild. / Hatso, I miss you! Your nakedness" (*Karelia*). In the second chapter of the film ("The Past Tense"), the frames are much darker, as dim as the Dark Ages. They present an eerie insect caught in the web, a frog, soil on a white dress, and dry vegetation, all of which intensify a dense and uncanny atmosphere. A femme dressed in a long white skirt, which symbolically restricts their movements and catches on trees and undergrowth, hurriedly escapes persecution, seeking protection in the forest. The runaway's mobility is cinematographically rendered in the fast rewind; references to the Past Tense are conveyed through contrastive montage and intercuts. This section of the film explores the impossibility of openly articulating a queer desire.

The *Karelia* booklet features haiku poems in both Finnish and English which serve as protective invocations of non-normative and non-cis forest refugees intertwined with past narratives and old myths that comment on the persecutions. The first one of "Hatso's Spells" starts with "Polvijärvi, Sarkiselkä, Honkalampi, Kalaton" (ibid.), which are geographical names in Karelia, and accentuates their transcriptive "strangeness." The language of old Finno-Ugric origin, with its "alien" fonts and auditory form, further defamiliarises the locations. The repeated, often rhyming Finnish place-names are intimately woven into the geography of the region and the forest's own history: "Juoksen täältä, lennän täältä / *I run from here, I fly from here* // Anna minulle turva metsässä / *Give me refuge in the forest*" // II. VAUHTI / SPEED / *I am a bird's wing, I am the north wind, I am thought*" (ibid.). For witch-hunting persecutors of the escaping femme, the crip-queer desiring body can exist only as a dematerialised erasure but not as a corporeal entity. The transformation into a more-than-human creature (bird) brings hope for liberation from physical and symbolic violence. After the body's annihilation, normative hegemonic discourses seek to erase the femme's existence from the community's memory. Throughout the poem, however, the centrality of "I am" assertions reveals crip-queer rural intimacies with the more-than-human world. The femme becomes a bird, a stone, a twisted path, a ghost, breath, and then the darkest night and the grave: Baradian agential matter takes diverse organic and non-organic forms, shapeshifting but never disappearing or becoming forgotten. It can turn into a whisper whose material particles make up the air, the clouds, the planet, or the living soil. Notably, witch-hunting was directed specifically against rural communities (Thurston). Therefore, the dynamic filming of the run-for-life escape of the persecuted femme into the forest signifies that the more-than-human world has been the last sanctuary, a companion, and a witness to the protagonist's violent death.

ALONE AMONG THE TREES: THE FUTURE TENSE AND CRIP-QUEER FUTURITY

Crip-queer rural intimacies in "The Future Tense" unfold in a forest-water land of queer utopia, called New Karelia. Drawing on Muñoz's definition of utopia as "a potential blueprint of the world not quite here" (97), New Karelia is an ideal place where hegemonic discourses of normalcy do not oppress or exclude members of crip-queer. Apart from utopias/dystopias, the creative practices of the Collective encompass an assemblage of genres, such as science fiction, fantasy, and dreamwork, to name but a few ("About").

In the *Karelia* project, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS drew inspiration from the speculative fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin. Her trilogy *Worlds of Exile and Illusion* tells the story of the ethnographer/explorer Gaveral Rocannon/Falk, who travels across possible worlds and through time, witnessing conflicts and colonisation of people and the natural world. Le Guin opens the first novel in the series, *Rocannon's World*, with the following words: "How can you tell the legend from the fact on these worlds that lie so many years away?—planets without names, called by their people simply The World, planets without history, where . . . the darkness uncertainty and disproportion grow like weeds." In the last novel in the series, *City of Illusion* (set on a futuristic, post-apocalyptic Earth), after Rocannon's memory has been wiped out, he is looked after by the Foresters (a rural forest community), whose customs and forest language he learns. The question arises of whether the forest speech in Le Guin's novel can be paralleled with *Damiá*—the first queer language that Aslan invented before *Karelia* but mastered and completed during his residency in Finland. The temporal span of Le Guin's protagonist's journey (the present, past, and future) corresponds to the temporality of New Karelia, where time runs in a non-linear way, as rendered by the camera through reverse motion, repetitions, and fast rewind.

Correspondingly to Le Guin's fiction, New Karelia, the queer-only planet, is described by ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS as a sylvan territory, abundant with lakes and rivers. Much as in "The Present Tense," the camera prioritizes more-than-human entanglements over anthropocentric perspectives. The blades of grass, indirectly referencing *Leaves of Grass*, through which Chris and Aslan are wading, also evoke Whitman's ecosexual, queer poetry in which the more-than-human world joins in the ecstasy of the male lover:

> Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you!
> . . .
> You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you!
> Wind whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you!
> Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving lounger in my winding paths, it shall be you!

For Whitman, queer desire, expressed, among other aspects, by wind-play, runs through human veins and through the fibres of plants, solar waves, and the particles of water; they are all interconnected and entangled.

Karelia's motto—"Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world," included in the booklet—is derived from Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (1). Rereading a different passage from this study (first published in 2009) raises the question of the transformative changes that occurred over the past decades and these still to come yet: "Queerness's form is utopian. Ultimately, we must insist on a queer futurity because the present is so poisonous and insolvent. . . . the future is . . . in its utopian potentiality" (30).

In the final part of *Alone among the Trees*, crip-queer rural intimacies combine leaves of grass and trees with glamorous, glittering, sparkling futurity signified by the water into which both characters stare with hope and into which they dive with pleasure. Chris's sequined top, comparable to water particles, catches the light and reflects it proudly. The shimmering waves resemble the sequins on his outfit. In broad daylight, ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS occupy the centre of the frame: due to the low angle, we see the couple empowered, fulfilled, and relaxed. No longer separated from each other, Aslan and Chris hold hands and look towards the future's horizon with hope. In Muñoz's terms:

> To see queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out. Ecstatic time is signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure, and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one's past, present, or future. (32)

Although Muñoz's book does not directly refer to disability, using the general umbrella term "minorities" instead, Crip-queer theory has embraced his writing, especially the temporal scale and the aforementioned concept of futurity. Muñoz explains that minorities live in a world that is very far from a utopia. Therefore, instead of focusing on present inadequacies, they need to look towards "the horizon," to its "futurity" (99, 97).

Crip-queer theorists (e.g., Kafer; Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled*) argue that as long as disability tends to be perceived as pathology and calamity, it will not be part of a desired future. Like Queer futurities, Crip futures are written in and with desire. Kafer, for instance, states: "I desire crip futures: futures that embrace disabled people, futures that imagine disability differently, futures that support multiple ways of being"

(45). Muñoz explains that the desire he writes about is both for "a better world or freedom but also, more immediately, better relations within the social that include better sex and more pleasure" (30). *Karelia*'s "The Future Tense" abounds with Neuro-Queer desire and queer freedom, articulated through the free-flow aquatic movement and the pleasure derived from being in this nearly weightless environment. In an ecosexual approach, the experience of water, i.e. human contact with waves and surrendering to their momentum ("seadomasochism"), might also be sexually arousing (Sprinkle and Stephens 27).

CONCLUSION

The article has explored sensory perceptions of NeuroQueer ecosexual desires in relation to the more-than-human world. The *Karelia* project examines queering the forest, "foresting" queerness, and the mutual interdependence between the two, or rather three, Neurodiversity being the third concept in the equation. It appears that the outcome of the artistic project, and its transformative power of sensory-cognitive neurodiverse interactions with the more-than-human world, also contribute to the explorations of the queer rural turn and its impact on sexuality and the environment. As the Collective admit, their explorations in the forest were not interrupted by the intrusive or hostile gaze of local inhabitants; they have become a part of the local community. Crip-queerness in the deep countryside of the forest was in a sense reinvented by the Collective in relation to the more-than-human world. The sense of belonging and acceptance made Aslan and Chris return to Karelia in the future and stay there longer. Crip-queer theory encourages one to move beyond the stereotypes of what is socially perceived as normal, healthy, or desirable. What is more, the works of ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS prove that the futurity that Muñoz envisaged as the horizon may not be as far away as he thought.

Works Cited

"About." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, n.d., https://oncewewereislands.com/About, accessed 25 May 2026.

"Access is Love." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, n.d., https://oncewewereislands.com/Access, accessed 25 May 2026.

"'Autistic Long-Form' as an Artistic Methodology." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, Nov. 2023–Jan. 2024, https://oncewewereislands.com/Autistic-Long-Form, accessed 25 May 2026.

Alaimo, Tracy. "Eluding Capture: The Science, Culture, and Pleasure of 'Queer' Animals." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Indiana UP, 2010, pp. 51–72.

Baker, Kelly. "Out Back Home: An Exploration of LGBT Identities and Community in Rural Nova Scotia, Canada." *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, edited by Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley, New York UP, 2016, pp. 25–48. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479895250.003.0005

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke UP, 2007.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391623

Butler, Judith. "Critically Queer." *Playing with Fire: Queer Politics, Queer Theories*, edited by Shane Phelan, Routledge, 1997, pp. 11–29. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203760505-3

Cartwright, Ryan Lee. *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of White Rural Nonconformity*. U of Chicago P, 2021. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226697079.001.0001

Chapman, Robert. *Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism*. Pluto, 2023. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.8501594

Chisholm, Dianne. "Biophilia, Creative Involution, and the Ecological Future of Queer Desire." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Indiana UP, 2010, pp. 359–81.

Coráñez Bolton, Sony. *Crip Colony: Mestizaje, US Imperialism, and the Queer Politics of Disability in the Philippines*. Duke UP, 2023.

Dewinter, J., H. De Graaf, and S. Begeer. "Sexual Orientation, Identity, and Romantic Relationships in Adolescents and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, vol. 47, no. 9, 2017, pp. 2927–34. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3199-9

Gray, Mary L., Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley. Introduction. *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, edited by Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley, New York UP, 2016, pp. 1–21. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479895250.003.0004

Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York UP, 2005.

Haraway, Donna J. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Prickly Paradigm, 2003.

Herring, Scott. *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*. New York UP, 2010.

Jacobs, Joela. "'These Lusting, Incestuous, Perverse Creatures': A Phytopoetic History of Plants and Sexuality." *Environmental*

Humanities, vol. 14, no. 3, 2022, pp. 602–17. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-9962926

Johnson, Colin R. *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America*. Temple UP, 2013.

Kafai, Shayda. *Crip Kinship: The Disability Justice & Art Activism of Sins Invalid*. Arsenal Pulp, 2021. E-book.

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana UP, 2013. https://doi.org/10.2979/6841.0

Karban, Richard. "The Language of Plant Communication and (and How It Compares to Animal Communication)." *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, edited by Monica Galiano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira, U of Minnesota P, 2017, pp. 3–26. https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452954110-002

Karelia. *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, n.d., https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bZxTGtXHny0-zS9njkCiAn9j3J6-GYZi/view, accessed 25 May 2025. Programme booklet.

Kone Foundation. "Old Growth: 'Crip-Queer Rurality' as an Artistic Methodology." *Kone Foundation*, 2023, https://koneensaatio.fi/en/grants-and-residencies/old-growth-crip-queer-rurality-as-an-artistic-methodology-2/, accessed 28 May 2026.

Lazarony, Barbara. "Autism and Sex: Honouring the Full Spectrum of Desire." *Love on the Autism Spectrum*, n.d., https://www.loveontheautismspectrum.com/autism-and-sex/, accessed 18 May 2025.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Worlds of Exile and Illusion: Rocannon's World, Planet of Exile, City of Illusions*. Gollancz, 2020. E-book.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York UP, 2006.

Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice." *Leaving Evidence*, 12 Apr. 2017, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/, accessed 18 Aug. 2025.

Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link." *Leaving Evidence*, 5 May 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/, accessed 18 Aug. 2025.

McKenna, Dennis. Foreword. *The Mind of Plants: Narratives of Vegetal Intelligence*, edited by John C. Ryan, Patrícia Vieira, and Monika Gagliano, Synergetic, 2021, pp. 10–11.

Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona, and Bruce Erickson. "Introduction: A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Indiana UP, 2010, pp. 1–47. https://doi.org/10.2979/5988.0

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York UP, 2019.

Neff, Megan Anna. "Autism and Sexual Diversity: Exploring LGBTQIA+ Identity in Neurodivergent Lives." *Neurodivergent Insights*, 2 Feb. 2022, https://neurodivergentinsights.com/autism-and-sexual-diversity/, accessed 25 May 2026.

Nijkamp, Marieke. "Strange New Worlds and Other Love Languages." *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2024. E-book.

ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS. "*KARELIA—Alone Among the Trees*." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, Aug. 2021, https://oncewewereislands.com/KARELIA, accessed 28 May 2026.

Pickens, Theri Alyce. *Black Madness and Mad Blackness*. Duke UP, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478005506

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Arsenal Pulp, 2018. E-book.

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *The Future is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes and Mourning Songs*. Arsenal Pulp, 2022. E-book.

"Plants Don't Like Touch, New Study Finds." *La Trobe University*, 16 Dec. 2018, https://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2018/release/plants-dont-like-touch,-new-study-finds, accessed 26 Apr. 2026.

Raguso, Robert, and André Kessler. "Speaking in Chemical Tongues: Decoding the Language of Plant Volatiles." *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, edited by Monica Galiano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira. U of Minnesota P, 2017, pp. 27–61. https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452954110-003

Riley, Jason. "The Secret Sex Lives of Plants." *BBC Earth*, n.d., https://www.bbcearth.com/news/the-secret-sex-lives-of-plants, accessed 2 May 2026.

Sala, Giorgia, et al. "As Diverse as the Spectrum Itself: Trends in Sexuality, Gender and Autism." *Current Developmental Disorders Reports*, vol. 7, 2020, pp. 59–68. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40474-020-00190-1

Sandahl, Carrie. "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2003, pp. 25–56. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9-1-2-25

Sarris, Marina. "Autistic People Are More Likely to Identify as LGBTQ." *Spark*, 12 June 2024 (revised), https://sparkforautism.org/discover_article/autism-lgbtq-identity/, accessed 2 May 2026.

Schlanger, Zoë. *The Light Eaters: How the Unseen World of Plant Intelligence Offers a New Understanding of Life on Earth—A Popular Science and a Natural History Study of Botany*. Harper, 2024. E-book.

smith, s. e. "Skin Hunger and the Taboo of Wanting to be Touched." *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2024. E-book.

Sprinkle, Annie, Beth Stephens, and Jennie Klein. *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover*. U of Minnesota P, 2021. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1v3gr06

Taiz, Lincoln, and Lee Taiz. *Flora Unveiled: The Discovery and Denial of Sex in Plants*. Oxford UP, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190490263.001.0001

Thomsen, Carly. *Visibility Interrupted: Rural Queer Life and the Politics of Unbecoming*. U of Minnesota P, 2021. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1t2mzb8

Thurman, Marlo Payne. *Autism is the Future: The Evolution of the Different Type of Intelligence*. Future Horizons, 2019.

Thurston, Robert. *The Witch Hunts: A History of the Witch Persecution in Europe and North America*. Routledge, 2007. E-book.

Trewavas, Anthony. *Plant Behaviour and Intelligence*. Oxford UP, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199539543.001.0001

Walker, Nick. *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment and Postnormal Possibilities*. Autonomous, 2021. E-book.

"We-Need-To-Talk-About-Britain." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, n.d., https://oncewewereislands.com/We-Need-To-Talk-About-Britain, accessed 25 May 2026.

"What Happens When Plants Have Stress Reactions to Touch." *Lund University News*, 23 May 2022, https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/article/what-happens-when-plants-have-stress-reactions-touch, accessed 26 Apr. 2026.

Whitman, Walt. *Song of Myself*. *Poetry Foundation*, n.d., https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version, accessed 9 June 2026.

"With Forests in Our Mouths: Speaking Queer Utopias into Being, 2024." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, 2024–25, https://oncewewereislands.com/With-Forests-in-Our-Mouths, accessed 25 May 2026.

Wilkie, Abigail. "Historic Witch Trails and Neurodiversity." *Historic UK*, n.d., https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Historic-Witch-Trials-Neurodiversity/, accessed 25 May 2026.

Wong, Alice, editor. *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*. Vintage, 2024. E-book.

Wong, Alice. Introduction. *Disability Visibility: Twenty-First Century Disabled Voices*, Vintage, 2020. E-book.

"Working as a NeuroQueer Artist: Loose & Messy Tips & Tricks." *ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS*, n.d., https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hD8-IaUi6UFEtKBBdFdSkUlN855Jcaoc/view, accessed 25 May 2026, pp. 1–8.

Xu, Yue, et. al. "Mitochondrial Function Modulates Touch Signalling in Arabidopsis Thaliana." *The Plant Journal*, vol. 97, no. 4, 2019, pp. 623–45. https://doi.org/10.1111/tpj.14183

Yergeau, M. Remi. *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*. Duke UP, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372189

Katarzyna Ostalska is Associate Professor in the Department of British Literature and Culture, University of Lodz, Poland. She is the Head of the Posthumanities Research Centre at the Faculty of Philology, University of Lodz. She holds PhD and a postdoctoral degree (*habilitation*) in literature. She published a monograph on *Towards Female Empowerment: The New Generation of Irish Women Poets: Vona Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey, Caitríona O'Reilly, and Mary O'Donoghue*. She was a guest co-editor of the special issue of the journal *The Problems of Literary Genres*, devoted to gender and speculative genre (2020). In 2025, she co-edited special issues of *Second Texts* [*Teksty Drugie*] ("Posthumanism and Justice") and the *Polish Journal of English Studies* ("Critical Posthumanism and Relationality"). She co-edited three volumes of articles, the most recent one being *The Postworld In-Between Utopia and Dystopia: Intersectional, Feminist, and Non-Binary Approaches in 21st-Century Speculative Literature and Culture* (Routledge, 2021).
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8553-7517
katarzyna.ostalska@uni.lodz.pl

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.10

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Marina Taraskina
Södertörn University

Tap for Intimacy Potentialities: The (In)Visible Queer/Crip Worlds of *Romance Club*

Abstract

This article examines queer/crip intimacy potentialities within the interactive visual novel application *Romance Club*. Focusing on its large Russian-speaking audience, I situate the game's portrayals of intimacy within a discursive terrain where queerness and disability are rendered socially invisible, legislatively constrained, and culturally stigmatized. Approaching invisibility as not only a condition but also as a strategy and a generative realm of possibility, I argue that *Romance Club* functions as a contradictory space: enforcing normative framings of romance through its stories, imagery, and mechanics, while simultaneously enabling queer/crip intimacies to emerge through slippages, player practices, and fan reinterpretations. The article traces the game's normative assumptions, explores moments of rupture and invisibility, and concludes by situating *Romance Club* in a landscape of potentialities, whereby intimacy can be negotiated and reframed in a context of opacity. By analyzing a Russian-language interactive visual novel application, the article offers an account of how queer and crip intimacies are imagined and sustained in contexts where visibility itself remains fraught, situating *Romance Club* within broader debates on digital intimacy, opacity, and non-Western European queer/crip experience.

Keywords: intimacy, opacity, interactive visual novels, crip theory, queer theory, *Romance Club*.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 7 Sept. 2025. Verified: 25 Jan. 2026. Accepted: 15 Apr. 2026.

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT TAKING A DIGITAL LOVER?

In an age of digital intimacy, such a query may not be too far-fetched. Intimacy is experienced and negotiated by millions in real time across the contemporary mediascape of dating apps, porn websites, AI companions, social feeds, and fan spaces. Oscillating between possibility and restriction, digital technology offers unprecedented paths for connection while simultaneously imposing new forms of algorithmic and social control (Andreevskikh and Muravyeva 215; Buyantueva; Sheperd-Murtagh). For queer and disabled users, as well as other marginalized groups, this space is no less complex–being closely entangled with wider systems of oppression, it inhabits local discourses of normativity, safety, and visibility (Buyantueva; Sciberras and Tanner 2696–99; Johnson et al. 3–7). This becomes markedly clear when examining the case of the Russian-language digital realm, where legislation, larger narratives of belonging, and accessibility of both digital and physical infrastructures produce an environment where intimacy, as a way of world-making (Berlant 282), must be continually re-imagined through the cracks in the visibility regimes (Tudor 3905–07).

In the colonial aftermath of the Russian Empire and, later, the Soviet Union, Russian remains relatively widely spoken across several countries in the region, often creating nationally overlapping digital spaces (Konradova 44; Uffelmann 174). The colonial legacy extends far beyond language. In many Russian-speaking environments, queer and disabled users often contend with overlapping erasures, stemming from imperial histories as well as Russia's export of the so-called *traditional values*—self-proclaimed antipodes to broadly defined Western culture—which emphasize traditional gender roles bound to heterosexual families, as well as maintain stigma around disability (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Verbilovich 431; Wiedlack and Neufeld 220). This space, however, is by no means uniform—more than thirty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia face continuous geopolitical pressure from Russia, resulting in different strategy choices regarding minority policy (Luciani and Shevtsova 665). This has been further complicated with the advent of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict in 2014 and Russia's increasingly restrictive anti-LGBTQIA+ policies, which contributed to the strengthening of the existing "LGBT-friendly" pro-EU discourse in Ukraine (657–58), as well as encouraged the use of Ukrainian as a primary language (Kulyk 172), but brought about discriminatory "Russia-style" legislation in countries like Georgia and Kazakhstan (Luciani and Shevtsova 664–65; "Statement: Kazakhstan Senate Votes to Approve Anti-LGBTI Provisions"). Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion in Ukraine has

resulted in a growing population of people with disabilities in the region, which will undoubtedly impact incoming legislation and policy, along with lived experiences of disability (Hopkins; "Ukraine Presents Its Experience of Inclusive Recovery at International Summit in Berlin"). This context marks a point of difference, where intimacy, visibility, and normativity are negotiated within entangled spheres of influence offline and online.

With queerness being restricted or disciplined through legislative or cultural mechanisms, and disability being rendered socially invisible via dominant narratives and lack of accessibility in many Russian-language contexts, discourse around queer and disabled persons is rarely open and leaves little room for the public centering of their subjective experiences, including those of intimacy (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Verbilovich 432; Wiedlack and Neufeld 225; Wiedlack 923). These overlapping erasures are constructed through the interwoven systems of ableism, androcentrism, and heterosexism, which, as proposed by Teodor Mladenov in his discussion of Central Eastern Europe and highly applicable to the Russian-speaking context, hinge greatly on conditions produced by the historical continuity between state socialism and postsocialist neoliberalization, including "the ways in which state socialist productivism, biological reductionism, and institutional confinement have interacted with welfare state retrenchment, re-traditionalization of society, and the creeping marketization that followed 1989" (536).

McRuer theorizes the disciplining of bodies as maintained through the closely interconnected systems of compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory able-bodiedness, and compulsory able-mindedness, which establish dominant bodies, minds, and sexualities as "the natural order of things" (12), effectively rendering existence outside the norm *invisible*. This resulting invisibility, however, does not merely signify absence or exclusion; it actively structures how queer and crip intimacies can be imagined, practiced, and sustained within Russian-language digital spaces. Invisibility, or *opacity*, as conceptualized by Édouard Glissant (190), can be understood as offering a space for refusal to become visible and thus subject to scrutiny. Building on Glissant's work, Anna T. extends the concept of opacity to demonstrate the value of invisibility and the queer closet as valuable spaces of refuge, creating queer joy and existence within gaps and absences (13–28). These very ruptures create potentialities for opaque intimacy beyond the normative—especially in a context of restricted visibility—with digital spaces specifically offering relative anonymity and opportunities for asynchronous, multi-modal communication, providing more possibilities for connection, community-building, and resistance (Maes, van Oosten, and Vandenbosch 135; Johnson et al.).

Within this discursive terrain, *Romance Club*, an interactive visual novel application popular among Russian-speakers, emerges as a curious case of digital intimacy-making in a normative regime that renders queer and disabled persons mostly invisible. Created in 2017 by an independent Moldovan game development studio, Your Story Interactive, *Romance Club* is a choice-based visual novel application in which players progress through illustrated dialogue scenes across a variety of serialized romantic stories, each spotlighting different characters, plots, and settings, from murder mysteries and pirate adventures to Christian mythology-inspired tales of the Apocalypse. In spite of leaving the Russian market in 2024 due to the Federal Executive Agency for Media Control's demands to remove LGBTQ content from the game,[1] the studio continues making Russian-language content, as they maintain a large Russian-speaking audience and fandom, with over 600,000 followers across the Russian-language segments of various social networks, such as Vkontakte, Instagram, and Telegram. Simultaneously, *Romance Club* continues to develop transnationally, with all its stories available and sometimes originally authored in English, and several having been translated into seven more European languages. This intentional transition beyond the Russian-language market has seemingly resulted in a digital space where more diverse, nominally liberal and market-oriented portrayals of intimacy coexist with more traditional storylines. This positions *Romance Club* between two major markets with different normative pressures, particularly at a time of great discursive tension between these two sets of norms—both within the Russian-language space and between Russia and the West.

This article examines how intimacy is represented in *Romance Club*, as well as the ways in which queer/crip intimacy potentialities emerge in spite of, and sometimes through, the invisibility and limited visibility granted by the app. I draw on queer and crip critiques of normativity, as articulated by McRuer, Sandahl, and Willey; the notion of opacity as potentiality inspired by Glissant and T.'s work; as well as the understanding of intimacy as a way of world-making (Berlant 282). This article treats opacity as structuring intimacy-making under constraint, tracing how optionality, partial visibility, and absence define what can be pursued, said, or recognized both in-game and out, across social media and fandoms. By situating my

[1] Since 2022, Russian law forbids the display of any materials including LGBTQIA+ portrayals, which prompted an investigation into the *Romance Club* application (see "'Клуб Романтики' удалили из Google Play"). At the time of writing, the application has been removed from the Russian market for almost two years. However, as of May 2026, *Romance Club* has returned to the Russian app marketplaces in the form of a separate application adapted in accordance to all the "local demands and conditions of dissemination" (@official_romanceclub). Players in the Russian Federation can still continue to use the uncensored version of the application if they have downloaded it before its removal in 2024.

research within the Russian-speaking space and highlighting its embedded norms, as well as the transitions introduced by the developers after leaving the Russian market, I aim to expand on contextualized conceptualizations of crip/queer intimacies within interactive visual novels.

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

I approach *Romance Club* as a cultural and narrative assemblage encompassing text, visual and structural design, platform affordances, and user practices situated within the context of overlapping normative pressures. This allows for an examination of intimacy not only as represented within the game's narratives, but also as negotiated through gameplay mechanics, replay practices, and fan engagement. I utilize a combination of close play, as articulated by, among others, Edmond Y. Chang, as well as Kimberly Dennin and Adrianna Burton, and digital ethnography (Popova) based on a three-month-long, immersive engagement with *Romance Club* and fan-generated social media content.

The methodology of close play aims to "know games beyond their content, narrative, mechanics and graphics" (Dennin and Burton), supposing that gaming elements are "connected and dependent on the logics, narratives, and histories of the real world" (Chang). Following the principle of oscillating between play as a player and play as a scholar, I note recurring patterns such as intimacy arrangements, aesthetic norms, and choice penalties, as well as my personal interpretations of queering and cripping potentialities within various elements of the game and its fifty stories. My digital ethnographic observations focus on publicly available user-generated material, including photos, videos, and text, on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram. My point of departure has been informed by informal conversations with two acquaintances—long-time players and fans of the game, who shared their favorite public community and creator pages. The analysis within this article focuses on the interplay of possibility and restriction, taking into account platform affordances, cultural boundaries, and normative structures that shape engagement with cultural products, such as that of *Romance Club*.

My engagement with the material within this article is informed by my positionality and embodied experience. As an able-bodied scholar, I do not aim to claim epistemic authority, but rather seek to emphasize the politically significant potentiality for the acts of cripping, which will be defined later in the text as a practice of revealing and reworking the normative assumptions embedded in media (Sandahl 36), within the game. Additionally, I rely on my own embodied experience to engage with the

queer potentialities of the game, as well as their situatedness within an Eastern European, specifically Russian-speaking, context. As the two discussed normative systems, as well as their context, are inextricably connected, I hope to provide a meaningful examination of their nexus.

THE ROMANCE OF IT ALL

Romance Club occupies a space between interactive visual novels, dating simulators, and the conventions of the popular romance genre, while mainly taking on the structure of the former. Camingue et al. define interactive visual novels (VNs) as "a digital narrative focused game that requires interactions where the player must be able to impact the story world or the story's progression" (11). With an impressive library of fifty such games, or *stories*, *Romance Club* allows the players to steer the plot through a series of dialogue choices. Sharing many traits with the *Choose-Your-Own-Adventure* book, they nonetheless have "a less straightforward relationship with player choices than most works of interactive fiction," where "choices . . . may have no immediate effect on the narrative, contributing instead to a complex system of potentialities and character relationships that resolves itself toward the end" (Fiadotau 2085).

Romantic interactive VNs focus on the experience of intimacy, often featuring extensive mechanics of relationship building, as well as erotic or pornographic scenes. Largely borrowing from *otome* games—female-oriented dating simulators that originated in Japan in the 1990s (Sun 2)—*Romance Club* follows similar mechanics, plot points, and focus on male love interests, while adhering to the interactive visual novel conventions. Much like the popular romance genre, romantic interactive VNs "do not only entertain but serve as cultural artifacts that reflect and potentially shape the views of society on gender roles, sexuality, and the concept of romance" (1). As argued by Emily Baldys, popular romance tends to perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness through its deeply rooted tropes, conventions, and clichés (129). Similarly, *Romance Club* heavily relies on conventional retellings of popular romance tropes such as enemies-to-lovers, friends-to-lovers, billionaire romance, and third-act breakups, where predominantly heterosexual pairings engage in productive romance that leaves little space for relational failure, queer ambiguity, or bodies and desires that do not conform to the able-bodied, monogamous couple at the center of the genre.

Most portrayals of intimacy in *Romance Club* adhere to those imposed through various normative structures, which are integrated into the gaming experience through the interface, marketing materials, game mechanics,

as well as storytelling elements themselves. Launching the app confronts one with a bright and colorful image, a loading screen that updates every few months, portraying four characters from different stories, two men and two women (one of whom is usually a main character in one of the stories), looking playfully at the camera as they pause their laborious half-naked attempt at a car wash. They are simply perfect: their skin glowing, abdominal muscles protruding, and hair virtually untouched by the hard work and moisture. Above all, they *really* want to romance you—the player. Readily aligning with the conventions of the popular romance genre, the desirable and desired bodies are flawless, with the visual medium further exacerbating the establishment of "bodies as romantic agents" (130). They are explicitly sexually capable, highly gendered, and, when actually having a disability, conventionally beautiful.

As the player settles on one of the stories in the catalogue, *perhaps that one about elves and dragons*, they are invited to customize the usually female (at the moment of writing, there are only two stories where the player can choose a male main playable character) avatar, by picking one from around four to five character models of different races and in a few cases two body types, either featuring "athletic" or "slim" options, or "athletic" and "full-bodied" or "curvy," all portraying fit, hourglass bodies. The game's approach to race is superficial and highly limited, with character models reflecting Eurocentric beauty standards and storytelling being largely race-evasive, with very few exceptions.[2] The player can pick their character's name and sometimes customize their appearance further with choices of hair and clothing. On the surface, these customization mechanics promise self-representation and connection with one's character; in practice, however, they delimit intimacy to bodies that conform to narrow aesthetic and functional ideals.

The main heroine, apart from being conventionally beautiful, able-bodied, and implicitly cisgendered, is also usually the epitome of the postfeminist main character, making "good use of the earlier gains of the women's movement, while at the same time, distancing herself from the feminist ethos" (Ostalska 207). Most of the main characters have jobs, which are easily set aside in favor of a grand adventure, or possess generational wealth; yet it is the romance in their lives that helps drive the plot forward. Despite the differences from story to story, the main

[2] The cultural and racial aspects of the game, including its portrayal of characters and plotlines, deserve a separate in-depth investigation, outlining the cultural appropriation, fetishization, and overall adherence to global white supremacist systems. Additionally, this pertains to the limited public discourse around race and ethnicity within certain Russian-speaking environments, as well as the aftermath of the Soviet universalist agenda (Zakharov and Law).

character's rather traditional femininity is often made the focal point, with extensive clothing and hair choices in every chapter, love interests complimenting her explicitly feminine physical features, or through the dialogue itself: in a scene from *Chasing You 2*, the main character asks her female friend to tighten her corset, saying, "I wish I had been born a man." Her friend replies, "And had to listen to the political debates in the smoking room?," to which the protagonist concedes, "You're right. Tighten it." The main character is momentarily annoyed by the demands of the gendered dress code of Victorian England, yet the prospect of participating in political debates, which her friend implicitly proposes as a strictly male activity, seems completely impossible and uninteresting to her.

Beyond character design and dialogue, the game's interactive mechanics also structure how romance and intimacy are meant to unfold. Throughout the story, the player can make several choices, specifically in the form of dialogue or actions. Many of these choices, especially those that lead to significant outcomes or feature interactions with romantic interests, are locked behind a paywall (expanded on below). Romantic storylines occupy a central place in the game, with romantic interactions often driving the plot and a wide array of romantic and erotic scenes that one can *unlock* throughout the narrative.

The player is invited to choose a favorite, one romantic interest that they would like to end up with in the game finale. One can also choose to take the path of a *lone wolf*; however, most of the paid scenes and narratives are aimed at picking a romantic interest that would drive the plot forward. On many occasions, continuing a storyline with more than one favorite can lead to confrontations, break-ups, or a significant worsening of one's relationship with the favorite(s). The game's insistence on picking a single romantic interest is curious; whether it is an (un)conscious decision on the developer's part, or a result of making game mechanics simpler (e.g., the narrative pressure of having to choose), each game is doggedly mononormative in both its playthrough and finale—with player characters often suffering penalties for non-monogamous behavior. Monogamy is regarded as *normal*, or even *natural*, for the target female reader, expanding compulsory heterosexuality to compulsory monogamy (Willey 621).

Consequently, while romantic relationships are often the driving force within the stories, they do not always offer a wide variety of romantic arrangements within the games, with heterosexual, cisgendered, and monogamous pairings being the most commonly available within the stories. Non-heterosexual pairings are also possible, and every story features at least one same-sex romantic interest. However, such pairings often appear homonormative, i.e. monogamous, following straight relationship timelines, and depoliticized (Drucker 279). For instance, romancing the

only female love interest in *Heaven's Secret 2* leads to the exact same wedding scenario as romancing any of the male love interests, similarly to *And the Haze Will Take Us* and *Sails in the Fog*. Sexual encounters within the game are bound by similar normative structures, either completely missing from the plot until the relationship stage deemed appropriate by the authors is finally reached, or featuring rather repetitive descriptions and following able-bodied notions of "what counts as sex" (Santinele Martino 487) relying on penetration and orgasm-focused scripts.

The top five most popular games in the app (which are showcased in the Popular section of the application interface) at the time of writing this article, *Dracula. A Love Story* and *Heaven's Secret–Requiem*, having over a million reads, followed by *Astrea's Broken Heart*, *And the Haze Will Take Us*, *and Song of the Crimson Nile*, all gathering around 700,000 reads, do not include the application's more romantically diverse stories. Mostly featuring only one non-heterosexual and no explicitly disabled romantic interests, the most popular stories cater to what appears to be a relatively homogenous, mono- and heteronormative audience, foregrounding male love interests and using the pairings as part of the promotional material and in-app story covers. *Romance Club* seems to appeal to the juxtaposing trends in post-Soviet romantic relationships (see Chernova and Shpakovskaya 41), featuring both relatively agentic, sometimes queer characters, while still centering patriarchal and heteronormative relationship models. Simultaneously, it seems to avoid tackling the topic of sexuality of people with disabilities, only featuring one disabled love interest in the whole catalogue.

The reproduction of these normative romantic scripts is closely tied to the platform's monetization model, which structures the decisions that the player can make, as well as the speed with which they can complete the stories. *Romance Club* involves the use of two in-game currencies, diamonds and cups. Certain choices and paths that readers can take within the stories are hidden behind a paywall—many crucial plot points and romantic interactions tend to require the spending of diamonds, which players can gain in-game mainly through the completion of story chapters and viewing of sponsored advertisements. Cups, on the other hand, are the currency that allows players to read the story episodes—chapters—in the first place. Each cup takes two hours to spawn, and users can only accumulate up to three cups without additional payments. *Romance Club* also offers merchandise, including body pillows with romanceable characters, mugs, toys, and books.

Each player profile, private by default and accessible by others when shared, features individual statistics, such as the number of finished, started, and unread stories, as well as in-game achievements, collected and wish

list cards, and top matches—sorted from highest to lowest percentage—showcasing romantic interests that the player is most connected to through their in-story choices. Similarly, as noted by Tingting Hu and Liang Ge, Chinese otome games increasingly rely on data-driven optimization, with player engagement dictating narrative development and shaping intimacy possibilities—for instance, sidelining queer and working-class romances as less profitable tropes (1–25). Monetization defines how intimacy is scripted and experienced in the game—mediating access, potential for repetition and circulation through time-gating and pay-to-play options, further reducing the potential for engaging with any of the non-normative aspects of stories, while limiting—or perhaps structuring—the capacity for imaginative or interpretive engagement.

Ultimately, *Romance Club* mirrors the structure of the many interactive VNs focused on romantic intimacy—through relationship-building mechanics, idealized aesthetics, and catering to hegemonic desires and bodies for the sake of profit. Being rooted in the Russian-speaking context, however, with many story authors being Russian speakers themselves, and a large number of stories being initially written in Russian, the displayed intimacies also reflect a regime of invisibility, with non-normative love interests being few and far between, as well as same-sex romance being portrayed as homonormative.

THE (IN)VISIBLE

Nonetheless, some storylines within the *Romance Club* catalogue seemingly attempt to depart from the normative imaginaries of intimacy. Various stories feature examples of polyamorous relationships, visibly disabled queer characters, non-binary characters, and more-than-human romantic interests. For instance, *The Missing*, a story about a Danish detective, introduces Alba, a confident, visibly disabled courier who initiates a sexual and romantic relationship with the female protagonist and identifies as a bisexual woman. *Seven Brothers*, arguably one of *Romance Club*'s most *queer* stories, allows the player to choose and customize their romantic and sexual preferences, from indicating their curiosity toward polyamory to identifying as asexual and deciding whether they are interested in BDSM practices, which can become an important part of the narrative as a result of certain player choices. The story also features an autistic love interest, Chloe.

Some of the more recent stories showcase alternative forms of intimacy, allowing the reader to create meaningful friendships alongside, or instead of, romantic relationships by making choices that either lead to the progression of one or the other. This game mechanic allows for

experiences of non-romantic intimacy that also affect the plot and have a generally positive impact on the story's outcome. In the story *Garden of Eden*, the protagonist's friendships dramatically shape not only the overall ending of the story, but also her very survival. In stories such as *Astrea's Broken Heart*, the main character can also build a caring relationship with an animal companion. The above choices allow the readers to experience intimacy in a non-romantic way, while still being able to influence the plot and unlock scenes with no romantic or erotic content, thus decentering romantic intimacy and allowing for alternative modes of connection.

While these additions undoubtedly contribute to the visibility of non-hegemonic intimacies, they can also be interpreted as attempts to appeal to a new audience by making superficial inclusions that create the illusion of diversity (Sun 8), potentially coinciding with *Romance Club* leaving the Russian market in 2024. Moreover, the interface of the game does not provide any explicit accommodation for disabled players, including players with vision impairments, raising the question of who is allowed to access it in the first place. Arguably, the characters mentioned above do not play the same crucial roles in the stories as some of their male counterparts—Alba rarely makes an appearance in the episodes, while Chloe does not quite fit into the story's premise of the main female character moving into a fraternity. Overall, these departures from the norm are rare and largely absent from most popular stories in the app—as posited by games studies scholar Bo Ruberg, queer content that is legible, optional, and non-disruptive can coexist comfortably with normative systems (1–2). Situated within the Russian-speaking space, I read these inclusions as conditional and uneven: limited canonical visibility can be meaningful where representation is scarce and policed, yet it is often structured as peripheral and opt-in, and thus easily bypassed—a player can complete many of these stories without encountering non-heterosexual romance or romance with disabled characters if they do not pursue those routes.

At the same time, other queer/crip possibilities emerge less through the most legible routes than through negotiated engagements with the game's architecture and interpretive play, where opacity becomes an affordance for making meaning under constraint. Queer engagement beyond representation "disrupts the neoliberal instrumentalization of LGBTQ content in video games" (17). The invisible forms of intimacy that can be "read" into the game through fan interpretations or uses of existing game mechanics allow for a meaningful and authentic engagement. Following Sandahl's framing of queering/cripping as a practice of revealing and reworking the normative assumptions embedded in media, I approach the invisibility of non-hegemonic intimacies in the game not only as absence

but as an active site of intimacy-making (37). For instance, on Instagram, the childhood experiences, inner monologue, and social interactions of the protagonist of *Heaven's Secret–Requiem*, Lane, are interpreted by fans as autistic traits they found relatable. A TikTok by user maratum reads:

> While everyone keeps saying that Lane is a psychopath, a sociopath, or has schizophrenic tendencies, based on her childhood memories, I get intense flashbacks from my own life with autism spectrum disorder. She has feelings—they're just different, often more intense than usual, and she doesn't always know what to do with them. At the same time, Lane understands others' emotions quite well—she has learned this and developed cognitive empathy. She doesn't crave constant social contact, but she gets restless if she can't fully grasp a topic. She is deeply absorbed in her special interests, straightforward yet not closed off. And that distant look in her eyes, as if she disappears into her own thoughts. . . And if someone wants to claim that Lane is just a traumatized girl who needs a diagnosis, I must disappoint them: Lane has always been different by nature. Her brain functions differently, her consciousness is wired differently. And if we translate this into the language of our reality, she looks very much like a woman with autism spectrum disorder. (translation mine)

Here, an interpretation beyond the canon signifies connection with the main character, and the ways in which she relates to others. The potentiality of difference, positioned as concealed within the narrative itself, brings to life a character whose very existence becomes disruptive to conventional interpretations. This can be considered quite common among the Russian-speaking audience, with the queering and shipping (fan-creation of non-canonical pairings) of male romantic interests, as well as alternative reimaginings of existing characters (Rajagopalan).

The very act of posting LGTBQIA+ or government-critical content on social media, even anonymously, carries a great deal of risk in a country such as Russia, with harassment and criminal charges being only some of the possible consequences ("Russia: Rising Toll of LGBT 'Extremism' Designation"; Borodina 279). Nonetheless, queer and disabled users continue to use digital spaces for resistance, love, and dwelling through the use of opaque language, anonymized accounts, and various tools for accessing blocked content, such as VPN for Instagram. This, naturally, constrains the possibilities for engagement, and the examples I outline here can be interpreted as opaque subversions of normative intimacies.

Many popular short-form videos on Instagram also convey a certain longing for Boris, another character from the same story who dies in the first season yet returns to the protagonist in visions—a significant

departure from the more normative pairings of living characters. Reinterpretations of characters also occur through cosplay, with one or multiple people portraying non-canonical interactions between characters in online social media content. An Instagram post by koval_tyan (Fig. 1) showcases a cosplay of the *Song of the Crimson Nile*, with the protagonist being surrounded by four love interests in sensual poses, hinting at a desire to transcend the need to choose only one.



Fig. 1. "Этот песок поглотит вас" ["This sand will consume you"]—a *Song of the Crimson Nile* cosplay. Courtesy of @koval_tyan. Author of the post: @koval_tyan. Author of the novel: @alerogute. Photographer: @rmegusta_photo. Models: Amen @genshe_cos, Eva @crazy_pink.lyudmila, Set (Ash) @darky_cosplay, Agnia @trisha_layons, Livius @theromanovss.

In addition to user-generated content, certain game mechanics within *Romance Club* can also be perceived as allowing for the queering and cripping of the storylines and intimacy potentialities. Strategies such as playing to lose (inspired by the queer/crip art of failing), moments of no fun, and queer manipulations of time within the games can be seen as different ways of engaging with games in a queer and crip way (Ruberg 209–30; Meinen 260–63). In *Romance Club*, there are potentialities for similar strategies, with players being able to create new save files and be unproductive in-game, use the app interface to connect with other players, and engage with the game's intimate content in new ways.

The possibility to create multiple save files allows players to make different choices, pursue other romantic interests, follow paths to different endings, and create new main characters. This grants the reader the power to maintain multiple narratives at once, letting go of the commitment to a single character or a single storyline. This dynamic is highlighted in the game's Russian-language Telegram channel, where users are often invited to vote on the romantic interests they are currently pursuing within a certain story. Such surveys seem to be initiated by the users themselves in the comments under a post about the related story, and they often feature the option of "Путь путаны/Несколько слотов" ["A slut's way/Multiple save files"], which are two separate possibilities grouped into one within the format of this survey. Interestingly, the desire for multiple love interests is labelled with a rather specific word, *путана* (Rus. slut, prostitute).

Even though the term is, of course, used in a conscious, light-hearted manner, it still points to a certain perceived social transgression—in this case, romancing multiple lovers at the same time or aspiring to do so, which departs from the normative ideals of intimacy. Simultaneously, creating multiple save files requires a certain commitment: one must restart the game and spend resources, such as cups and diamonds, to have the opportunity to make different choices or choose a new love interest. The manipulation of game mechanics can be read as generating "alternative presents" (Barton 9) of intimacy, or world-building through the exploration of different choices, romantic interests, and relationships, still performed in an opaque and relatively safe way. However, even this feature becomes restricted behind a paywall within the game—players can use up to three save files for free, with additional seven having to be purchased. Utilizing the game's free structures to their full capacity, in turn, can be interpreted as yet another way of queer/crip engagement. Most features in *Romance Club* can be used without any monetary investment with sufficient patience and commitment, with the app itself being free to play, and events such as diamond rush (and analogous in-game events where cups and outfit purchases are free) providing significant time-windows where play is completely unproductive, and where experiences of intimacy do not generate profit, but rather dwelling.

Recently introduced mechanics of gifting, sharing collector's cards (often showcasing erotic portrayals of romantic interests from different stories), and displaying and captioning one's favorite cutscenes (also usually featuring erotic content) from the game add another dimension to the intimacy landscapes within *Romance Club*. Readers can befriend other users, as well as their real-life friends, by entering their unique game tag in the search bar, which can only be shared directly from one person to another, adding a relative degree of anonymity.

The avatar is customizable, offering images of various in-game characters, with readers being able also to showcase their answers to prompts, such as "I play RC. . ." and "My motto," and add their favorite characters and stories—these allow for free-form writing, adding more flexibility and customization, as well as a direct engagement with the content of the game, and even co-creation. Users can gift each other up to thirty diamonds and collector's cards that usually contain various amounts of in-game currencies and which can be obtained for free through participating in a daily lottery. In-game messaging is yet another new feature which adds a way to connect, share intimate moments in the game, and discuss experiences, as well as, of course, topics outside the scope of *Romance Club*.

The relative opacity of the environment opens up opportunities for engaging with the game in queer and crip ways, inserting one's experiences, desires, sentiments, and interpretations into an otherwise normative structure, labelling scenes in subversive ways, using in-game currency to express feelings of attachment to fellow players, discussing slash pairings, or describing one's off-canon fantasies in writing. This mode of connection provides a less structured way to engage with the game's content and fellow players alike, creating potentialities of intimacy that extend beyond the norm. These seemingly invisible ways of doing intimacy allow for alternative connections to emerge—through interpretation, replay, and the social practices of the game's community.

Throughout the instances described above, the potentialities for subversive engagement with *Romance Club* and its content emerge as potentialities for experiencing different forms of intimacy and belonging. In the Russian-speaking context, where both are often defined along patriarchal and heterosexist value-systems, the subversion of said structures can mean survival and existence at the interstices in spite of erasures, violence, and risks that opacity itself can also carry.

CONCLUSION

Romance Club mirrors the majority of romantic interactive visual novels with its portrayals of intimacy. The normative frameworks that shape most of its stories cater to the white, heterosexual, monogamous, and able-bodied reader, perpetuating hegemonic imaginaries of relationality—through character design, paywalls, and privileging romantic monogamous heterosexual intimacy. The portrayals of connection within the stories clearly delineate what is allowed to remain visible, spotlighting what is most marketable, even when superficially inclusive by extension. Thus, *Romance Club* creates an environment of relative invisibility, where certain intimacies are rendered or

made normative and even compulsory; not everyone makes it into the *Club*, nor is everyone entitled to the *Romance*. Yet, it is the gap in between that allows for subversive readings, imaginaries, and canon-breaking.

In the larger context of the invisibility of queer and disabled persons in many Russian-speaking environments, the digital space of *Romance Club* both reproduces the dominant standards of compulsory heterosexuality and able-bodiedness and allows for them to be contested and reimagined. It is important to note that, through simply featuring non-heterosexual romance in Russian-language stories, *Romance Club* contravenes the legislation of the Russian Federation, providing an otherwise inaccessible opportunity to experience non-heterosexual romance, even to a limited extent. *Romance Club* makes the tensions between the strict legislative and cultural regulation in certain Russian-speaking environments and the neoliberal normative structures particularly clear.

While providing limited visibility to normative experiences of homosexuality, as well as, recently, more queer portrayals of romance, *Romance Club* also creates a space of opacity through relatively anonymous play, as well as a lack of explicitly subversive, emancipating depictions of intimacy that extend beyond the normative. This opacity, however, is only the beginning, enabling the emergence of alternative worlds of intimacies through user-generated discussions and content, and manipulation of game mechanics, as well as reader engagement with the few stories featuring queer, disabled, or crip-coded characters.

Works Cited

Andreevskikh, Olga, and Marianna Muravyeva. "Doing Gender Online: Digital Spaces for Identity Politics." *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies*, edited by Daria Gritsenko, Mariëlle Wijermars, and Mikhail Kopotev, Springer International, 2020, pp. 205–19.

Baldys, Emily. "Disabled Sexuality, Incorporated: The Compulsions of Popular Romance." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2012, pp. 125–41.

Barton, Gem. "Queer Futures: Correlations between Queer Identity and Imagination Literacy." *Proceedings of DRS*, edited by Colin M. Gray et al., June 2024, pp. 1–11. https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2024.292

Berlant, Lauren. "Intimacy: A Special Issue." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1998, pp. 281–88.

Borodina, Svetlana. "Strategies of Disability Activism in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia." *Current History*, vol. 120, no. 828, 2021, pp. 274–79. https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2021.120.828.274

Buyantueva, Radzhana. "Virtually (Non) Existent? The Role of Digital Media in Russian LGBTQ+ Activism." *International Politics*, 2024, pp. 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00592-7

Camingue, Janelynn, et al. "What Is a Visual Novel?" *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, vol. 5, 2021, pp. 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1145/3474712

Chang, Edmond Y. "Gaming as Writing, or World of Warcraft as World of Wordcraft." *Computers and Composition*, vol. 25, 2008, http://cconlinejournal.org/gaming_issue_2008/Chang_Gaming_as_writing/index.html, accessed 10 Jan. 2026.

Chernova, Zhanna, and Larisa Shpakovskaia. "Молодые взрослые: супружество, партнерство и родительство. Дискурсивные предписания и практики в современной России" ["Young Adults: Marriage, Partnership, and Parenthood. Discursive Prescriptions and Practices in Contemporary Russia"]. *Laboratorium: Zhurnal sotsial'nykh issledovanii*, no. 3, 2010, pp. 19–43.

Dennin, Kimberly, and Adrianna Burton. "Experiential Play as an Analytical Framework: Empathetic and Grating Queerness in *The Last of Us Part II*." *Game Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2023, https://gamestudies.org/2302/articles/denninburton, accessed 10 Feb. 2026.

Drucker, Peter. "The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism." *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism*, vol. 92, 2015, pp. 279–304. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004288119_008

Fiadotau, Mikhail. "Visual Novel." *Encyclopedia of Computer Graphics and Games*, edited by Newton Lee, Springer, Jan. 2024, pp. 2085–88. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-23161-2_193

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, U of Michigan P, 2010.

Hopkins, Valerie. "For Many Returning Russian Veterans, a Long Road of Recovery Awaits" *The New York Times*, 7 Jan. 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/07/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-veterans.html, accessed 10 Jan. 2026.

Hu, Tingting, and Liang Ge. "Datafication of Digital Intimacy: The Dual Logic of Empowerment and Commodification." *Games and Culture*, 21 July 2025, pp. 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120251358522

Iarskaia-Smirnova, Elena, and Volha Verbilovich. "'It's No Longer Taboo, Is It?' Stories of Intimate Citizenship of People with Disabilities in Today's Russian Public Sphere." *Sexuality & Culture*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2020, pp. 428–46. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09699-z

Johnson, Megan A., et al. "Crip Digital Intimacies: The Social Dynamics of Creating Access through Digital Technology." *Societies*, vol. 14, no. 9, 2024, pp. 1–17. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14090174

Konradova, Natalia. "The Rise of Runet and the Main Stages of Its History." *Societies and Political Orders in Transition*, 2020, pp. 39–61. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33016-3_3

@koval_tyan. "*Song of the Crimson Nile* Cosplay." *Instagram*, 3 July 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C89JODVo9Px/?igsh=MXZjdGNrZmV3NWtnag==, accessed 2 July 2025.

"'Клуб Романтики' удалили из Google Play и App Store в России. Это сделали сами разработчики—они отказались подчиниться Роскомнадзору и убрать из игры контент об ЛГБТК-людях" ["'Romance Club'" Was Removed from Google Play and the App Store in Russia. This Was the Developers' Own Doing—They Refused to Comply with Roskomnadzor and Remove LGBTQ Content from the Game"]. *Meduza*, 25 June 2024, https://meduza.io/feature/2024/06/25/klub-romantiki-udalili-iz-google-play-i-app-store-v-rossii-eto-sdelali-sami-razrabotchiki-oni-otkazalis-podchinitsya-roskomnadzoru-i-ubrat-iz-igry-kontent-ob-lgbtk-lyudyah, accessed 10 Feb. 2026.

Kulyk, Volodymyr. "Language Shift in Time of War: The Abandonment of Russian in Ukraine." *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2024, pp. 159–74.

Luciani, Laura, and Maryna Shevtsova. "Sexuality Securitized: How Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Reconfigures (Anti-)LGBTQ Politics in Eastern Europe." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 34, no. 5, 2025, pp. 655–68.

Maes, Chiel, Joris M. van Oosten, and Laura Vandenbosch. "Adolescents' Digital Media Interactions within the Context of Sexuality Development." *Handbook of Adolescent Digital Media Use and Mental Health*, edited by Jacqueline Nesi, Eva H. Telzer, and Mitchell J. Prinstein, Cambridge UP, 2022, pp. 135–61.

@maratum. #секретнебесреквием [#heaven'ssecretrequiem]. *TikTok*, 24 Feb. 2025, https://www.tiktok.com/@maratrum/video/7474770930506517768, accessed 4 July 2025.

McRuer, Robert. "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence." *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, New York UP, 2006, pp. 1–32.

Meinen, Lisanne. "Imagining Neuroqueer Futures: Crip Time and Care-Ful Connections in Night in the Woods." *Unbound Queer Time in Literature, Cinema, and Video Games*, edited by Juan Francisco Belmonte Ávila and Estíbaliz Encarnación-Pinedo, Routledge, 2024, pp. 255–69.

Mladenov, Teodor. "Gender, Sexuality, and Disability in Postsocialist Central-Eastern Europe." *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, edited by Katalin Fábián, Janet Elise Johnson, and Mara Lazda, Routledge, 2021, pp. 531–39.

@official_romanceclub. "Прошло почти два года с момента принятия одного из самых непростых решений в истории нашей команды" ["It has been almost two years since one of the most difficult decisions in the history of our team"]. *Telegram*, 13 May 2026, https://t.me/official_romanceclub/5751, accessed 19 Sept. 2026.

Ostalska, Katarzyna. "Dystopias in the Realm of Popular Culture: Introducing Elements of Posthuman and Postfeminist Discourse to the Mass Audience Female Readership in Cecelia Ahern's *Roar* (2018)." *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, vol. 11, 2021, pp. 204–21. https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2018-0006

Popova, Milena. "Follow the Trope: A Digital (Auto)Ethnography for Fan Studies." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 33, 2020. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1697

Rajagopalan, Sudha. "Slash Fandom, Sociability, and Sexual Politics in Putin's Russia." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 19, 2015. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0620

Ruberg, Bo. *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*. New York UP, 2019.

"Russia: Rising Toll of LGBT 'Extremism' Designation." *Human Rights Watch*, 30 June 2025, www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/30/russia-rising-toll-of-lgbt-extremism-designation, accessed 20 Jan. 2026.

Sandahl, Carrie. "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer?: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2003, pp. 25–56.

Santinele Martino, Alan. "Toward a 'Crip' Sociology of Fucking." *Sexualities*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2025, pp. 485–502.

Sciberras, Ruby, and Claire Tanner. "Feminist Sex-Positive Art on Instagram: Reorienting the Sexualizing Gaze." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 23, no. 6, May 2022, pp. 2696–2711. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2080752

Sheperd-Murtagh, Shawna. "Crip Joy, Misogynoir, and Digital Care Work: Disabled Content Creators Navigating Visibility, Desire, and Surveillance." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2026.

"Statement: Kazakhstan Senate Votes to Approve Anti-LGBTI Provisions | ILGA-Europe." *ILGA-Europe | Safety, Equality and Freedom for LGBTI People in Europe & Central Asia*, 18 Dec. 2025, www.ilga-europe.org/news/statement-kazakhstan-senate-votes-to-approve-anti-lgbti-provisions/, accessed 15 Jan. 2026.

Sun, Yanpei. "Otome Games and Fictosexuality: Exploring Queer Narratives in Digital Spaces." *Science, Technology and Social Development Proceedings Series*, vol. 2, 2024, pp. 1–11. https://doi.org/10.70088/27zrz226

T., Anna. *Opacity—Minority—Improvisation: An Exploration of the Closet Through Queer Slangs and Postcolonial Theory*. Transcript Verlag, 2020.

Tudor, Matilda. "A Queer Kind of Dwelling: Digital Throwness and Existential Security among Sexual Minorities in Russia." *New Media & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7, 2024, pp. 3895–3911.

Uffelmann, Dirk. "Post-Russian Eurasia and the Proto-Eurasian Usage of the Runet in Kazakhstan: A Plea for a Cyberlinguistic Turn in Area Studies." *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, July 2011, pp. 172–83. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2011.03.008

"Ukraine Presents Its Experience of Inclusive Recovery at International Summit in Berlin." *United Nations Development Programme*, 4 Apr. 2025, https://www.undp.org/ukraine/press-releases/ukraine-presents-its-experience-inclusive-recovery-international-summit-berlin, accessed 11 Jan. 2026.

Wiedlack, Katharina. "In/Visibility and the (Post-Soviet) 'Queer Closet.'" *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 32, no. 8, 2023, pp. 922–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2023.2214886

Wiedlack, Katharina, and Masha Neufeld. "Dangerous and Moving? Disability, Russian Popular Culture and North/Western Hegemony." *Somatechnics*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2016, pp. 216–34. https://doi.org/10.3366/soma.2016.0192

Willey, Angela. "Constituting Compulsory Monogamy: Normative Femininity at the Limits of Imagination." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 24, no. 6, Feb. 2014, pp. 621–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2014.889600

Zakharov, Nikolay, and Ian Law. *Post-Soviet Racisms*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-47692-0

Marina Taraskina is a PhD candidate in Gender Studies at Södertörn University. Her research centers on intimacy politics and the relationship between online and offline worlds.
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1318-6308
marina.taraskina@outlook.com

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.11

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Hui Peng
The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA

Staging Social Intimacy by Hand Angel: A Crip-Queer Infrastructure of Support in Taiwan

ABSTRACT

The crip-queer body in East Asia, in this case Taiwan, has long been scripted by Confucian moral frameworks in which sexual desires are often rendered invisible and subordinated to the mandates of heteronormative reproduction. Founded in 2013, Hand Angel (手天使) is a Taiwanese non-profit organization that intervenes in this ableist cultural script by providing pro-bono, voluntary sex assistance to disabled people regardless of their sexual orientation. Grounded in the core value that sex is a human right, Hand Angel helps disabled individuals destigmatize sexual desire and co-creates a three-part infrastructure of support. Through the lens of performance art, global disability studies, and disability justice, I analyze the three-part (pre-session, assistance, post-session) sex assistance as a form of performative act where disabled intimate narratives and experiences are not only made visible but also structurally supported. I argue that Hand Angel constructs an infrastructure of support which helps us reimagine intimacy beyond sex itself and rehearses a kind of social intimacy based on crip-queer desires, embodiment, and lived experiences. Structurally, I first contextualize Hand Angel within the local cultural context in Taiwan. Secondly, I explain the three-part infrastructure of support. I focus especially on how intimacy is made social in the pre-session consultation and post-session reflection. Lastly, I examine two different case studies: one, I argue, represents a performance of refusal asserting the right to non-participation, the other re-scripts desire through access intimacy. Ultimately, these narratives demonstrate how the infrastructure sustains distinctive sexual desires and transforms intimacy into a curated social practice.

Keywords: crip-queer, Taiwan, voluntary sex assistance, staging intimacy, performance art, Hand Angel.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 1 Oct. 2025. Verified: 29 May 2026. Accepted: 31 May 2026.

HAND ANGEL IN TAIWAN

Founded in 2013, Hand Angel was created by a group of gay men in Taiwan, initially providing sexual assistance to gay men with severe disabilities. The non-profit organization soon expanded its scope recognizing the broader societal neglect of sexual rights for all disabled people. Since introducing female volunteers in 2015 and expanding sex assistance to disabled women the following year, Hand Angel further broadened its services in 2023 by assisting its first transgender woman ("Response"). As a direct translation of its Chinese name 手天使, the first character, 手 (Hand), reflects the practical, physical nature of the assistance, wherein volunteers provide manual, predominantly non-penetrative sexual stimulation to disabled applicants. The second character, 天使 (Angel), captures the affective dimension and emotional impact of the assistance ("The History of Hand Angel") to help disabled people destigmatize sexual desires.

Regarding the eligibility for such sex accessibility, disabled individuals of all genders who have a government-issued certificate of severe physical disabilities or visual impairment can apply for the sex assistance up to three times in their lifetime.[1] As of April 2023, the organization has provided fifty sessions: one for a transgender individual, four for bisexual individuals, nine for homosexual individuals, and thirty-six for heterosexual individuals. Among all the applicants, six per cent were female, and ninety-four per cent were male ("About Hand Angel"). The waiting list reflects a heteronormative bias, as applicants requesting a female volunteer face a wait time of over two years due to high demand, whereas female applicants or those open to a male volunteer are processed much faster. In contrast to the applicants, most of Hand Angel's volunteers identify as LGBTQA+ friendly. The organization consists of approximately thirty volunteers from a wide range of professions, including sex workers, social workers, long-term care professionals, office workers, university professors, parents, and students. In addition to providing sexual assistance through Hand Angel, volunteers are committed to public advocacy, hosting barrier-free events, developing inclusive sex and gender education courses, and promoting the integration of sexual care into long-term support systems ("Response").

Hand Angel's operational model functions as a distinct sociocultural adaptation that both engages with and diverges from global predecessors in sex accessibility. The organization explicitly situates its development within a lineage of international practice, referencing Japan's White Hands (Shiroi Te), which provides specialized sexual services for disabled men, and the Netherlands' Stichting Alternatieve Relatiebemiddeling (SAR), which

[1] The interval between each assistance is determined by the applicant.

offers state-subsidized programs that recognize intimacy as a fundamental component of well-being ("The History of Hand Angel"). However, Hand Angel differentiates itself in two ways. First, unlike the gender-restricted scope of White Hands, Hand Angel's mission is expansively inclusive of all genders and sexual orientations. Second, while European models in countries such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Denmark often operate through state-sanctioned or subsidized frameworks, Hand Angel remains a pro-bono, grassroots initiative. By rejecting the commercial and state-funded structures of its precedents, Hand Angel pivots the practice of sex assistance to a community initiative rooted in crip-queer community in Taiwan.

Culturally, Hand Angel's uniqueness is embedded in the values placed on disabled bodies dictated by Confucianism. Unlike most of the Anglo-North American disability models deriving from ontological individualism, the conceptualization of the body in East Asia is best understood through a familial lens. An individual body does not come with inherent autonomy and rights-bearing agency because it is not an individual possession but an embodied link in a familial, generational chain. Central to this is the concept of "Xiao" (孝, filial piety), which presumes that the body—including every hair and patch of skin—is a sacred gift from one's parents that must not be damaged. Scholars have illustrated how a disabled body is seen as a failure to preserve the integrity of the ancestral gift, and thus perceived as a disruption of familial inheritance (Kan; Tsay 15; Stone 78–79). On a social level, an individual's role within the state is often determined by his ancestral status, which includes prescribed responsibilities that ensure the continuity of the bureaucracy beyond the tenure of any single official. Within this framework, a disabled body is perceived as incapable of upholding the familial legacy or contributing to the state in the roles dictated by its lineage.

Sex and sexual desires are strictly regulated within the formation of family and subordinated to reproduction, as this is the primary way to fulfill filial duty and preserve the familial order under Confucianism. In a comparative study of adolescents and young adults' sexual values across East Asia, scholars find that sexual values informed by Confucianism in Taipei, Taiwan, lead to lower engagement in premarital sexual behavior (Gao et al. S12–17). Because sexuality is primarily understood through a heteronormative framework oriented toward reproduction, sexual activity occurring outside of a marital contract and serving no reproductive purpose is often regarded as unethical, and the expression of such desire is frequently cast as morally corrupt. Even more, Chou Yueh-Ching and her colleagues show that such cultural constraints are further magnified within the disability community. Their study shows that both men and women with intellectual disabilities have very limited opportunities to develop romantic relationships and sexual identity, with women especially internalizing negative views toward non-reproductive

sexuality (Chou et el. 663–78, 1125–136). Together, these studies underscore how sexual stigma, shadowed by Confucian moral frameworks, continues to shape attitudes towards sexual desires and behaviors in Taiwan.

In response to Confucianism, Hand Angel reclaims the disabled body as a site of autonomous sensory pleasure, questioning ableist heteronormativity through three interventions. First, the organization utilizes the Western farmwork "sex as a human right" to decouple sexual desire from the traditional mandates of reproduction. By organizing public demonstrations in 2018, 2019, and 2024 under the banner "Disabled People Need Sex" (殘障者需要性), Hand Angel transformed private desire into a public political claim, forcing a confrontation with the pervasive social stigma surrounding disabled bodies ("Response"). While the organization acknowledges the complex debates regarding whether sex constitutes a "basic need" ("Q&A"), it strategically prioritizes the immediate, lived realities of those for whom sexual access is a precursor to bodily agency.

Second, Hand Angel aligns its mission with broader Taiwanese LGBTQ+ discourses to further destabilize the Confucian emphasis on gender duality and patriarchal lineage. For example, in 2014 Taiwan LGBT+ Pride Parade, queer participants used slogan such as "Filial Piety Cannot Produce Heirs" (孝道不能生小孩) to satirize the pro-fertility expectations of Confucian masculinity (Chen Li-Chi 44). In 2025, Hand Angel launched the "Women's Masturbation Discussion Group" (Shuangshuang Sisterhood/爽爽姐妹會), offering a public space for female disabled applicants to share their sexual fantasies and masturbation practices ("Shuanghuang Sisterhood"). Sexual desire is, in this sense, recognized not as a tool for biological reproduction, but a discursive site of individual pleasure and a form of community-building.

Lastly, Hand Angel continues to contest the rigid gender norms in conventional sexual practices by extending its sex assistance to bisexual and/or transgender people. Crip-queer people, historically, have faced compounded stigma that often renders their sexual desires invisible because their distinctive understanding and practice of intimacy do not align with normative sexual expectations. By creating a social space where distinctive desires and narratives are heard, Hand Angel offers a form of social support for the crip-queer community.

INTIMACY MADE SOCIAL

Hand Angel's public presence is rooted in a culture of self-advocacy where disabled participants and volunteers take ownership of their own narratives. The online archive consists of testimonies from disabled participants and

sex volunteers ("Testimonies").[2] Scholars such as Chen Bo-Wei and Zhou Yueqing have curated eleven narratives of disabled participants from the testimonies under the title "Reclaiming Sex Right: Let Sex Empower the Disabled," which offers the first comprehensive overview of the stories of Hand Angel's crip-queer community ("Special Issue"). More recently, in 2025, the book *Ten Years Ago, Our Disabled Love Stories* by Yinghua Yi offers a different perspective, as Yi, a sex volunteer at Hand Angel, reflects on her experiences interacting with disabled participants and discusses how sex accessibility contributes to reclaiming the sex rights of disabled people in Taiwan.

Beyond self-narratives, researchers like Carmen Yau utilize thematic content analysis to transform raw testimonies into a structured framework for "intimate citizenship" ("Sexual Liberation"). Yau defines intimate citizenship as the intersection of private desire and public rights, arguing that for disabled people, the ability to access and navigate sexual experiences is a fundamental component of social inclusion and civic agency. She introduces a five-step framework to structure sex assistance: 1) application process; 2) pre-interviews with disabled liaison volunteers; 3) preparation for sex assistance; 4) provision of the assistance; and 5) post-session reflection. With this framework, Yau is able to provide suggestions and actionable items for social work with disabled people to reconstruct "the sexual identity of disabled people" in order to advocate for "intimate citizenship" (157).

My analysis of Hand Angel draws on Yau's five-step model. But I focus here only on the three distinct phases—pre-session, sex assistance, and post-session—of the sexual assistance to illuminate the shifting boundaries between the *social* and the *intimate*. I explain how the administrative preparation in the pre-session and collective reflection in the post-session, together, make space for intimate crip-queer desires and narratives in public. This tripartite structure shows that "intimate citizenship" Yau defines is facilitated through what I term "social intimacy," where the sexual act is not an isolated event but a curated and reflective process in which social labor and radical vulnerability converge to produce a unique form of relational belonging.

The practice of social intimacy is situated at the intersection of three historical and theoretical movements across performance art and disability activism: the body and performance art of the 1960s and 1970s, the "social turn" in the arts and humanities during the 1990s, and the contemporary framework of disability justice. These moments chart a progressive shift away from the myth of individual bodily autonomy and toward political actions of collective interdependency.

---

[2] The archive is organized chronologically from February 2014 to the present.

Firstly, the practice of social intimacy draws on a deep lineage of artists and scholars who brought the private experience of the body into the public sphere. The 1960s and 70s saw a pivotal shift in body art and performance art where the artist's body became a site of socially engaged, often uncomfortable, intimacy. For instance, in *Cut Piece* (1964), Japanese artist Yoko Ono kneeled in the traditional *seiza* posture, motionless, on the stage of Carnegie Hall, New York City. She placed a pair of scissors at the edge of the stage, inviting audience members to ascend the platform and cut away her garments piece by piece. By rendering her body to the public, Ono transformed her vulnerability into a highly charged public indictment, exposing the voyeurism and gender violence embedded in the Western consumption of an East Asian female body. This public exposure of a private body is further exemplified by Taiwanese artist Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance* 1981–1982 (also known as *Outdoor Piece*). In this work, Hsieh lived outside for a full year without entering any interior space, including performing private acts of bodily maintenance in the streets of New York City. In doing so, Hsieh demonstrated that for bodies denied access to private infrastructure, the most basic biological necessities become a site of constant, fraught negotiation with the social.

Secondly, the practice of social intimacy found resonances in the "social turn" within the humanities and the arts in the 1990s, specifically through what Shannon Jackson terms "performing support." By this, Jackson means that a performance is made possible not only through the living body of the actor but also through a "series of supporting relations" (14) such as the material, structural, and legal support that enable a body to exist and perform in public. This shift—moving from the individual body to the invisible infrastructures—is vital for understanding Hand Angel's framework of social intimacy. In the pre-session and post-session of the sex assistance, Hand Angel provides the administrative and reflective mediation for individual desire to be recognized, enacted, and thus socially produced.

Lastly, disability justice radicalizes this trajectory by translating art-historical critiques of body autonomy and the lack of social support into a political stance. Articulated by the collective Sins Invalid, intimacy is understood not as a private interaction but a communal practice ("10 Principles"). Their model challenges the neoliberal, individualistic notion of the autonomous self and shows that interdependence is the bedrock of genuine connection. Similarly, disability activist Alice Wong sees intimacy as a generative quality for new social relationships. For example, her *Disability Visibility Project* creates a public sphere for marginalized disabled stories. By centering first-person narratives, she demonstrates how the act of sharing one's intimate embodied experience is a social and political act that builds collective access and forges a shared disability identity.

Hand Angel operationalizes this disability justice praxis, translating the politics of collective access into a concrete, three-part infrastructure that transcends the physical act of sex to cultivate a public space for rehearsing interpersonal relationships, which ultimately contribute to a form of social intimacy grounded in crip-queer desires, embodiment, and lived knowledge.

The first step, the pre-session consultation, functions as a long, in-depth dramaturgical process. Through ten-week self-evaluations and in-depth interviews, disabled applicants embark on a self-discovery journey, translating often-isolated sexual desires and past—frequently negative—experiences into a potential exploration for intimacy. The organization uses a "person-first" approach to understand the lived realities of disabled people. In the application form, disabled applicants are asked to specify their sex assigned at birth (女性/female, 男性/male, 其他/others) and sexual orientation (同性/homosexual, 異性/heterosexual, 雙性/ bisexual, 其他/others), followed by identifying the desired sex of the volunteer (女性/female, 男性/male, 其他/others) ("Application Form").[3] The choice of "others" for each category is significant because it creates a non-prescriptive invitation to contemplate sex and gender without the pressure to conform to fixed labels at this initial stage.

After the ten-week self-evaluations and interviews, a disabled applicant is paired with a designated volunteer for consultations. These consultations create a dedicated space for participants to openly discuss their past sexual experiences, including concerns and struggles, as well as expectations for the sex assistance. The process is mutually formative: as applicants articulate their needs and desires, Hand Angel also assesses how best to respond, determining the most suitable volunteer match, and managing complex logistics, such as scheduling, location, and the necessary assistance for the applicant to reach the designated site. Over months, a flexible script is co-created based on the applicant's past sex experiences and visions for ideal sexual scenarios. This is not a rigid script but a flexible performance score, open to change and improvisation. The pre-session self-evaluations and interviews are foundational for building the trust necessary for any meaningful intimate relationships later on. In other words, the pre-session consultations and interviews socialize intimacy by transforming it from a private fantasy into mutual conversations and collaborations.

[3] If an applicant is unable to complete the form independently due to their disability or other reasons, they can enlist a helper to assist them. In such cases, Hand Angel requests information about the helper, including their relationship to the applicant and their contact details. When it comes to the pre-session communication, Hand Angel will contact both the disabled individuals and their helpers.

The second step, the sex assistance, is usually a 90-to-120-minute staged encounter centered on the sexual desires and access needs of the disabled individuals. On the day of the session, a team of four to ten Hand Angel volunteers collaborates to ensure a smooth and safe process. Volunteers usually include an interviewer, a few liaisons who manage the logistics, and a sex volunteer who focuses mainly on providing/performing the sex assistance. The location of the assistance is determined by the applicant's circumstances: it may be their own home if their family or caregivers are supportive, or an accessible hotel room. If the assistance is held at a hotel, the liaison finds an accessible path to the room and provides physical assistance as needed. They may also assist in purchasing items like sex toys or outfits that the applicant cannot easily acquire independently. The space is carefully prepared with aromatic oils, clean towels, and the applicant's preferred music or videos. Once the environment is prepared, the interviewer, who has been in contact with the applicant for months during pre-session consultations, conducts a final check-in to ensure the applicant is ready. The sex assistance itself is highly personalized. Sexual interactions—undressing, caressing, massaging, hugging, kissing, touching, oral sex—are guided by the communication between the disabled applicant and the sex volunteer. The specific acts are less important than the process of communication and negotiation during the sex assistance. As the later examples—Neo and Xiao Xue—will demonstrate, a successful one-on-one performance can be an affirming, exploratory experience just as meaningfully as an empowered act of refusal.

Finally, the post-session reflection serves as a space for processing, analyzing, and archiving the experience. If the pre-session socializes the production of intimacy, the post-session reflection is the mechanism through which Hand Angel transforms the one-on-one, intimate experiences into a public archive. Typically, reflections are gathered from three to four sources: the disabled applicant, the sex volunteer, the volunteer(s) who conduct pre-session interviews, and the liaison. This multi-perspective narrative is crucial, as it offers a more comprehensive picture of the assistance, moving beyond the physical act to illuminate the nuanced decision-making and planning process.

In this tripartite support system, the pre- and post-session phases are particularly important because they unveil how crip-queer intimacy becomes social. By social, I mean that, first, the entire process is a collaborative effort, sustained by a team of interviewers, liaisons, and sex volunteers who make intimacy a distributed, communal achievement. Second, by consenting to make their reflections public, disabled applicants contribute to a shared repository of knowledge on crip-queer intimacy. Together, by staging intimacy through this tripartite infrastructure of support, the one-time sex assistance becomes a dedicated space where disabled

individuals navigate interpersonal communications and interactions. The confidence and social skills cultivated through the interactions, for instance, the ability to articulate a need, to set a boundary, and to negotiate an interaction, are essential skills that participants can carry into their everyday lives, empowering them to build and sustain intimate relationships long after the one-on-one performance concludes.

SOCIAL INTIMACY WORKS

To further explain how such social intimacy works in practice, I introduce the experiences of two disabled participants: Neo, a disabled heterosexual man, and Xiao Xue, a blind transgender woman. I conducted a close reading of Neo and Xiao Xue's testimonies to investigate their distinctive understandings of intimacy and how it is produced socially. I also draw on the reflections of Naiji, their sex volunteer, to better understand Neo and Xiao Xue's decision-making process.

The reason for choosing Neo and Xiao Xue's experiences is twofold. First, both cases successfully fail the ableist, heteronormative expectation of a sexual encounter. In conventional terms, a sex encounter is deemed successful only if it results in specific physical markers; however, in the cases of Neo and Xiao Xue, no conventional sex occurred. Neo chose to end his session midway because the sex volunteer, Naiji, did not align with his preferences. Xiao Xue requested hair-washing rather than conventional sexual acts. She re-scripted the performance of sex to facilitate a form of access intimacy that honored her unique sensory processing and transgender embodiment. Second, the cases of Neo and Xiao Xue illuminate the tension within social intimacy by demonstrating that agency is relational and co-constituted. By this I mean their choices required a direct, embodied response from the sex volunteer, Naiji. In terms of infrastructure, for such refusal or alternative choice to be executed, an entire volunteer team also needed to recalibrate in order to provide the necessary physical and psychological environment in the pre-, post- and sex assistance phases.

1. Neo: The Right to Not Participate

Neo, a person with a spinal cord injury who has lost sensory and motor function below the neck, shows how social intimacy functions as the right to non-participation in sex assistance. In his reflection, "The Long Wait," Neo notes that, as a disabled heterosexual man, he has struggled to identify and articulate his sexual desires. The pre-session interviews helped him find a language to articulate the nebulous longings he had previously felt, which were too confusing or shameful to acknowledge ("The Long Wait"). For

the sex assistance, Neo had envisioned a volunteer who was "skinny [with] long hair"—an image that aligned with mainstream, heteronormative beauty standards.

However, this soft-focus expectation was immediately disrupted by the physical presence of Naiji. Naiji chose to present her "Eternal Immortal" gothic aesthetic, appearing in sharp stiletto heels, metal studs, and a self-designed outfit that exuded a dark, assertive autonomy. As Naiji notes in her own reflective text ("Stop the Mission"), this decision to wear armor-like, avant-garde attire was a deliberate act of authentic self-presentation. By refusing to mold herself into Neo's pre-conceived ideal, she transformed the room from a site of predictable service into a space of unpredictability and negotiation.

Neo decided to terminate the session prematurely due to this aesthetic misalignment between his preference and Naiji's self-presentation. In his reflection, "The Long Wait," Neo unmasks the complex vulnerability of this pivot. After enduring the long wait, the immediate instinct could have been one of grateful compliance. However, the vocabulary of desire he had uncovered in his pre-session interviews was not a passive fantasy to be accommodated, but a boundary to be defended. When Neo decided to terminate the session, the volunteer team had a complex yet celebratory reaction. "I felt both guilty and excited," the liaison (Vincent) confessed, "I felt guilty because the sex volunteer bore the psychological pressure, but I was excited because a disabled person had exercised their veto power" ("Thank you for Pausing"). While the labor required to facilitate a single encounter spans years of coordination as the process was halted by the global COVID pandemic, Neo's refusal demonstrated that he was not just a passive recipient of care but an active agent capable of navigating the complex interpersonal dynamics. Naiji, who navigated her own history of isolation due to bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, felt "relief and pride" in Neo's refusal ("Stop the Mission"). His honesty validated her labor in a way a completed sexual act never could; it proved she had successfully performed her role as a facilitator of sex assistance rather than a mere object of desire.

By centering on Neo's right to refuse, Hand Angel was able to question the ableist script of the grateful disabled recipient and to replace it with the self-determining disabled individual. In this light, intimacy is not found in the sexual climax, but in the negotiated trust that allows two strangers to exist in a state of radical honesty. The infrastructure supports the vulnerability of autonomy, suggesting that a socially supported "failure" is more liberatory than a physically "successful" encounter that lacks agency. Social intimacy, in this case, is transformed from a private, result-oriented act into a socially supported rehearsal of autonomy, where the "success" of the encounter lies in the participant's reclaimed agency in saying "no."

2. Xiao Xue: An Affirmative Space for Access Intimacy

As a blind transgender woman, Xiao Xue's experience expands the infrastructure of support by moving beyond the right of refusal toward the cultivation of a complex, affirmative sexual experience grounded in access intimacy. Coined by Mia Mingus and championed by Alice Wong, access intimacy is the "elusive, hard-to-describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs" (Mingus). I understand that access intimacy—the sensory shorthand of being understood without words—is the mechanical prerequisite for social intimacy. Xiao Xue's case demonstrates how the three-step infrastructure transforms non-normative sexual desire into a tangible, affirming, and liberatory reality.

Before applying to Hand Angel, Xiao Xue had been in intimate relationships. Her past experiences of providing unilateral pleasure to a girlfriend made her curious about the sensations of receiving pleasure herself. This desire was left unfulfilled when her girlfriend declined to reciprocate, resulting in what Xiao Xue calls a "faint sense of loss" ("Xiao Xue's First Experience"). Different from Neo's confusion and frustration, Xiao Xue understood her sexual desire as a form of experiential exploration. She sought a "princess-like" experience where she would be cared for, served, and respected. The sex volunteer, Naiji, was therefore dedicated to translating this abstract "princess-like feeling" into a tangible, caring encounter.

The sex assistance began with a months-long process of questionnaires and interviews, which created a space for Xiao Xue to further elaborate on the "princess-like" feeling. Hand Angel shifts the managerial role from the disabled people to the infrastructure of support. On the day of the session, this intimacy manifested immediately through the hotel's sensory environment. Upon arrival, Xiao Xue noticed a faint, elegant fragrance and discovered the room was furnished with an onsen-style bathtub and a bidet—details that aligned with her specific aesthetic and sensory preferences. These thoughtful touches allowed her to feel welcomed and understood without a single word of direction.

Regarding the sex assistance, for most of their time, Naiji focused on washing Xiao Xue's hair. It was only at the very end that their interaction progressed to other intimate actions. Xiao Xue described Naiji's touch as a sensory journey, moving from the feeling of a "smooth stone" to an "eagle's claw" and finally a "lover's hand" ("Xiao Xue's First Experience"). Instead of overtly sexual acts, the session was defined by the hair washing, an alternative sensory performance based on access intimacy. As Xiao Xue later reflected in "First Experience," the feeling of being understood and cherished created an affirmative space where her lived experiences and embodiment as a blind transgender woman were validated and celebrated.

The contrasting narratives of Neo and Xiao Xue serve as a powerful testament to the fact that Hand Angel's support infrastructure helps disabled individuals articulate their distinctive sexual desires, regardless of whether that agency manifests as an empowered "no" or an exploratory "yes." This flexibility is the infrastructure's core strength, allowing it to be tailored to the distinct needs of each individual. For Neo, the pre-session consultations provide a vocabulary to articulate desires long shrouded in confusion and shame. The infrastructure's validation occurred when it safeguarded his right to refuse. In contrast, Xiao Xue's experience demonstrates the infrastructure's capacity to translate abstract desire into a tangible, affirmative reality. The infrastructure responded through months of meticulous planning and creating a sensory environment that affirmed her access needs and sexual desires. The intimacy unfolded through the prolonged, caring act of Naiji washing her hair. By equally validating Neo's refusal and Xiao Xue's affirmation, these cases reveal that the infrastructure decenters the physical act of sex and recenters the disabled individual's right to choose their own path to social intimacy.

On a broader, social level, the transformations catalyzed by Hand Angel persist beyond the momentary encounter because they function as a rehearsal for social relationships. By *doing* intimacy in a safe, tripartite-structured way, participants like Neo and Xiao Xue practice the social skills of boundary-setting, desire-articulation, and self-advocacy. These rehearsed skills are what they carry back into their daily life as disabled social citizens and prepare them for future experiences. In addition, the public archive of Hand Angel makes these fleeting performances endure. Hand Angel's commitment to post-session archiving ensures that these crip-queer acts of world-making remain socially active. When a participant's *successful failure* or *alternative access intimacy* is transcribed and published, it is transformed from a private moment into a communal archive, allowing the ephemeral encounter of the past to provide illumination for future participants and the organization.

CONCLUSION

Hand Angel's performative infrastructure of support illustrates how intimacy is transformed from a private, one-on-one act into a relational, social practice. Through the lens of performance art, sex assistance is understood as a constitutive, tripartite social practice. Each phase—the pre-session dramaturgy, the performative act of sex assistance, and the post-session archiving—is a collaborative act of *doing* intimacy, where disabled participants generate new social skills and realities based on their unique

sensory needs, lived experiences, and disabled embodiment. This tripartite infrastructure is deeply informed by the principles of disability justice, which help us understand that intimacy is a collective responsibility and a generative quality that forges new social bonds. The significance of this support system is that it provides both a powerful counter-narrative to the Confucian ethics in Taiwan, which often places intimacy within an ableist heteronormative framework, and a tangible blueprint for crip-queer world-making. Looking forward, as Hand Angel's archive of testimonials continues to grow, it will serve as an invaluable resource for understanding the evolving knowledge of desire, gender, and disability within crip-queer communities in East Asia.

Works Cited

"10 Principles of Disability Justice." *Sins Invalid*, https://sinsinvalid.org/10-principles-of-disability-justice/, accessed 7 Sept. 2025.

"About Hand Angel." *Hand Angel*, https://www.handangel.org/?page_id=2, accessed 7 Sept. 2025.

"Application Form for Hand Angel's Sex Assistance." *Hand Angel*, https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf3MQ9pz0xl6PCy4SWRmS5btj8JxomNhhXtVaYHUsOuskDc-w/viewform, accessed 15 Apr. 2026.

Chen, Bo-Wei, et al. "Special Issue on Hand Angel." *Taiwanese Sociological Association Communication*, vol. 91, 2020, pp. 13–44.

Chen, Li-Chi. "Challenging Heteronormativity and Reifying Tai-ness: The Linguistic Landscape of Taiwan LGBT+ Pride." *Pride in Asia: Negotiating Ideologies, Localness, and Alternative Futures*, edited by Benedict J. L. Rowlett et al., Cambridge UP, 2025, pp. 35–62.

Chou, Yueh-Ching, et al. "Attitudes Toward Male and Female Sexuality among Men and Women with Intellectual Disabilities." *Women & Health*, vol. 55, no. 6, 2015, pp. 663–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/03630242.2015.1039183

Chou, Yueh-Ching, et al. "'Transformed Rights' Sexual Health Programme Evaluation for the Parents and Service Workers of Adults with an Intellectual Disability." *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, vol. 63, 2019, pp. 1125–36. https://doi.org/10.1111/jir.12624

Gao, Ersheng, et al. "How Does Traditional Confucian Culture Influence Adolescents' Sexual Behavior in Three Asian Cities?" *The Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 50, no. 3 Suppl., 2012, pp. S12–17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2011.12.002

Jackson, Shannon. *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. Routledge, 2011.

Kan, Weiyue. "The World of Care: Managing Disability in Qing China (1644–1911)." 2025. University of California at San Diego, PhD dissertation.

Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link." *Leaving Evidence*, 5 May 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/, accessed 30 Jan. 2026.

Naiji. "Let's Stop the Mission." *Hand Angel*, 24 Sept. 2024, https://www.handangel.org/?p=8168, accessed 7 Sept. 2025.

Neo. "The Long Wait and the Change of Mindset." *Hand Angel*, 24 Sept. 2024, https://www.handangel.org/?p=8165, accessed 7 Sept. 2025.

"Q&A." *Hand Angel*, https://www.handangel.org/?page_id=1422, accessed 15 Apr. 2026

"Response to Criticism on Social Media by Hand Angel." *Hand Angel*, 18 July 2025, https://www.handangel.org/?p=8838, accessed 15 Apr. 2026

"Shuangshuang Sisterhood-Women's Masturbation Discussion Group." *Hand Angel*, 19 June 2025, https://www.handangel.org/?p=8808, accessed 15 Apr. 2026

Stone, Emma Victoria. "Reforming Disability in China: A Study in Disability and Development." 1998. University of Leeds, PhD dissertation.

"Testimonies of Sex Volunteers and Disabled Participants." *Hand Angel*, https://www.handangel.org/?cat=1, accessed 29 Jan. 2026.

"The History of Hand Angel and Common Issues." *Hand Angel*, https://www.handangel.org/?p=8946, accessed 15 Apr. 2026.

Tsay, Dalvin Da. "Garbage People: The De-Essentialization of Impairment in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1872–1936." 2019. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, MA thesis.

Vincent. "Thank You for Pausing the Service." *Hand Angel*, 24 Sept. 2024, https://www.handangel.org/?p=8178, accessed 7 Sept. 2025.

Wong, Alice. "About." *Disability Visibility Project*, https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/about/, accessed 7 Sept. 2025.

Xiao Xue. "Xiao Xue's First Experience, a Fantasy Journey of Sex." *Hand Angel*, 2 June 2023, https://www.handangel.org/?p=7813, accessed 7 Sept. 2025.

Yau, Carmen. "Sexual Liberation of Disabled People: Voluntary Sex Services by Hand Angels." *Disability, Sexuality, and Gender in Asia: Intersectionality, Human Rights, and the Law*, edited by Wanhong Zhang et al., Routledge, 2023, pp. 143–59. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003170297

Yi, Yinghua. *Ten Years Ago, Our Disabled Love Stories*. Independent, 2025.

Hui Peng (she/her) is a contemporary theatre and performance scholar who specializes in global disability studies, performance studies, and theatre in Asia and Lusophone countries. Hui is the co-convenor of the Performance and Disability Working Group at the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR). Her writing has appeared in *Theatre Journal*, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, and *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*. Hui earned her PhD in Theatre and Performance at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, and will join the Department of Theatre and Performance as Assistant Teaching Professor at William and Mary.
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3273-9463
hpeng03@wm.edu

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.12

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Laura Sanmiquel-Molinero
Milà i Fontanals Institution (IMF),
Spanish National Research Council

Queer-Cripping Spanish Disability and Feminist Activism: A Critical Analysis of Andrea García-Santesmases's *El Cuerpo Deseado*

Abstract

This article explores the Spanish queer-crip alliances in the 15-M movement that took place in 2011, through which bodies that had previously been marginalized in the sexual-affective realm (including disabled and queer individuals) began to claim their place in public space. Against this background, the article critically examines the book *El Cuerpo Deseado: La Conversación Pendiente entre Feminismo y Anticapacitismo* [*The Desired Body: The Unfinished Conversation Between Feminism and Anti-Ableism*]. The book offers a concise overview of Andrea García-Santesmases's last ten years of research on the convergences and divergences between queer, feminist, and crip activisms in Spain. Drawing on intersectional Feminist Disability Studies, *El Cuerpo Deseado* invites us to wear both feminist and anti-ableist, queer, and crip lenses simultaneously to better navigate the complexities of contemporary issues of interest to feminist, queer, and crip activists—such as heterosexist and ableist violence, sexual assistance, euthanasia, abortion, the care crisis, or the politicization of marginalized identities. The book opens up relevant conversations for academic, non-academic and activist audiences beyond Spain. Yet, gender and sexuality issues are still more politicized than those surrounding disability. This creates an asymmetry between feminism and anti-ableism that might prevent such important conversations from happening.

Keywords: Spain, disability, ableism, feminism, queer, crip.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: This article was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and the ESF+ under the Grant No. JDC2023-051695-I. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 8 Apr. 2025. Verified: 7 Apr. 2026. Accepted: 15 Apr. 2026.

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALIZING FEMINISM AND ANTI-ABLEISM IN SPAIN

Back in February 2023, Telmo Irureta won the Best New Actor Goya Award for his performance in *La Consagración de la Primavera* ([*The Rite of Spring*], 2022, dir. F. Franco). This Spanish film explores sexual assistance through the story of an eighteen-year-old able-bodied university student who decides to become a sexual assistant for a young man with cerebral palsy, played by Irureta, who, in real life, shares the same condition as his character. At the ceremony, Irureta advocated for the "right to sexuality for disabled people." In a later interview, Irureta stated that "he has never resorted to [sexual assistance] because he has opted for prostitution ("Telmo Irureta").[1] In another interview, he clarified that "he has not always had sex by paying for it" (qtd. in Sánchez-Gento). These statements sparked controversy in certain circles, where critics such as Mabel Lozano, speaking from an abolitionist feminist position, retorted, "Sexuality is not a right; it is a desire" (qtd. in Otero), along with ableist accusations and insults such as *putero* [whoremonger] directed at Irureta (Prieto). Amid the uproar, the actor was forced to clarify in an interview for the Spanish National Radio Station: "I have never paid a woman. I mean, I am gay" (Asencio). Silence followed. Mainstream abolitionist feminists were lost for words before crip-queerness.

The anecdote raises some questions beyond the debate regarding whether all sex work is exploitative. Are disabled people, like Irureta and myself, truly considered sexed, sexual, and individuals? Would Irureta feel legitimized in claiming the right to sexual assistance and sex workers' services for disabled people, if he was a (lesbian/queer/trans) woman? What made Irureta feel the need to clarify that he had not always used sexual services because someone genuinely desired him? What led abolitionist feminists to assume that Irureta's desire was heterosexual? What is the connection between non-normative sexual orientations and disability? Can a disabled body be sexually desired? Can one desire to have a disabled body?

When this happened, García-Santesmases's *El Cuerpo Deseado: La Conversación Pendiente entre Feminismo y Anticapacitismo* [*The Desired Body: The Unfinished Conversation Between Feminism and Anti-Ableism*] was already at the printers. Had it been in the making, it surely would—I am allowing myself to imagine—have analyzed this anecdote. The book invites us to wear both feminist and anti-ableist, queer, and crip, hats simultaneously to better navigate the complexities of contemporary debates not only around sexual assistance but also euthanasia, abortion,

[1] Unless noted otherwise, all translations from Spanish are mine.

and the so-called "care crisis." These seemingly unrelated topics are, in fact, all linked by one invisible ethical and political thread; namely, the question regarding which lives deserve to be lived (Agamben; Morris) and enjoyed rather than merely endured (Centeno), reproduced (Malacrida), and grieved when lost (Butler). These debates have long preoccupied feminist and disability studies scholars and activists alike. However, as disabled feminist Jenny Morris argued thirty years ago in her introduction to her edited volume *Encounters with Strangers*, these traditions have not always engaged in dialogue with each other. *El Cuerpo Deseado* prompts them to return to this "unfinished conversation."

To understand both the reactions to the film starring Irureta and *El Cuerpo Deseado*, we must consider the events that took place in the Spanish context over the past decade. In the following section, I will outline the rise of queer-crip, feminist, and anti-ableist alliances in Spain at the time and review *El Cuerpo Deseado* in light of these developments. Finally, I will conclude by presenting what I believe are the book's main contributions and the conversations it leaves open for the future.

Before moving on to the next section, for the sake of situating this text, I would like to give a testimony both to the Spanish queer-crip alliances and to the birth of *El Cuerpo Deseado.* I met García-Santesmases in late 2017, when I was just acquainting myself with Critical Disability Studies and the vibrant queer-crip activist landscape that was shaking Spain at the time. Over the last decade, Andrea and I have built an intellectual and personal bond that has greatly shaped our perspectives on gender, sexuality, and disability. Thus, what follows is nowhere near a neutral account of Spanish queer-crip alliances or García-Santesmases's book. On the contrary, I aim to sketch my embodied journey through both in the hope of drawing some theoretically rigorous conclusions regarding the coalitions between these movements.

FROM THE CITY SQUARES TO *EL CUERPO DESEADO*: AN EMBODIED JOURNEY THROUGH THE CRIP-QUEER ALLIANCES IN SPAIN

La Consagración de la Primavera is not the first film to address sexual assistance or, more broadly, the sexuality of disabled people in the Spanish context. In fact, over the past decade, numerous cultural products dealing with this topic have emerged in Spain, including documentaries, such as *Yes, We Fuck* (2015, dir. R. de la Morena and A. Centeno; see the discussion of the film in this issue) and *Jo També Vull Sexe!* ([*I Want Sex, Too!*], 2017, dir. M. Armengou and R. Belis); feature films, such as *Nexos* ([*Links*], 2014, dir.

Post-Op et al.), *Vivir y Otras Ficciones* ([*Living and Other Fictions*], 2016, dir. J. Sol), and *La Consagración de la Primavera*, and plays, such as *Supernormales* ([*Supernormals*], 2021, dir. I. Rikarte), *Lectura Fácil* ([*Easy Reading*], 2022, dir. A. San Juan),[2] and *Mare de Sucre* ([*Sugar Mother*], 2021, dir. C. Cedó).

One of the most notable works due to its impact is *Yes, We Fuck* (*YWF*). Structured around six stories regarding disability and sexuality—several of which focus on sexual assistance—this documentary is the result of so-called *alianzas tullido-transfeministas* [crip-queer alliances] forged in Spain in the early 2010s.[3] As Centeno, co-director of *YWF* and activist in the Spanish Independent Living Movement, explains: "In the 'we' of the title, we have identified with and found different groups who engage in political work about and from the body (feminists, transfeminists, queers, people with functional diversity, fat activism. . .)" (110).

To understand the emergence of crip subjectivity within queer-crip alliances and *YWF*, we must first examine how a politicized disability subjectivity took shape in Spain. Historically, the Spanish disability advocacy movement has followed a service-provision approach. This has contributed to neutralizing its activist side (Guzmán-Castillo 100). As Moscoso-Pérez argues, "[i]nstead of promoting self-advocacy or empowerment for their users, these organizations . . . treat disabled people as service recipients and fail to foster further initiatives to support personal autonomy or political endeavors" (93). Against that trend, the *Foro de Vida Independiente y Divertad* (FVID) [Forum for Independent Living and Diverty[4]] was founded in Spain in 2001 by physically disabled activists. The FVID was inspired by the American and British independent living philosophy, and can be seen as the materialization of the independent living movement in Spain.

One of the FVID's core goals since its inception has been advocating personal assistance as an alternative to family care and institutionalization. After years of activism, the FVID succeeded in having personal assistance included in the so-called Law for the Promotion of Personal Autonomy

---

[2] This is an adaptation of Cristina Morales's novel under the same title, published in 2018 and awarded two of the most important literary prizes in Spain. The plot revolves around four women with intellectual disabilities who share a supervised flat in Barcelona during Ada Colau's mayoralty and who were among the leaders of the 15-M anti-austerity protests in 2011. *Lectura Fácil* portrays the protagonists' everyday lives, including the anarchist assemblies and dance classes they attend, as well as court testimonies regarding the forced sterilization that one of them underwent.

[3] While the queer-crip alliances in Spain have never ceased to exist since their inception, it could be argued that, especially after the pandemic, they transformed significantly. I delve into this in the last section of this text.

[4] FVID activists invented the term *divertad*, a mix of *libertad* (liberty) and *diversidad* (diversity). I have chosen to translate it as *diverty*.

and Care for Dependent Persons (LAPAD), passed in 2006. That same year, pilot personal assistance programs for physically disabled people were launched in several Spanish cities. Although two decades later, they are still in place, they have never been fully developed or expanded nationwide (López-Pérez and Álvarez-Nieto).

It is important to remember that Spain has historically been a familialist state, "one that sees the family—and not society—as primarily responsible for ensuring the well-being of its members" (Guzmán-Castillo 108). While societal changes have pushed younger generations in Spain to advocate for state-oriented solutions to a greater extent, social services in Spain still tend to assume that such solutions *only* need to be in place when the family cannot provide care work (Sánchez-Castiñeira 113). Undoubtedly, what *family* really means in this context are *the women in the family*. This is why the FVID quickly recognized personal assistance as a form of care organization that could potentially align with feminism. As early as 2007, the FVID began building alliances with the *Agencia de Asuntos Precarios* [*The Agency for Precarious Issues*], a feminist collective focused on dignifying care work. This collaboration resulted in the publication of *Cojos y Precarias Haciendo Vidas Que Importan* [*Crips and Precarious Women Making Lives That Matter*] (Agulló et al.), one of the earliest precedents in Spain of the kind of dialogue called for in the book *El Cuerpo Deseado*.

When examining queer-crip alliances, it is important to place them in the context of the *Indignados* [The Outraged] movement, which emerged during the 15-M (15 May) anti-austerity protests of 2011—a massive mobilization that spontaneously evolved into a long-term encampment in the main squares of Spain's largest cities. Robert McRuer, who was staying in Madrid at the time, describes the 15-M as follows: "Unruly bodies occupying public spaces, bodies—as it were—out of bounds, were challenging the guardians of capital and short-circuiting the official consensus that those guardians urgently needed to forge about the 'necessity' or inevitability of drastic austerity measures" (*Crip Times* 8). Before 15-M, many queer activists saw personal assistance programs for disabled people as a source of politically aligned and welcoming jobs. Austerity measures and the 15-M protests brought "unruly bodies" together in new ways.

Although disability was not at the center of the protest, in Barcelona and Madrid "functional diversity[5] committees" emerged. These committees

[5] *Functional diversity* is a neologism promoted by the FVID (Romañach and Lobato) as an alternative to the negative connotations associated with the term disability. The phrase faced strong opposition from traditional Spanish disability rights organizations. As a result, functional diversity operates as a distinctive marker of the FVID's identity. Although in recent years it has been incorporated into some legal texts, its use in everyday language has declined in favor of newer terms, as will be explained later.

were made up of FVID activists and street protesters who were engaging with the movement for the first time (Arenas Conejo and Pié-Balaguer 237). While the so-called "financial crisis" of 2008 extended precarity to the entire population, it hit disabled people particularly hard, as the crisis was used to socially justify significant cuts to the aforementioned LAPAD, usually misnamed as the Law of Dependency. As Arenas Conejo and Pié-Balaguer point out, during the 15-M,

> The debates and events that arose in the squares reflected a social knotting mediated by a new kind of precariat and a collective sense of fragility. This awareness created space for functional diversity and moved vulnerability away from hiding or shame. At the same time, it also opened up space for other meaningful issues. (242)

Among those "other meaningful issues" was the sexuality of non-normative bodies, including those of disabled people. As Centeno explains, up until that point, both the biomedical system and the independent living movement had dismissed sexuality as an object of intervention. Both had been prioritizing other issues—whether the rehabilitation of the body or tangible gains in terms of accessibility or labor and educational inclusion. However, in a context of the financial crisis when the movement's modest achievements in dependency management were collapsing, sexuality emerged as the truly important pillar that would secure future gains in urgent matters:

> The desexualization of people with functional diversity is one of the pillars of the ableist system that has oppressed them since the beginning of times. By eliminating or reducing sexuality, desire, and pleasure to something anecdotal, it becomes easier to limit the life horizons of people with functional diversity to mere survival, infantilize them (with the connotation of "dependent individuals" this entails), remove them from any notion of full citizenship, and ultimately, convince them that they are broken, that they are not supposed to be as they are, that they must withdraw from the central lanes of all social, cultural, and economic processes. (Centeno 102)

In this way, the queer-crip alliances forged during the 15-M completely challenged common-sense notions about the place of pleasure in the political landscape. For access to education, employment, housing, or personal assistance to be secured, disabled people needed to be seen as desiring and desirable.

With the spirit of the 15-M alliances still thriving, young anthropologist and sociologist Andrea García-Santesmases Fernández arrived in Barcelona

in 2012. During her undergraduate years in Madrid, she had already met several prominent FVID figures from across the country. That experience, combined with her active involvement in feminist activism, had led her to question what gender does to functional diversity—and vice versa. Thanks to the networks she had woven within disability activism in both Barcelona and Madrid, Antonio Centeno invited her to participate in creating the famous documentary *Yes, We Fuck!* (*YWF*, 2015). She conducted an ethnographic study of the film production, developing it into her doctoral thesis (García-Santesmases Fernández, *Cuerpos (Im)pertinentes*).

YWF had a notorious impact in several areas. It was screened at ten film festivals between 2015 and 2016, winning the "best documentary" prize at four of them. In academia, several Spanish as well as international scholars besides García-Santesmases have analyzed the documentary. Not all of them concur in their interpretations of what *YWF was* or *did*, particularly in terms of its position in the "sexuality as a right or a desire" debate. Calderón-Sandoval and Sánchez-Espinosa emphasize that "[i]n their sexually explicit images, the filmed subjects enact their performative *right to appear as both, desiring and desirable*" (12). In contrast, Castelli Rodríguez argues that what characterizes *YWF* is the absence of "certain 'authorized' figures: the doctor, the expert, or the politician. In this way, common topics such as medicalization, care, and *rights* are left aside" (5). Indeed, while "sexuality as a right" appears explicitly in the story regarding sexual assistance, most authors agree that the documentary's main goal was to change social imaginaries around sexual desirability. *YWF* had a major impact on the social arena. According to Gómez-Prada and Bote Díaz, by 2020, it was clear that "[w]hat was initially conceived as a documentary with an explicitly political, pedagogical, and sensitizing intent, kept growing and turned into a social movement under which new work is being done" (61).

After her pioneering work on *YWF*, García-Santesmases continued to examine the evolution of queer-crip alliances in Spain, the forms that gender-based violence takes in the lives of disabled women, representations of sexual assistance, and the metaphors used to conceptualize personal assistance. With regard to queer-crip alliances, as García-Santesmases, Vergés-Bosch, and Almeda-Samaranch already pointed out in 2017, despite the undeniable impact of *YWF*, these alliances were at times problematic (277). Most disabled people in Spain were nowhere near as politicized as their queer counterparts, and many did not identify with the terms "crip" or *tullido*. Also, queer activists organized some events in physically inaccessible venues and soon became aware of their ableist privileges (García-Santesmases, "*Yes, We Fuck!*" 235). As a result, many events that were advertised as *queer-crip* were not attended by visibly disabled people (234). Despite this, the alliances continued. In the remainder of this

section, I offer an embodied journey through three events that attested to the (troubled and productive) continuation of queer-crip alliances in Spain after *YWF*. By doing so, I aim to set the background against which *El Cuerpo Deseado* has come to exist. The first event was the *Jornada Cojas, Transfeministas y Otras Rarezas* [*Crip, Queer and Other Oddities Assembly*], held in Madrid in 2018. While it was influenced by *YWF*, the assembly was the result of the long-lasting alliances between transfeminist activists and disabled people forged before and during 15-M. During the *Jornada*, queer-crip activist Elena Prous launched the performance *Aguanta Tú Que Puedes* [*You Can Hold It In, So Do It*], where Prous was catheterized by a personal assistant who followed her poetic instructions. The performance was initially intended to bring the audience's attention to the fact that many disabled people cannot access queer, activist spaces that do not have an accessible bathroom or other accommodations that help disabled people use them. In a dialogical text written by García-Santesmases, Prous, and me, the performer shared that, in that version of the performance, only her disabled body was under the spotlight. A more recent version of the piece, staged at the ONCE 8th Biennial of Contemporary Art, held in Madrid between 2022 and 2023, included significant changes. As Prous explains:

> As time went by, we concluded that the other bodies in the performance also matter. At the beginning, they were completely covered and wore a ski mask [sic]. In the latest version, Eco [a queer person who is catheterized] comes out naked, blindfolded, and she also begins to show her dissident body. We were like, "great, because this means you also want to tell a story by exposing your body." And, Sari, who is the personal assistant (PA), did nothing besides catheterizing me. In the latest version, she opens the performance with a short speech. . . . *This performance has brought an alliance to the fore and has become a journey through the history of our bodies*. (Sanmiquel-Molinero, García-Santesmases, and Prous)

In January 2019, both García-Santesmases and I had the chance to watch Elena Prous and Patricia Carmona, another crip-queer activist and star of the aforementioned postporn film *Nexos*, as they staged a new performance. In *¿Quién puede Desobedecer?* [*Who Is Allowed to Disobey?*], they played sensually together with *shibari* ropes while Prous recited a poetic provocation. The performance was part of the conference *Lorenza's Way: Artistic Practice, Functional Diversity and Epistemic Disobedience* held in the Virreina Palace in Barcelona. In that venue, queer philosopher Paul B. Preciado, Antonio Centeno, and the aforementioned performers discussed and honored the work of queer-crip artist Lorenza Böttner. After the event, art curator Veronica Valentini, who had learned about

YWF while it was being produced but had not participated in it, decided to approach crip activists Antonio Centeno and Maria Oliver. Out of that conversation, the project *Diversorium* was born (Valentini 18).

Continuing the idea of linking disability with a joyful life, *Diversorium* intended to create party spaces where crip-queer alliances could flourish as disabled and non-disabled people met and had fun together. *Diversorium* launched its first event in late February 2020 at Apolo, a famous nightclub in Barcelona. García-Santesmases, Prous, and I were fortunate to dance to the eclectic sets of Marikarmen Free, a queer sex assistant who had featured in *Vivir y Otras Ficciones*, and served as the event's DJ on that occasion. We were completely oblivious to the fact that the pandemic was about to put the project on hold and further problematize queer-crip alliances. In the virtual roundtable *Sexualidad en Tiempos de Coronavirus* [*Sexuality in Coronavirus Times*] that took place in May 2020, queer activist Urko, one of the protagonists of the postporn story in *YWF*, noted: "What worries me is, how are we talking about the sexual lives of people with pre-existing conditions if they are not even entitled to live? How can you see yourself as a desired and desirable body when you are in fact an easily disposable body?" ("Sexualidad" 28:32–28:45). Here, Urko was discussing an opinion article (García-Santesmases, Sanmiquel-Molinero, and Prous) that we published some weeks earlier and that addressed the necropolitics[6] that our governments were pushing against people "with pre-existing conditions." We argued that not only did pandemic necropolitics open a personal and political breach in queer-crip alliances, but also, more importantly, in the affective bonds between disabled and non-disabled people.

In August 2021, just as we were beginning to leave lockdown behind, the independent publishing house Kaótica Libros released the Spanish translation of Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory*. García-Santesmases and I had the opportunity to launch the book in Barcelona alongside Robert McRuer. In the informal conversation following the event, we expressed our frustration over the lack of Spanish-language texts on Critical and Feminist Disability Studies—particularly ones written in accessible, non-academic language. In March 2023, Kaótica Libros helped fill that gap with the publication of *El Cuerpo Deseado*. The book synthesizes the author's research from the past decade through global and local cultural vignettes, recognizable to both Spanish and international audiences.

[6] Mbembe's necropolitics, largely overlapping with Agamben's tanathopolitics, reverses the mechanics of the biopolitics that Foucault explored. If biopolitics involves *making some subjects live while letting others die*, necropolitics involves *making some subjects die so that others can live* (cf. Foucault 240–41).

The book was so successful that, only seven months after its initial release, its second edition was published, featuring a foreword by Bob Pop, a Spanish crip-queer writer and comedian. Finally, by the end of 2024, *El Cuerpo Deseado* transcended borders with the release of its Argentinian edition, introduced by Carolina Ferrante—a key figure in Latin American Critical Disability Studies. As of April 2026, a third edition has made it to bookstores. In the next section, I will explore the main contributions of the book in the hope of convincing English-speaking audiences of its relevance on an international level.

CRITICALLY EXAMINING *EL CUERPO DESEADO*[7]

El Cuerpo Deseado strikes a difficult balance between scientific rigor and accessibility, Social Sciences and the Humanities, ethnographic anecdotes and analyses of pop culture and audiovisual products, as well as balancing Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, and Disability Studies. Academically, we could classify it first and foremost as a contribution to Critical Disability Studies (CDS). Dan Goodley suggests that CDS does not necessarily imply a clear-cut departure from disability studies. The diverse approaches he considers to be part of CDS share the fact that they de-center disability to explore its connections with other issues and identity markers. What makes *El Cuerpo Deseado* part of this trend is precisely the types of desires that shape its five chapters, which address gender, care, violence, sexuality, and identity. Some of these desires would be unintelligible when viewed through the prism of the social model of disability—the "big idea" that underpinned traditional Disability Studies—and thus demonstrate the need to transcend it without disregarding its significance.

The book's introduction begins by examining the case of Chloe Jennings-Whyte, a *pretender/transabled* woman.[8] To appear or to become disabled is indeed an abject desire both to the left-wing traditions that underpin the social model of disability—aimed at overcoming *disability* as oppression—and to some (ableist) streams of feminism—aimed at overcoming *womanhood* as *disability*. With this rather "clickbaity" start, designed to catch the unsuspecting reader's eye, the author establishes the

---

[7] This section is an extended and adapted version of this review: Sanmiquel-Molinero, Laura. "Reseña de *El cuerpo deseado: La Conversación Pendiente entre Feminismo y Anticapacitismo*." *Revista Española de Discapacidad*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2023, pp. 267–70.

[8] *Pretenders* are non-disabled people who desire to appear as disabled in all or some circumstances (for instance, by using a wheelchair). By contrast, transabled people desire to transform their bodies in order to become disabled (for instance, by severing their own limbs).

book's main premise. Drawing on crip theory (McRuer, "Crip Theory"; Sandahl), García-Santesmases argues that patriarchy and ableism are mutually constitutive. She urges both feminist and disability movements to rethink their political subjects and practices through intersectional lenses. While previous studies have already explored these ideas, the main strength of *El Cuerpo Deseado* lies in its ability to unpack them in a rigorous, accessible, and engaging way.

In Chapter 1, "Las Ruedas del Patriarcado" ["The Wheels of Patriarchy"], the author delves into the idea that the hegemonic binary notion of gender is inherently able-bodied—being a socially acceptable man or woman requires certain abilities. For this reason, disability disrupts gendered performances—while the default disabled subject is male, disabled men are "symbolically feminized"; disabled women are, in turn, de-gendered but still expected to perform feminized roles. In an argument reminiscent of Butlerian analyses of drag performances, García-Santesmases disrupts the reproduction/resistance dualism by proposing that even when a disabled body desires to fit into gender mandates, it ends up subverting them by performing them incorrectly, thereby exposing their constructedness. However, as I point out elsewhere (Sanmiquel-Molinero, "Los Estudios" 10) and as Asun Pié also noted in the book launch in Barcelona ("#enprivat"), what remains to be discussed is the question: should we regard those that seek to destabilize the patriarchal and ableist system—such as queer/crip activists—*and* those that simply try to conform to this system and fail equally as resistance? Following Butler's non-voluntarist stance, we might argue that, regardless of the intention behind the act, what seems most important is what these strategies *do*. Conforming to the desired current normative order legitimizes it even if one fails to conform. A runway is no longer exactly the same exclusive space it once was when a person with Down syndrome is allowed to walk it. Yet it remains a site where bodily norms—those to which bodies are expected to aspire—are produced. Queer-crip activism, in contrast, seeks to generate a new order in which the difference between the normative (desirable) and the counter-normative (undesirable) ceases to make sense.

In "Afectos, Deudas y Alianzas" ["Affects, Debts, and Alliances"] (Chapter 2), the author introduces Feminist Disability Studies as a branch of Critical Disability Studies that allows us to overcome two ableist desires regarding care. On the one hand, the book questions mainstream feminism's desire to "other" dependency by conceptualizing care (always for others) as an oppressive burden. In this sense, while both academic and grassroots feminism in Spain is deeply concerned with the so-called global "care crisis," the book argues that feminist texts and venues in Spain often still address care only from the perspective of the caretakers,

completely neglecting those who are "cared-for." On the other hand, the book problematizes Independent Living Movement's desire to turn personal assistants into "disembodied tools" and assisted individuals into rational *cogitos* who are undoubtedly capable of managing and supervising their own care. The chapter celebrates the *Marchas por la visibilidad de la diversidad functional* [*Demonstrations for the visibility of functional diversity*], advocating personal assistance as a feminist and anti-ableist care alternative, which used to take place in Madrid between 2007 and 2016. Yet, following crip-queer activist Elena Prous's groundbreaking text on her complicated embodied relationship with personal assistance (Prous), García-Santesmases argues for the inherently bodily, affective, and contentious care work. The chapter concludes with a feminist and anti-ableist critique of the supposedly "progressive" consensus on disability-related abortion and euthanasia—two practices that concern bodies requiring "excessive" care. García-Santesmases discusses the processes of cripwashing (Moscoso-Pérez) by which the Spanish conservative Catholic party used disability rights language to restrict abortion rights in the aftermath of 15-M. In her article, Melania Moscoso-Pérez points out that cripwashing was facilitated by the fact that, "unlike the American Disability Rights movement, forged in a common struggle with other progressive forces, such as LGTBQ and feminism, Spanish disability activist claims have found support in the disciplinary area of bioethics, which in Spain is strongly influenced by the Catholic Church" (101). In spite of that convergence, FVID activists are well aware that Spanish conservative parties are not in favor of their rights but against women's rights. In turn, García-Santesmases urges left-wing parties, unanimously in favor of abortion and euthanasia, not to frame them as mere "individual decisions" but as bio/thanatopolitical practices informed by the ableist and patriarchal forces that dictate which lives are worth living and sustaining through care.

In Chapter 3, "Heridas y Silencios" ["Wounds and Silences"], the author presents a chilling narrative illustrating the necessity of an intersectional approach to understanding the desire to enact violence. She examines both the desire to harm disabled people that comes from able-bodied individuals (caregivers, partners), as well as the desire to harm that disabled men express toward feminized bodies (whether disabled or not). One of the book's greatest strengths is its effort to shift reflection on the conditions that enable violence away from bodily abilities and into "a material . . . and symbolic context of possibility" (119) created by the intersection of ableism and patriarchy. In other words, a person is not violent because they *can* physically overpower another, but because they have the spatial, temporal, and symbolic environment that enables

them to do so. This is crucial for both feminism and anti-ableism and for their respective struggles to denaturalize violence against the political subjects they represent (women and disabled people). Moreover, such denaturalization of violence also renders otherwise unintelligible forms of violence visible—such as violence perpetrated by female caregivers and disabled men. In this regard, García-Santesmases quotes the *faux* fanzine *Yo también quiero ser un macho* [*I want to be a macho, too*] included in the aforementioned novel *Lectura fácil*, where Cristina Morales ridicules the naturalized forms of violence in the film *Yo, también* ([*Me too*], 2009, dir. A. Pastor and A. Naharro), which features a young boy with Down syndrome who affirms his masculinity by "going whoring." As FVID activist Elena Prous remarked during McRuer's book launch in Madrid (Traficantes de Sueños), the analysis could have been expanded to contextualize the violence that both disabled men and women also enact against their caregivers. This violence is legitimized by the ableist paradigm of personal tragedy, which culturally sanctions the "villainization" of disabled bodies: the stereotype according to which bodies struck by tragedy turn "bitter" and seek revenge.

In "Las Prótesis del Placer" ["The Prosthetics of Pleasure"] (Chapter 4), García-Santesmases agrees with Centeno's aforementioned approach to sexuality. That is, far from being a hedonistic call, advocating for sexual desire by and toward disabled bodies is a "far-reaching political project" (155). The reason is that sexuality helps reclaim the disabled body from being reduced to "bare life" (Agamben 18), limited to mere biological survival. Once again, García-Santesmases disrupts the reproduction/resistance binary. She demonstrates that disabled sexuality both disrupts and reproduces ableist and patriarchal norms. While these norms mandate the sexual and reproductive undesirability of disabled people, reclaiming sexual desirability is also a rite of passage into ableist normalization: if you have sex and are desirable, you are human. García-Santesmases critiques the discourse framing sexuality as a universal human need and examines its ableist and patriarchal underpinnings, particularly regarding the right to sexual assistance. While she does not dismiss sexual assistance outright, she invites us to rethink it through an intersectional lens.

Making references to several Spanish and international films, the author explores two models of sexual assistance, one based on individual models and the other based on social models of disability. As regards the former, *The Sessions* (2012, dir. B. Lewin) serves to illustrate the "therapeutic" iteration of sexual assistance. The aforementioned documentary *Jo També Vull Sexe* is also examined to problematize the ableist and patriarchal trope of "mothers who are forced to masturbate their disabled sons" (García-Santesmases Fernández, *El Cuerpo* 159), used to justify

the *biological need* of sexual assistance for disabled men. As regards the other type of sexual assistance, García-Santesmases also problematizes *YWF* and its vision of sexual assistance, which is modelled upon personal assistance (the assistant is a "tool" that helps the disabled person access their own body or that of a disabled partner). Finally, distancing herself again from the social model, García-Santesmases asserts that disabled people are not merely waiting for barriers and discrimination to disappear before allowing themselves to desire and enjoy their sexuality. Rather, what we may observe is not so much "a latent or nonexistent sexuality," but rather "a sexuality that is mostly closeted, stigmatized, invisible, or even pathologized" (184). Using the portrayal of disabled relationships at Camp Jened in *Crip Camp* (2020, dir. J. Lebrecht and N. Newnham) as an example, the author urges us to explore how existing disabled sexualities already break normative codes.

In Chapter 5, "Una Identidad en Disputa" ["A Contested Identity"], the author emphasizes the liminality of ability and disability, arguing that while they seem to be fundamentally distinct categories, they are separated by "porous boundaries" (249). Within these boundaries, bidirectional, desire-driven transitions occur. García-Santesmases questions the conditions under which disability can become a desirable identity. She contrasts the desire "to pass as able-bodied" of those newly disabled—who still see themselves as "recovering" and are ashamed to identify as disabled—with the experience of those who proudly claim a crip identity—such as some participants in *YWF*. García-Santesmases also brings to the fore two initiatives stemming from the queer-crip alliances forged in the past decade in Spain that transformed how crip activists interpreted their embodied identities. First, she mentions the expansion of disability arts companies such as *Liant la Troca* [*Entangling Threads*];[9] second, the project *En Torno a la Silla* [*Around the Chair*], where FVID activists and "makers"[10] that had met at 15-M demonstrations co-designed and produced technical aids aimed at "activat[ing] other possible relations with [disabled people's] technical and affective environments" (Criado, Rodríguez-Giralt, and Mencaroni 30). García-Santesmases then examines ableist and patriarchal frameworks that shape the so-called abject desires, such as *wannabe/transabled*, *pretender* identities, and *devotee* desires

[9] While *El Cuerpo Deseado* does not mention this, in 2017, Barcelona's local TV launched a series devoted to disability arts called *Trèvols de quatre fulles* [*Four-Leaf Clovers*], where many Spanish crip-queer activists appear. The first episode features the dance company *Liant la Troca.* The series is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7PmkAE7rdc&list=PL2rLjs4qtscwhMqVwByWXqRACEl-jGDBK

[10] "Makers" are people who participate in "maker culture," which can be defined as an extension of DIY culture that heavily draws on technology.

(where primarily able-bodied men find sexual attraction to disabled bodies precisely because they are disabled). Ultimately, she demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between ableism—the system that makes desiring disability unthinkable by equating it with sub-humanity—and disablism, which refers to the material and social barriers that oppress disabled bodies (Thomas 73).

Finally, the "Epilogue" provides an emotional close, in which García-Santesmases not only reveals the personal, relational, activist, and academic trajectory that shaped her book but also explores the complexities of constructing the subject of feminism and anti-ableism today. Just as transfeminism has expanded the discussion of feminism beyond cishet women, the disability movement has also influenced Spanish feminism in recent years. While physically disabled activists used to lead the way when 15-M took place and *YWF* was released, recently, more and more people who identify as neurodivergent or have mental health issues and other invisible health conditions, have started politicizing their struggle via social networks. While *El Cuerpo Deseado* does not explicitly point this out, many of these young activists have abandoned the term *functional diversity* and tend to identify as *disca*.[11] Many *disca* activists are themselves queer, which gives a whole new meaning to the crip-queer alliances that deserve to be explored in the future.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Desire is a driving force that arises when reality is not yet—or no longer—what an individual or collective subject wants it to be. Thus, desire fuels transitions toward new structures or identity positions. *El Cuerpo Deseado* reveals a paradox: fixed structures, such as patriarchy and ableism, can only be apprehended through what escapes fixity—the shifting norms of desirability they enforce and the unthinkable desires that exceed them. In this sense, the book is an important academic contribution, insofar as it breaks with some of the classical dualisms in the social sciences, such as the structure vs. agency dualism or the subversion vs. reproduction of the structure binary.

At the same time, the book is relevant for activists. It challenges some of the main political slogans—both of the anti-ableist movement (does "Nothing about us without us" really include women and all queer

[11] *Disca* is short for *discapacitado/discapacitada* (disabled). The term is mainly used on social network platforms, usually by queer-crip activists. As opposed to *functional diversity*, the term *disca* also has some currency in Latin American contexts. For instance, in Chile, one of the main Critical Disability Studies centers is called *Núcleo Milenio Disca*.

crip subjects?) and of the feminist movement (when feminists say, "The police don't take care of me, my friends do," do they think about the kind of care a disabled person might require?). At the same time, the book reminds us that we cannot assume that the long-overdue conversation between feminism and anti-ableism is symmetrical. While feminist and queer movements have gained political visibility in Western countries in recent years, disability continues to be too often relegated to the realm of the "natural" and the "apolitical"—even within feminist and queer movements.

Even those who think they have nothing to do with disability are only "temporarily able-bodied" (McRuer, *Crip Theory* 197; Kafer 27). Far from the uncritical cliché of "we all have a disability" (after all, not everyone is systematically discriminated against because of their body-mind), the temporality of ability reminds us that society as a whole (including activism) must move away from what García-Santesmases calls "trench essentialism" in identity politics (*El Cuerpo* 261) in order to sit with alterity and recognize sameness within it. Only then can the long-overdue conversations outlined in the book truly take place.

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: El Poder Soberano y la Nuda Vida, Volume 1*. Pre-Textos, 1998.

Agulló, Cristina, et al., editors. *Cojos y Precarias Haciendo Vidas Que Importan. Cuaderno Sobre Una Alianza Imprescindible*. Traficantes de Sueños, 2011.

Arenas Conejo, Míriam, and A. Pié-Balaguer. "Las Comisiones de Diversidad Funcional en el 15M Español: Poner el Cuerpo en el Espacio Público." *Política y Sociedad*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2014, pp. 227–45. https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_POSO.2014.v51.n1.42459

Asencio, Mamen, host. "Sexo y Discapacidad, Rescatistas y Niños de La Guerra." *Por Tres Razones*, Radio Nacional de España, 15 Feb. 2023, https://www.rtve.es/play/audios/por-tres-razones/ninos-guerra-civil-exilio/6811774/, accessed 18 Feb. 2026.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.

Calderón-Sandoval, Orianna, and Adelina Sanchez-Espinosa. "Feminist Documentary Cinema as a Diffraction Apparatus: A Diffractive Reading of the Spanish Films, *Cuidado*, *resbala* and *Yes, We Fuck!*" *Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 7, 2019, pp. 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8070206

Castelli Rodríguez, Luisina. "Reseña de *Yes, We Fuck!*" *Papeles Del CEIC*, vol. 2017, no. 2, Sept. 2017, pp. 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1387/pceic.17966

Centeno, Antonio. "Simbolismos y Alianzas para una Revuelta de los Cuerpos." *Educació Social. Revista d'Intervenció Socioeducativa*, no. 58, 2014, pp. 101–18.

Criado, Tomás Sánchez, Israel Rodríguez-Giralt, and Arianna Mencaroni. "Care in the (Critical) Making: Open Prototyping, or the Radicalisation of Independent-Living Politics." *Alter*, vols. 10–11, 2016, pp. 24–39. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alter.2015.07.002

Crip Camp. A Disability Revolution. Directed by James Lebrecht and Nicole Newnham, Higher Ground Productions, 2020.

"#enprivat con Andrea García-Santesmases en Laie CCCB." *YouTube*, uploaded by Laie, 26 Apr. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=KI3U_vMRJqA, accessed 18 Feb. 2026.

Foucault, Michel. "17 March 1976." *"Society Must Be Defended." Lectures at the College de France 1975–76*, edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, translated by David Macey, Picador, 2003, pp. 239–64.

García-Santesmases Fernández, Andrea. *Cuerpos (Im)pertinentes: Un Análisis Queer-Crip de las Posibilidades de Subversión desde la Diversidad Funcional*. 2017. Universitat de Barcelona, PhD thesis.

García-Santesmases Fernández, Andrea. *El Cuerpo Deseado: La Conversación Pendiente entre Feminismo y Anticapacitismo*. Kaótica Libros, 2023.

García-Santesmases Fernández, Andrea. "*Yes, We Fuck!*: El grito de la alianza queer-crip." *Revista Latinoamericana de Geografía y Género*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2016, pp. 226–42. https://doi.org/10.5212/Rlagg.v.7.i2.0015

García-Santesmases Fernández, Andrea, Núria Vergés-Bosch, and Elisabet Almeda-Samaranch. "'From Alliance to Trust': Constructing Crip-Queer Intimacies." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, May 2017, pp. 269–81. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1273100

García-Santesmases, Andrea, Laura Sanmiquel, and Elena Prous. "Si No Merecemos Vivir Ahora, ¿Cómo Vamos a Vivir Después?" *El Salto Diario*, 28 Apr. 2020, https://www.elsaltodiario.com/opinion/diversidad-funcional-si-no-merecemos-vivir-ahora-como-vamos-vivir-despues, accessed 18 Feb. 2026.

Gómez-Prada, Hernando Carlos, and Marcos Bote-Díaz. "Documentar la sexualidad y la diversidad funcional. El sexo y los cuerpos diversos y no normativos como armas de empoderamiento y reivindicación política en *Yes we fuck!*, *Jo també vull sexe!* y *Crip Camp*." *Atlántida. Revista Canaria de Ciencias Sociales*, no. 11, 2020, pp. 51–72. https://doi.org/10.25145/j.atlantid.20.11.03

Goodley, Dan. *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. SAGE, 2017.

Guzmán-Castillo, Francisco. "Evolución de la Atención Dirigida a las Personas en Situación de Dependencia." *Deconstruyendo la Dependencia: Propuestas para una Vida Independiente*, edited by A. Pié-Balaguer, Editorial UOC, 2012, pp. 89–110.

Jo També Vull Sexe! Directed by Montse Armengou and Ricard Belis, Televisió de Catalunya–CCMA, 2017.

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana UP, 2013. https://doi.org/10.2979/6841.0

La Consagración de la Primavera. Directed by Fernando Franco, performances by Valèria Sorolla, Telmo Irureta, and Emma Suárez, Agencia Andaluza de Instituciones Culturales/Blizzard Films/Canal Sur Radio y Televisión, 2022.

Lectura Fácil. By Cristina Morales, directed by Alberto San Juan, performances by Desirée Cascales Xalma, Carlota Gaviño, Pilar Gómez, Anna Marchessi, Marcos Mayo, Pablo Sánchez, and Estefanía de los Santos, 18 Nov. 2022, Centro Dramático Nacional, Madrid.

López-Pérez, Mercedes, and Carmen Álvarez-Nieto. "La asistencia personal en España. Perspectiva de sus protagonistas: personas beneficiarias, responsables de la asistencia personal de las entidades proveedoras y asistentes personales." *Trabajo Social Global–Global Social Work*, vol. 10, no. 19, 2020, pp. 224–56. https://doi.org/10.30827/tsg-gsw.v10i19.11811

Malacrida, Claudia. "Mothering and Disability: From Eugenics to Newgenics." *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, edited by Nicholas Watson et al., Routledge, 2019, pp. 467–85. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429430817-33

Mare de Sucre. By Clàudia Cedó, directed by Claudia Cedó, performances by Andrea Álvarez, Ivan Benet, Marc Buxaderas, Mercè Méndez, Judit Pardàs, Maria Rodríguez, and Teresa Urroz, 13 May 2021, Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, Barcelona.

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York UP, 2006.

McRuer, Robert *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance*. New York UP, 2018.

Morales, Cristina. *Lectura Fácil*. Anagrama, 2018.

Morris, Jenny. Introduction. *Encounters with Strangers: Feminism and Disability*, edited by Jenny Morris, Women's P, 1996, pp. 1–16.

Moscoso-Pérez, Melania. "Cripwashing: Undermining Civil Liberties in the Name of Disability Rights in Contemporary Spain." *Critical Disability Discourses*, vol. 7, 2016, pp. 89–108.

Nexos. Directed by Post-Op, Antonio Centeno, Sabrina Lux, and Patricia Carmona, performed by Veronika Arauzo, Patricia Carmona, Antonio Centeno, Sabrina Lux, Raimundo López, Karmen Tep, Majo Post-Op, and Urko Post-Op, 2014.

Otero, Julia, host. "*El Gabinete*: ¿El Sexo Es Un Derecho o Es Solamente Un Deseo?" *Onda Cero*, 15 Feb. 2023, https://www.ondacero.es/podcast/programas/julia-en-la-onda/gabinete/gabinete-sexo-derecho-solamente-deseo_2023021563ed32c3036bb0e40c87ef3a.html, accessed 18 Feb. 2025.

Prieto, Cristina. "'Telmo El Putero.'" *El Independiente de Granada*, 16 Feb. 2023, https://www.elindependientedegranada.es/blog/telmo-putero, accessed 18 Feb. 2026.

Prous, Elena. "Escatologías de la asistencia personal: divagaciones para sobrevivir al recurso y argumentos para politizarlo." *Laincontenida*, 23 Apr. 2022, https://laincontenida.wordpress.com/2022/04/23/escatologias-de-la-asistencia-personal-divagaciones-para-sobrevivir-al-recurso-y-argumentos-para-politizarlo%ef%bf%bc/, accessed 18 Feb. 2026.

Romañach, Javier, and Manuel Lobato. "Diversidad funcional, nuevo término para la lucha por la dignidad en la diversidad del ser humano." *Foro de Vida Independiente y Divertad*, May 2005, https://forovidaindependiente.org/wp-content/uploads/diversidad_funcional.pdf, accessed 1 Apr. 2026.

Sandahl, Carrie. "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer?: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2003, pp. 25–56. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9-1-2-25

Sánchez-Castañeira, Sergio. "La transformación de la solidaridad familiar desde los servicios sociales básicos en España." *Papers*, vol. 106, no. 1, 2021, pp. 95–118. https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/papers.2787

Sánchez-Gento, Marta. "Telmo Irureta: 'Estoy a favor de la prostitución si es libre, aunque no siempre tengo sexo pagando.'" *El Progreso*, 27 Feb. 2024, https://www.elprogreso.es/articulo/cultura/telmo-irureta-estoy-favor-prostitucion-es-libre-siempre-tengo-sexo-pagando/20230222233252164 2612.html, accessed 1 Apr. 2026.

Sanmiquel-Molinero, Laura. "Los Estudios de la Dis/capacidad: Una Propuesta no Individualizante para Interrogar Críticamente la Producción del Cuerpo-Sujeto Discapacitado." *Papeles del CEIC*, no. 231, 2020, pp. 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1387/pceic.20974

Sanmiquel-Molinero, Laura. "Reseña de *El Cuerpo Deseado: La Conversación Pendiente entre Feminismo y Anticapacitismo*." *Revista Española de Discapacidad*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2023, pp. 267–70.

Sanmiquel-Molinero, Laura, Andrea García-Santesmases, and Elena Prous. "Piss of Art: A Journey Through the History of Our Bodies." *A*Desk*, 16 Jan. 2023, https://a-desk.org/en/magazine/me-arte-un-recorrido-por-la-historia-de-nuestros-cuerpos/, accessed 18 Feb. 2026.

"Sexualidad En Tiempos de Coronavirus." *YouTube*, uploaded by Barcelona en Comú, 9 May 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwJjmYVVfa8, accessed 18 Feb. 2026.

Supernormales. By Esther Carrodeguas, directed by Iñaki Rikarte, performances by José Manuel Blanco, Carlota Gaviño, Emilio Gavira, Natalia Huarte, Jorge Kent, Mónica Lamberti, Anna Marchessi, Marcos Mayo, Inma Nieto, and Irene Serrano, 28 Apr. 2021, Centro Dramático Nacional, Madrid.

"Telmo Irureta, ganador del Goya: 'No he recurrido a asistentes sexuales pero sí a la prostitución. No puede desaparecer.'" *Europa Press*, 13 Feb. 2023, https://www.europapress.es/epsocial/igualdad/noticia-telmo-irureta-ganador-goya-no-he-recurrido-asistentes-sexuales-si-prostitucion-no-puede-desaparecer-20230213143533.html, accessed 18 Feb. 2026.

The Sessions. Directed by Ben Lewin, performances by John Hawkes and Helen Hunt, Fox Searchlight, 2012.

Thomas, Carol. *Sociologies of Disability and Illness: Contested Ideas in Disability Studies and Medical Sociology*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-02019-2

Traficantes de Sueños. "El Cuerpo Deseado: La Conversación Pendiente entre Feminismo y Capacitismo." *YouTube*, uploaded by Traficantes de Sueños, 11 May 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2EWB125Rto, accessed 18 Feb. 2026.

Trèvols de quatre fulles. *YouTube*, uploaded by betevé, 17 Sept. 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7PmkAE7rdc&list=PL2rLjs4qtscwhMqVwByWXqRACEl-jGDBK, accessed 18 Feb. 2026.

Valentini, Verónica. Introducción. *Bailando la diversidad*, edited by Verónica Valentini, Bartlebooth, 2024, pp. 7–26.

Vivir y Otras Ficciones. Directed by Jo Sol, performances by Pepe Rovira and Antonio Centeno, Shaktimetta Produccions, 2016.

Yes, We Fuck! Directed by Raúl de la Morena and Antonio Centeno, 2015.

Yo, también. Directed by Álvaro Pastor and Antonio Naharro, performances by Pablo Pineda and Lola Dueñas. Alicia Produce/Promico Imagen, 2009.

Laura Sanmiquel-Molinero (PhD) is currently a Tenure Scientist at the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC). From October 2023 until December 2025, she was a postdoctoral

researcher at the Department of Social Psychology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. She also took part in the project *Repro-flows in Europe, North Africa and Latin America: People's and Gametes' Mobilities in the Fragmented Context of Trans-national Regulation of Assisted Reproduction and Adoption* (PID2020-112692RB-C21). Her latest publication (co-authored with Joan Pujol-Tarrés and Marisela Montenegro) is the article "Parents Despite Support Networks? An Intersectional Analysis of Disabled Parenthood" (*Feminist Anthropology*, art. e70039, 2026, https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.70039).
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7879-7847
laura.sanmiquel@imf.csic.es

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.13

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Em Gural
Independent Scholar

Patterning Straightness: Unraveling Compulsory Hetero-Ableism in *The Fair Maid of the Exchange*

Abstract

The anonymously published 1607 city comedy *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* regulates the production of normative intimacies and embodiments through fabric patterns. Using Hobgood and Wood's material model of disability (2013), I examine how the disabled patternmaker in the marketplace, named Cripple, reveals figurative and physical patterns to be an imitation designed to move the characters toward the straight line. The straight line—which encompasses both heterosexual desire lines and the straight lines of the nondisabled body—relies on the movement of Cripple's crutches/needle to facilitate the reproduction of normative bodies and desires. Thinking alongside Sara Ahmed's "straightening devices" (2006) and Genevieve Love's "prosthetic doubling" (2018), I consider disability disguise as a subversion of normative patterning. The able-bodied character Frank Golding's imitation of Cripple's movements offers a variation on the repetition that undergirds the straight line pattern, making space for queer and crip intimacy. *Fair Maid* asserts its straight lines in the end, but offers the potential for contemporary readers to explore queercrip variations to the straight line and the alternative modes of intimacy and embodiment that such variations could create.

Keywords: *The Fair Maid of the Exchange*, compulsory able-bodiedness, compulsory heterosexuality, textiles, pattern, disability.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 7 Sept. 2025. Verified: 25 Jan. 2026. Accepted: 13 Apr. 2026.

The Fair Maid of the Exchange, published anonymously in 1607, uses fabric patterns to illuminate the impact that figural constructions of disability and sexuality have on the material world. The enduring throughline in this early modern city comedy is that of textile work. The plot is primarily concerned with interpersonal dynamics, and yet these dynamics always occur in proximity to fabric: the inciting incident transpires when the fair maid Phyllis Flower attempts to deliver her sewn handiwork, the locus of the drama is the patternmaker's workspace where he prepares garments for embroidery, and the deception plot hinges on sartorial confusion. The fact that *Fair Maid* continually brushes up against clothing—cloth, textiles, material—is not incidental. The narrative is a pattern: one that deliberately attempts to orient desires and embodiments toward the straight line. The pattern draws a connection between the expectation of heterosexuality (straightness) and the assumption that normative bodies produce straight lines, or stand straight. Through textile metaphor, *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* attempts, perhaps unsuccessfully, to disrupt the production of straight lines that pattern the societal enforcement of a heteronormative and ableist culture.

The drama follows a character named Cripple, whose name metonymically connects him to his disability, as he orchestrates several love plots and corrects failed business ventures. Cripple is a successful patternmaker in the city marketplace; he creates patterns that are embroidered by the local seamstresses, Phyllis Flower and Moll Berry. The play begins with Phyllis and her assistant Ursula delivering their embroidered garments, only to be attacked by thieves. Cripple hears their shouts for help and rescues them, winning Phyllis's eternal love and gratitude. The thieves return and, this time, attack Cripple. The young and wealthy Frank Golding rescues Cripple, winning *his* eternal love and gratitude. Phyllis asserts that she loves and wants to marry Cripple, while Frank (along with his two brothers, Anthony and Ferdinand) desperately wants to marry Phyllis. Cripple feels indebted to Frank, and thus helps Frank win Phyllis's hand by suggesting that Frank disguise himself as Cripple to woo Phyllis as Cripple's exact likeness. Frank complies, but casts off the disguise at the last minute and marries Phyllis as himself. Cripple, who has up until the end acted as the onstage director of the play, is suddenly silent as he witnesses the final moments of Frank and Phyllis's (reluctant) union.

Cripple's job as the patternmaker is central to the plot of *Fair Maid*. His patterns are used by the seamstresses, Phyllis and Moll, and his expertise is unparalleled within the city marketplace. Cripple creates the patterns by repetitively poking a needle into fabric, making a charcoal-dust outline that can be embroidered or sewn over, after which the charcoal gets washed

away.[1] Cripple's workshop does not simply provide a backdrop for the drama, but microcosmically performs the regulatory actions of compulsory hetero-ableism by tracing a line for the other characters to follow. Cripple's patterns demonstrate—through the repetitive motion of his needle poking the fabric—the repetition that creates a straight line pattern. At the same time, the normative world that Cripple finds himself in is indelibly changed by his patterns. Cripple's patternmaking demonstrates what Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood designate as the material model of disability, wherein "cultural narratives and representations of disability have the power to shape corporeal experience even as those narratives themselves are being shaped by the material realities of non-normative bodies and minds" (5). The material model attends to the linguistic and societal forces that impact lived experience, with the knowledge that, paradoxically, lived experience is simultaneously impacting language and culture. When Cripple creates his patterns, he elucidates the function of compulsory hetero-ableism while also providing a template for fashioning alternatives.

To examine the various straight lines which prescribe a pattern of heterosexual able-bodiedness, there are multiple threads that I will weave together: bloodlines, hemlines, and stage lines. *Bloodlines* investigates the familial attachments to straightness that reproduce normative patterns and describes how Cripple, as the patternmaker, queers such reproduction. *Hemlines* demonstrates the repetitive movements that imitate the pattern through fabric while illuminating imitation's reliance on queer and crip desires. *Stage lines* examines metatheatrical languaging as the strongest enforcer of the pattern, and one that must be addressed in order to embrace the queercrip potential of the play. While *Fair Maid*'s use of textile metaphor decries compulsory hetero-ableism, the final moments of the play attempt to erase such efforts in favor of the expected city comedy ending. *Fair Maid of the Exchange* reveals the material and figural pattern that enforces both straight lines of the body and straight desire lines through repetitive actions that are counterfeited to remain visible only as the default. Through an exploration of imitation as the source of normative patterning, the play gestures to a world beyond a fabricated conception of normative bodies and intimacies.

---

[1] This technique, called "pricking and pouncing" was an early modern method for copying patterns both onto textiles and print material (Learner). An image would be outlined by poking a needle through cloth or parchment, at which point colored charcoal (called "pounce") would be sprinkled over, leaving an outline on the fabric to be embroidered (Cennini 87).

BLOODLINES

The setting of *Fair Maid* is the Exchange, a proto-capitalist marketplace that (re)produces economic status through the interchange of goods. The Exchange refers to the marketplace where Cripple and Phyllis work, yet exchange has an additional significance here: the exchange of Phyllis to a suitable husband is the primary directive of the plot. Katherine Schaap Williams explains, "Phyllis is a property, like land, and since she may be won, marriage is yet another competitive financial transaction" (109). Master and Mistress Flower treat Phyllis's betrothal as a transaction because the objective of her marriage is to reproduce their family wealth. Yet the propriety of a potential marriage to the Golding family hinges upon each brother's perceived ability. Phyllis must follow the pattern toward straightness, wherein compulsory heterosexuality is contingent upon compulsory able-bodiedness. Cripple disrupts the pattern by using the same mechanisms that enforce heterosexual relations to "reproduce" queerly, and in doing so offers an alternative to the straight line.

The appellation of the titular fair maid Phyllis Flower—the daughter of Master Flower—clearly delineates her role in the Exchange. Master Flower's servant introduces Phyllis through her connection to her father and to the activity of exchange: "I serve a gentleman. That gentleman is father to this gentlewoman. / This gentlewoman is a maid. This maid is fair. And this fair maid belongeth to the Exchange" (3.2.154–55). Phyllis does not get to be her own person, but is rather named through her father and through the capitalist activity that labels her a commodity; she is "the flower of the Exchange" (3.2.163). Like all of the names in *Fair Maid*, Phyllis's surname, Flower, outlines her anticipated contribution to the narrative. As the Flower of her father, she is expected to sow the seed of her family line through the reproduction and consolidation of her family's economic assets. Phyllis Flower is defined by her virginity (the fairness of her flower), which identifies her as nothing more than an item of exchange in marriage.

In the world of the Exchange, Phyllis's marriage must benefit the family, reproducing their wealth through a connection with the Golding brothers, whose surname verifies their affluence. Master Flower wants Phyllis to marry Ferdinand Golding and Mistress Flower has insisted that Phyllis marry Ferdinand's brother Anthony. Phyllis, who has her heart set on Cripple, decides to trick both her parents into thinking that she will marry the Golding they desire for her. She says to her mother, "I could not be so much unnatural / As to refuse the love you proffer me" (4.1.143–44). For Phyllis, making a decision outside of the pattern set for her would be

"unnatural," strange, or queer.[2] She has already been given a desire line to follow, just as in her embroidery she must sew along the patterned line that Cripple provides for her. Sara Ahmed argues that heterosexuality is maintained through repetitive movements that orient bodies toward the straight line, which are repeated so that the mechanisms that mandate straightness fall away: "Think of tracing paper: when the lines on the tracing paper are aligned with the lines of the paper that has been traced, then the lines of the tracing paper disappear: you can simply see one set of lines" (66). The tracing paper, in this case, is the fabric that Phyllis embroiders, which illustrates her constraints in choosing a husband. Fabric patterns exemplify the regulations of desire in the narrative, which must follow the pre-patterned line or else be considered unnatural.

However, it is not only compulsory heterosexuality that pushes Phyllis toward the straight line of marriage, but the expectation that her husband be able-bodied. Crip theorist Robert McRuer has already identified the imperative to read heteronormative and ableist structures concurrently: "the system of compulsory able-bodiedness, which in a sense produces disability, is thoroughly *interwoven* with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness" (2, emphasis mine). If pre-conditioned societal patterns orient Phyllis toward the straight (heterosexual) line, what would it mean to consider straight lines of the body as another mandated mechanism through which society patterns normativity? Master Flower wants to give Phyllis to Ferdinand, claiming that his "jointure" will add to "the gentleman's good parts" (4.1.12). "Jointure" refers to Phyllis's dowry, but also a joining together, or the imagery of a joint. The financial incentives of their marriage become physicalized through the body. Ferdinand's "good parts" are his wealth and morality, but also his physical body parts, with the implication that he will perform in the marriage bed and offer children. Master Flower identifies Ferdinand as a worthy match based on his economic status, which is intricately linked linguistically with his physical ability, i.e. his ability to reproduce. Phyllis's ideal husband follows the straight line of heterosexuality through his able-bodiedness, demonstrating the reliance of heterosexual patterning on physical straight lines.

Compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness combine to enforce an ideology of straightness. In employing the term "straight" with reference to heterosexuality, I do not mean to be reductively anachronistic, but rather to trace a lineage of thought that connected the word "straight" with heterosexual acts long before said identities or

[2] While Phyllis's desire for Cripple is heterosexual, I use the term "queer" broadly throughout to refer to desires that destabilize the straight line pattern.

terminologies existed. Being straight, as in being a good or moral person, was of common usage in the early modern period prior to the introduction of the term "heterosexual."[3] In 1607, the word would have signified a body part stretched to elongation, in addition to being in alignment with the correct or moral way of living ("Straight"). When Master Flower describes Ferdinand as a man of "good carriage," he melds the two definitions of straightness, describing his preferred match for Phyllis as honest (straight) and an *upstanding* citizen (implying he has a straight spine) (4.1.2). The word "straight" linguistically performs the linkage between compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness that places both structures within the anticipated norm or pattern.

The pattern of heterosexuality, in the case of *Fair Maid*, is a physical one: Cripple, Phyllis, and Moll create and embroider garments that secure courtships. When Bowdler and Moll get engaged, Bowdler says: "We'll to the drawer / There to dispatch what I further intend" (4.2.236–37). Cripple, as the drawer, creates a copy of an original image for Phyllis and Moll to embroider: in other words, Cripple's patterns reproduce images onto fabric, performing the work of reproduction. These patterns are tools used in the process of courtship, wherein love itself becomes a copy: "For what is he, loving a thing in heart, / Loves not the counterfeit, though made by art?" (1.2.15–16). The goal of patternmaking is to create a copy or reproduction of an original, described here as a "counterfeit." In 1607, counterfeit simultaneously meant "a false imitation" and "fashioned, made to a pattern" ("Counterfeit"). Heterosexuality uses reproduction to repetitively imitate normative intimacies such that they become the default. What patterning unveils then is the extent to which this reproduction of heterosexuality is nothing but a counterfeit.

Cripple, as the disabled patternmaker, critiques the counterfeit of heterosexual reproduction by using the same patterning mechanisms to reproduce along a queer line. Cripple and Frank, while supposedly being very different in their relation to able-bodiedness and heterosexuality, often remark on their likeness to one another. In one of their scenes together—in which Cripple and Frank are conspiring to make Phyllis fall in love with Frank—Frank addresses Cripple with reference to their intense bond: "Mirror of kindness, extremity's best friend / While I breathe, sweet blood, I am thine" (4.2.1–2). Frank sees in Cripple a mirror, specifically of "kindness," meaning likeness (to be of the same kind) as

[3] Etymologically, the term "straight" emerged around 1225, and was initially used to describe something stretched or elongated. The term bore a deep connection to the body: for instance, to straighten one's arm. A new interpretation emerged in the mid-16th century, after a revised reading of the biblical strait became reference to the honest and moral path—or the straight and narrow ("Straight").

well as good favor. Their homoerotic connection is forged both through similarity and a crip gain perspective of the complementary nature of their different embodiments. Yet after Phyllis has declared her love for Cripple, Cripple—who feels both unworthy of Phyllis's love and ambiguous about it—suggests to Frank that he disguise himself as Cripple to trick Phyllis into marrying him instead.[4] When Frank imitates Cripple by replicating his movements, he becomes a copy of him; the characters in the play cannot tell the difference between them. In other words, Cripple reproduces through another man. Cripple's queer reproduction, while still serving the heterosexual marriage plot, attempts to create lines outside of the straight pattern that dictates normative intimacies.

HEMLINES

The patterns of *Fair Maid* are created through the repetition of Cripple's needle outlining an image, which institutes fabric as a larger site of imitation, a "habit" that repeats normativity through movement. Drawing on Genevieve Love's analysis of the connection between Cripple's locomotion and his craftsmanship, I explore the impact of the fusion of Cripple's crutches with his needle on the pre-patterned lines of ability and desire ("Standing" 51). The repetitive movement exemplified by Cripple's needle regulates straightness by creating an image of desire and embodiment that follows the straight line. While the pattern allows for a certain level of non-straight imitation, *Fair Maid*'s hemlines truly begin to unravel the moment that such imitation becomes visible. Using fabric as a nexus of imitation expands possibilities for exploring the fiction of compulsory able-bodiedness and the potential methods of queer and crip subversion.

Fair Maid enacts the counterfeit of compulsory hetero-ableist thought within and through tangible cloth patterns. Using fabric as a metaphor and a physical tool, *Fair Maid*'s language straightens Phyllis's body and desires through the pattern of her dress. When Phyllis is propositioned by a gentleman named Gardiner in her shop, he compliments her attire, musing how "a garment made by cunning arts-men's skill / Hides all defects that Nature's swerving hand / Hath done amiss, and makes the shape

[4] Cripple's ambiguity with regards to Phyllis stems from both internalized ableism ("knowing my unworthy self / Too foul for such a beauty") and also from a deep dislike of marriage: "fancy shall never marry me to woe" (4.2.25–26; 2.2.251). Cripple is the most eroticized figure in the play ("yet I am hourly solicited," 2.2.242) and also seemingly devoid of any romantic interest, which speaks to Anna Mollow's read of the ableist conception of disability as "both sexual excess and sexual lack" (286).

seem pure. / If then it grace such lame deformity / It adds a greater grace to purity" (3.1.80-84). Gardiner reveals the curvature of Phyllis's body, created by "Nature's swerving hand," to be undesirable. Thus, Gardiner uses the pattern of the fabric to make Phyllis's body more straight. The garment changes "lame deformity"—aligning deformity with a word that pejoratively describes a mobility impairment—into purity, or the heteropatriarchal ideal of female virginity. Yet rather than able-bodiedness being considered the default, Gardiner suggests that Phyllis's body was not straight to begin with. The pattern of Phyllis's dress must hide any curvature and align Phyllis with a straight line that did not previously exist.

The able-bodied and heterosexual norm is a fiction that is carefully constructed through non-straight embodiments. Fabric lines rely on a kinesthetic repetition of the straight line, exemplified through Cripple's movement on his crutches. When Cripple suggests the disability disguise scheme, he specifically mentions to Frank that he should borrow Cripple's clothes: "Wherefore I will immediately you take / My crooked habit, and in that disguise / Court her, yea, win her, for she will be won" (4.2.30–32). Here, "habit" simultaneously means Cripple's clothing and his repetitive behavior (the movements he performs habitually). Schaap Williams similarly notes the multiple definitions of "habit," yet cannot decide if Cripple's habit is a "property of the body or a property on the body" (108). I read Cripple's habit as both; when he describes his clothing as his habit, Cripple is deliberately connecting his textile work with his movement through space. Cripple's movement on his crutches, much like the movement of his needle, creates patterns that result from a straight vertical line (the crutches/the needle) creating a point upon a horizontal surface (the ground/the fabric). Repetitive movements of the crutches or the needle result in a habit that creates the outward appearance of straightness. What keeps lines tracing the same pattern, according to Ahmed, is what she calls "straightening devices" (66).[5] In this case, the straightening devices are Cripple's crutches, which reveal the difference between the straight line crutch and the ability for the body to mimic straightness. Cripple's habit demonstrates a reliance on non-straight—or disabled—bodies to "prop up" the illusion of able-bodiedness. The act of creating patterns on fabric,

[5] Ahmed states that orientations (such as sexual orientation) are produced through repetition, such that "bodies . . . acquire orientation through the repetitions of some actions over others" (58). Repetitive actions shape the body on an abstract level, but also on a physical one (she uses repetitive stress injuries as an example). This argument rests entirely upon an ableist assumption of the normative body, seen here as the neutral place from which all humans begin. If non-straight orientation in this case is associated not just with queerness, but with disability, Ahmed erases the crip critique that she leans on to expose the mechanisms that create heterosexuality as straight.

when paralleled with the movement of crutches against the ground, serves to demonstrate the impossibility of a natural straightness.

If Cripple's needlework patterns love, and his crutches direct the movement of his needle, how does this crip interpretation of his textile work impact the physical patterns themselves? To turn directly to the patterns described in the text, the images that Cripple is instructed to prick into fabric are nearly all flowers: Moll wants "the peascod and the blossom" (early modern imagery for sexual organs), while Phyllis asks for "a springing laurel tree / Circled about with a ring of poesy" (1.2.4; 2.2.228–29). These flowery outlines hold sexual connotations and are not formed by straight lines. Aside from Cupid's arrow, the patterns are all curved: the initials CC and SS, a gillyflower, and a rose (1.1.25; 1.2.6). Even as heterosexual courtships and expectations surrounding Phyllis's match are pushed toward the straight line, Cripple's handiwork reveals Phyllis and Moll's desires to be crip and queer. Although Cripple's stated goal is to convince the fair maid Phyllis to marry the honest (straight) Frank Golding, the patterns that *Fair Maid* produces are not so straight after all.

Frank's imitation of the patternmaker himself performs non-straight desire on a larger scale. At the beginning of the play, Frank is adamantly opposed to falling in love, and scoffs at both of his brothers who have already declared their desire for Phyllis. Yet when he meets the fair maid, he immediately falls for her, and describes his longing using disability metaphor, calling himself "sick with love" (3.2.204). In his pursuit of Phyllis, Frank leans on disability to actualize his desire. Love finds Cripple's skill with his prosthetics to be requisite to Frank's theatrical personation in the sense that "Cripple does not just shape patterns; he serves as one" ("Standing" 51). And while it is certainly true that Cripple provides the habit for Frank to assume, when Frank dons Cripple's attire, he is not worried about his ability to act disabled. On the contrary, when he first puts on Cripple's clothes, he describes himself as being at home: "And you shall run through fire, / Before you touch one part of my desire. / Am I not like myself in this disguise?" (4.2.51-53). My question is, does Frank desire Phyllis, or disability? Not only does Frank find a certain euphoria in dressing as disabled ("am I not like myself in this disguise?"), but he also names a desire that can only be reached *through* a disabling act ("you shall run through fire," most likely to cause severe burns that would, if not permanently, at least temporarily cause impairment).[6] When Frank dresses

[6] While Frank's melancholia surrounding his able-bodiedness is notable, desire for disability does not, in and of itself, subvert the ableist system. As Kristen Harmon writes, "desiring disability renders unintelligible our constructs of the normate body and its pleasures," and thus, the question becomes "whether or not such desires are transformative, or reiterative, and of which norms" (356).

as Cripple, he is embodying an identity that feels much more true to him. *Fair Maid* is a play built around imitation. Yet Frank's imitation does not occur in the moment that he dresses as Cripple, but in his moments of being Frank.

Frank's counterfeit of Cripple, which illuminates his queercrip desire, fails in the moment that it is revealed to be a counterfeit. Phyllis—who has fallen for Frank's disguise—is suddenly disgusted the moment she realizes that someone is pretending to be disabled. Frank-as-Cripple has just secured Master Flower's permission to marry Phyllis when Cripple enters the stage alongside Frank and chaos ensues:

> CRIPPLE. Gentlemen, sweet bloods, or brethren of familiarity,
> I would speak with Phyllis. Shall I have audience?
> PHYLLIS. Help me, dear father! Oh, help me, gentlemen!
> This is some spirit! Drive him from my sight!
> FRANK. Were he the devil, thou shalt not budge a foot.
> BOWDLER. Zounds, two cripples! Two dogs, two curs! 'Tis wonderful!
> FRANK. Fear not, dear heart.
> PHYLLIS. Hence, foul deformity!
> Nor thou, nor he shall my companion be.
> If cripples dead the living seem to haunt,
> I'll neither of either. Therefore, I say, avaunt!
> Help me, father. (5.1.281–92)

Phyllis initially fears the two Cripples because she sees two people who look (to her) exactly the same. The verisimilitude of Frank's disguise is facilitated through the clothing that Cripple offers to him; Cripple and Frank are cut from the same cloth. This shock of seeing two men looking so alike does not abate, and, furthermore, Phyllis is not interested in discovering which one is the real Cripple; the fact that one of them must be false is enough for her to reject them both outright. Cripple and Frank have used imitation differently from what is expected: if patterning is reproduction, Cripple has just reproduced through another man. In a world that sublimates the imitation it relies upon to create heterosexual bonds, the visible appearance of Frank (the copy) alongside Cripple (the original), attacks the very notion of patterning itself.

In *Fair Maid*, imitation, copying, and reproduction invisibly mandate heterosexual intimacies and the illusion of able-bodiedness in line with strict regulations. When the imitation becomes visible, the mechanisms that have thus far patterned the plot begin to break down. Susan M. Schweik writes of the "unsightly beggar" image in the cultural imaginary, specifically in the context of public indecency laws, which simultaneously target both cross-dressers and people with visible disabilities: the "emphasis on

exposure (don't show, don't peep) can be understood, borrowing from the register of gay discourse, as a ban on *flaming* disability" (163). Cripple and Frank, whose homoerotic connection makes them so similar as to be interchangeable, stand together against the sublimation of disability into an ableist pattern. Phyllis is not used to imitation that embraces its origins as such, and instead sees the two Cripples as a threat. As Love astutely points out, acting—imitation—is a haunted experience: a theatrical impersonation is a doubling of two bodies into one, such that either the actor or the character must, to some degree, disappear (Introduction 30). This fear of doubling, of impersonation, causes Phyllis to insist that she sees "some spirit," and to imagine Cripple as a ghost that has come to haunt her.[7] In a desperate attempt to restore the invisible nature of the pattern, Phyllis attempts to silence both Cripples just as one would blow the chalk dust off the fabric, ensuring the pattern remains hidden.

STAGE LINES

Metatheatrically, the very act of staging a play requires imitation: actors imitate characters, preemptively blurring the line between reality and pretend. This brings me to my final reading of lines: an actor's dialogue—their lines—direct the plot, or the pattern, of the narrative. Straight lines are maintained through repetitive actions, but also through language. In the context of the theater, where the actor's lines are repeated each night, the dialogue of a play creates the pattern of the play itself. After Phyllis's rejection, Frank uses his language to push the anxiety of fraudulent imitation onto disability, while reifying his own heterosexuality and able-bodiedness through his supposed honesty and decency. The linguistic conflation of disability with dishonesty silences Cripple, while allowing Frank, as the so-called honest gentleman, to attempt to assert his own straightness. Without Cripple to pattern the ending, the audience must decide whether *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* follows the straight line in the end.

The moment that Cripple steps into the same scene as his copy (Frank), he is stripped of his authorial power. Cripple's final line is, "I would speak with Phyllis. Shall I have audience?" (5.1.283). His question is never answered; Phyllis sees the two Cripples and begs them

[7] In this case, not only is Frank acting as Cripple, but Frank himself is also an actor. If Frank-as-Cripple is a doubling of two bodies into one, then actor-as-Frank-as-Cripple is a tripling of three bodies into one. Frank's excess of bodies recalls Cripple's crutches, which are described throughout the narrative as extra limbs (four legs instead of two). The visible excess of Frank's bodies and Cripple's limbs offers up their imitation as a valuable example of crip gain.

both to leave. Cripple does not exit, instead letting the audience watch while the play resolves around him. While Lindsey Row-Heyveld reads Cripple's character as ultimately asserting power at the end of *Fair Maid* by countering the stereotype of disabled people as dishonest (191), I read the ending as unequivocally disquieting. Cripple is a central character with the most dialogue, but also—as Love argues—his role as the patternmaker "establishes his skill at the process of manipulating characters into proper arrangements," making him an onstage stand-in for both author and director ("Standing" 51). Cripple uses this power to reproduce outside of the lines of the pattern, by creating his own image in Frank. But when Cripple goes a step too far, revealing Frank to be a copy, he is no longer able to intervene in the plot, or manipulate its lines. Instead, the narrative is left directionless as the Flowers and the Goldings scramble to revert towards the straight line pattern.

After Cripple is silenced, Frank straightens himself through his stage lines by declaring himself no longer a counterfeit. For Frank to reveal himself as nondisabled, he must take off the clothes that patterned him as Cripple. To return to the image of the unsightly beggar, who is feared to be "uncovering the body and displaying its forbidden part(s) for antisocial ends," Frank exposes himself for the distinctly *social* end of heterosexual marriage (Schweik 160). In other words, Frank exposes himself for the sake of decency. When Phyllis calls for the men to be driven from her sight, Frank removes the garments that disguised himself as Cripple to assure her: "Dear heart, revoke these words. / Here are no spirits, nor deformities. / I am a counterfeit cripple now no more, / But young Frank Golding, as I was before" (5.1.292–95). As he drops the crutches and moves very deliberately onto the straight line, Frank proves that he can stand straight by being nondisabled and, to further the metaphor, sexually potent.[8] Having counter-identified with Cripple, Frank declares himself young, honest, and able to procreate within the lines of heterosexuality. Phyllis halfheartedly accepts his proposal. Frank appropriates disability for his own gain, showing no investment in the reality of disability, only how the removal of his disabled disguise can be used to reify himself as both heterosexual and able-bodied.

Frank can verbally demonstrate his straightness because honesty and decency follow the straight line; in being honest, Frank becomes decent. Ahmed observes that in the movement toward the straight line, "straightness gets attached to other values including *decent*, conventional, direct, and *honest*" (70, emphasis mine). *Fair Maid* grapples with the

[8] Standing straight as a double entendre for the ability to become erect casts the straight line as a phallic symbol; patrilineality relies on the reinscription of straight lines.

common early modern theatrical trope of disability as dishonest, reified continuously through disability disguise narratives. Row-Heyveld argues that Cripple must work hard to resist the notion "that disability is always inherently fraudulent" (2). When Cripple no longer has control over the pattern of the play, *Fair Maid* reverts to a world in which disability can be used and discarded where convenient. At the end of his short soliloquy, Frank confesses why he feels so drawn to Cripple: "Am I not like myself in this disguise? / Crooked in shape, and crooked in my thoughts? / Then am I a cripple right" (4.2.53-55). Frank reinforces the straight line in his brazen conflation of disability with dishonesty, which assures the audience that all that is needed for him to no longer be disabled (or "crooked") is to be honest.

Frank is able to achieve heterosexual marriage by being honest, therefore ostensibly proving his straightness. Yet there is a catch: heterosexual marriage was only ever achieved through Frank's dishonest counterfeit of Cripple. The professedly able-bodied characters need Cripple, the disabled character reduced linguistically to his disability, to facilitate their imitation through patternmaking. Love argues that the repetition of Cripple's embodiment is crucial in securing heterosexual courtship (especially and most literally in the case of Frank):

> The union of prosthetic disability with artisanal skill, and in particular the intimation that prosthetic embodiment and locomotion is itself a skill (requiring nimbleness and facility with tools), suggests, alongside Cripple's especial expertise at patterning, that disabled embodiment is not only a skill but a model, a standard that the able-bodied need to copy to achieve their ends. ("Standing" 54)

Love reads Cripple's body as the site of imitation, that which is to be imitated *upon*. To further Love's argument, rather than disability being the failed copy of able-bodiedness, able-bodiedness becomes the failed copy of disability. Previous scholarship on *Fair Maid* has identified Cripple as the one character in a play built around imitation that *cannot* imitate. Schaap Williams considers Cripple as the facilitator of imitation, but believes him to be barred from it himself: "Cripple supplies theatrical prosthetics that are uniquely individual, and therefore make his identity particularly available for imitation, but the play marks his body as specifically unable to adopt another form or play another role" (113). However, understanding fabric patterns as the primary/sole facilitator of impersonation—as the grounds of the counterfeit that enables Frank to change his embodiment—shifts the narrative around Cripple's supposed inability to impersonate. While Frank can successfully trick others into believing he is Cripple, he

specifically mentions that he is not able to do Cripple's work. Frank chides himself, "Now frame thy hands to draw: A worser workman never any saw" (4.2.57–58). Love describes the "prosthetic doubleness" of Cripple's crutches and the "linkage of [his] tools of locomotion to artisanal work," i.e. Cripple's patternmaking ("Standing" 57; 52). If patterns are an imitation, Cripple *is* able to imitate; and in fact—given Frank's uselessness at drawing patterns—Cripple is the only one who can.

Cripple's unique embodiment provides him with a skill, one that is often exploited, but one that, through an understanding of the mechanisms of the straight line pattern, offers an opportunity for critique (and perhaps, interference). Rather than disability being the fraud in this disability disguise narrative, it is able-bodiedness that becomes more suspect. Frank's name as a synonym for honesty is complicated by the fact that he is the most dishonest character in the play; he spends half the plot pretending to be a porter before he puts on his final disguise. Frank did not think that he could win Phyllis by being honest. He worries, "if I had wooed her in my proper shape, / I do believe she never would have liked me" (5.1.95-96). Cripple, as the patternmaker and onstage director, has created a world in which Frank is anxious that his able body is somehow lacking, where the only way to get to a straight line is through a rather curved one. It is only through Cripple's forced silence that the play uneasily reverts toward the straight line. Able-bodiedness, McRuer argues, like heterosexuality, is an identity built on the illusion of attainability, for "the ideal able-bodied identity can never, once and for all, be achieved" (9). As the actors play out the marriage of the fair maid to the honest gentleman, the fraudulent performance of able-bodiedness has never been more apparent.

Fair Maid concludes as Phyllis and Frank scramble for stable ground, attempting hastily to repeat what the audience might expect of a city comedy: a reinstatement of Frank's true identity (which never did feel very true to begin with) and a (seemingly) heterosexual able-bodied marriage. Out of all of the moments of the drama, this is the one that seems the most fabricated. Phyllis pledges herself to whichever Golding brother wants her the most (who, in predictable fashion, is Frank), while Cripple stands by and watches it all without saying a single word. This is not the play that has been previously presented to the audience in which Cripple directs the action, Phyllis defies her parents' wishes at every turn, and Frank can never make up his mind who, exactly, he wants to be. Instead, each character reverts to the trope that patterns them. Without Cripple's verbal guidance, the audience members become the patternmakers who must either accept the marriage ending or understand the queercrip possibility that Cripple leaves behind. In fact, the prologue of the play puts the impetus for creating the straight line in the hands of the audience: "Meanwhile shore up our

tender pamping twig, / That yet on humble ground doth lowly lie" (9–10). The play envisions itself as disabled, in need of being propped upright by a straight line that only the audience can provide. It is up to the viewer/reader to choose whether to interpret *Fair Maid* along the straight line, to either accept the given conclusion or imagine the alternatives that allow for queer and crip intimacy to flourish.

CONCLUSION

The Fair Maid of the Exchange uses fabric patterns to imitate heterosexuality and able-bodiedness along the straight line, even as Cripple, the only disabled character in the play, attempts to work outside such regulations. Phyllis must marry a Golding brother to follow the pre-patterned betrothal her parents offer her, which will reproduce straightness through heterosexual and able-bodied marriage. The hetero-ableist norm is physicalized through textile work, in which repeated imitated movements pattern an invisible straight line. This imitation, or counterfeit, fabricates heterosexual courtship along the straight and nondisabled line by asserting its own honesty and decency, even in the midst of dishonesty. Material patterns act as straightening devices for Phyllis and Frank, who show a certain level of desire for Cripple and his embodiment, yet are ultimately not allowed to live in or express that desire. Frank's imitation of Cripple is denied, even as it is what allows the marriage plot to succeed. The repetition that undergirds *Fair Maid* is not used to bolster a crip critique, but instead is washed away, just as Cripple's patterned charcoal lines are washed off to reveal nothing but stitches on cloth. It is then up to the audience to follow the straight line or to think differently about the patterns presented in the drama.

Ultimately, *Fair Maid* reinstates the original pattern, which begs the question of whether there is any possibility of moving outside the omnipresent straight line. Judith Butler asks this very question: if heterosexuality (and, in this case, able-bodiedness) only exists through a series of performative actions repeated such that they are seen as natural, where lies the possibility for subversion? Butler writes, "all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; 'agency' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (185).[9] *Fair Maid* offers such a variation as well, one that may otherwise go unnoticed: Cripple and Frank are patterning themselves to favor disability rather than able-bodiedness; to create *more* disability rather than less.

[9] Butler offers drag as an example: drag's imitation of a gendered identity performs the imitation that secretly underlies the production of gender itself (175).

The play is gesturing toward queer and crip intimacy and embodiment by varying from the expected pattern. Phyllis's initial variation (to choose Cripple over any of the Golding brothers) changes the outcome of the repetition to center disability rather than sideline it. Cripple's final moments of silence, should the audience choose to listen, cultivate an uneasiness surrounding the able-bodied appropriation of crip tools and perspectives. What *Fair Maid* offers is not a new pattern, but a variation on an existing pattern that performs, for early modern and contemporary audiences alike, the radical possibilities of uncovering new ways to imitate.

Reading *Fair Maid* along the straight line will lead to an ableist and conformist interpretation of a play that, though written in the 17th century, offers valuable insight into the interplay between sexuality and ability today. *Fair Maid* provides a fabricated realm in which actors and audiences can enact repetitions that might not otherwise be available in everyday life. Yet, as the ending of the play demonstrates, fiction also does its part in reinforcing normative patterning, especially when dramatic narratives begin to fall into predictable shapes. Viewers expect a city comedy to end in marriage and may not read beyond the confirmation of the trope to consider how *Fair Maid* fights such standardization. An audience's task then is not to see outside the pattern, for that may well be impossible, but to see within the pattern, to understand its workings and its possibilities for disruption. Attention to patterning teaches audiences not to assume at the beginning that the fair maid Phyllis Flower will marry the young gentleman Frank Golding, nor to discount an early modern play that deals with disability as being automatically less adept at handling crip critique. *Fair Maid* establishes that the patterns that govern everyday lives often go unnoticed; thus, it is entirely possible to read *Fair Maid* without considering the sartorial setting. And that is precisely the problem, because in doing so, the reader misses the very mechanism that allows the play to direct and, ultimately, discard the possibilities of queer and crip intimacies. Audiences can all too easily follow the straight line, never stopping to consider what has patterned this line, and what alternative patterns may be possible.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke UP, 2006. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388074

Anonymous. *The Fair Maid of the Exchange*. Edited by Genevieve Love. *The Routledge Anthology of Early Modern Drama*, edited by Jeremy Lopez, Taylor & Francis, 2020, pp. 816–81.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. 1990. Routledge, 1999.

Cennini, Cennino. *The Craftsman's Handbook*. 1933. Edited by Daniel V. Thompson Jr., Dover, 1954.

"Counterfeit, Adj. & N." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, June 2025. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7994137129

Harmon, Kristen. "Hearing Aid Lovers, Pretenders, and Deaf Wannabes: The Fetishizing of Hearing." *Sex and Disability*, edited by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow, Duke UP, 2012, pp. 355–72. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smzjb.21

Hobgood, Allison P., and David Houston Wood. Introduction. *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England*, edited by Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood, Ohio State UP, 2013, pp. 1–19. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv17260bx.5

Learner, Mary. "Evidence of Pouncing in 17th-Century Print." *Huntington Verso*, 31 July 2019, https://www.huntington.org/verso/2019/07/evidence-pouncing-17th-century-print, accessed 30 Aug. 2025.

Love, Genevieve. Introduction. *Early Modern Theatre and the Figure of Disability*. Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 1–38. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350017238.0006

Love, Genevieve. "The Work of Standing and of Standing-For: Disability, Movement, Theatrical Personation in *The Fair Maid of the Exchange*." *Early Modern Theatre and the Figure of Disability*, Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 39–68. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350017238.ch-001

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York UP, 2006.

Mollow, Anna. "Is Sex Disability?: Queer Theory and the Disability Drive." *Sex and Disability*, edited by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow, Duke UP, 2012, pp. 283–312. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smzjb.18

Row-Heyveld, Lindsey. *Dissembling Disability in Early Modern English Drama*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Schaap Williams, Katherine. "Performing Cripple in Theatrical Exchange." *Unfixable Forms: Disability, Performance, and the Early Modern English Theater*, Cornell UP, 2021, pp. 86–119. https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501753503.003.0004

Schweik, Susan M. "Gender, Sexuality, and the Ugly Law." *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*, New York UP, 2009, pp. 141–64. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814708873.001.0001

"Straight, Adj., Adv., & N." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2478211037

Em Gural (they/them) is an independent scholar whose recent publication "Out of (Straight) Time: The Potentiality of Mythical Creatures in *Our Flag Means Death*" appeared in *Sextant: Masculinities, Sexualities, and Decolonialities* (vol. 2, no. 1, 2024). The focus of their research is gender and sexuality studies in contemporary literature and media, and their current scholarship analyzes theatrical performance as a mechanism for articulating queer and trans desire.
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1102-9980
emgural@proton.me

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.14

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń

"Hashtag wheels on fire": Crip/Queer Sexualities and Access Intimacies in Michael Southan's *Kerbs*

ABSTRACT

Michael Southan's *Kerbs* (2022) explores the problematic nature of dating for young wheelchair-users, discussing the complexities of disability intimacy (García-Santesmases) and different geographies for disability sexuality (Siebers). Beginning with an explicit exchange on disabled dating application projected on the screen, the play develops into a commentary on difficulty of negotiating time and place for a new relationship in a disabling environment. My aim in this article is to examine the intersections of crip and queer theories and to consider their applicability to the study of disability intimacy and its representation in disability drama. I will address the aspects of disability intimacies that either point to the connections between crip and queer sexualities or present moments when crip and queer sexualities coincide, despite contextual differences. I build my conceptual framework around the argument on the affinities between queer and crip challenges to compulsory heteronormativity and able-bodiedness developed, among others, by Robert McRuer as well as Tobin Siebers's reflections on disability as a sexual minority and sexual citizenship. In this context, I will investigate the tensions that Southan's play presents between normate expectations and conceptions of sexuality, on the one hand, and disability intimacy and access intimacy that define crip sexualities, on the other.

Keywords: crip/queer intimacy, disability sexuality, access intimacy, digital intimacy, intersectionality.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 19 Dec. 2025. Verified: 7 Apr. 2026. Accepted: 15 Apr. 2026.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to examine the intersections of crip and queer theories and to consider their applicability to the study of disabled intimacy and its representation in disability drama. Taking an essentially heterosexual crip romantic story told by Michael Southan in his 2022 play *Kerbs* as a case study, I will address the aspects of disability intimacies that either point to the connections between crip and queer sexualities or present moments when crip and queer sexualities coincide, despite contextual differences. I build my conceptual framework around the argument on the affinities between queer and crip challenges to compulsory heteronormativity and able-bodiedness developed, among others, by Robert McRuer ("Compulsory" and "Introduction") as well as Tobin Siebers's reflections on disability as a "sexual minority" (136) and the problem of sexual citizenship, taking detours to contextualise some of these concerns in crip/queer and disability activism referenced in the play. In this context, I will investigate the tensions between "normate" (Garland-Thomson 8) expectations and conceptions of sexuality, on the one hand, and disability intimacy and intimate access that define crip sexualities, on the other. As a type of non-normative sexuality, disability sexuality is characterised by increased vulnerability and exposure as well as insecurity and lack of privacy, but it also offers alternative ways of feeling and experiencing pleasure. Crip intimacy strongly depends on access intimacy—a concept based on disability justice and ethical responsiveness (Valentine)—both of which are linked to solidarity and care. *Kerbs* by Michael Southan problematises all of these concerns, showing, on the one hand, a struggle for autonomy and safety, and on the other, the need to re-think and expand intimacy into cooperative and often intersectional endeavour that demands new spatial and interpersonal relations.

Kerbs was first staged in 2022 as a co-production of Graeae and Belgrade Theatre in Coventry for Coventry UK City of Culture 2021. With its "rich history of inclusion" and contribution to the emergence of theatre-in-education, Belgrade Theatre has been committed to diversity, collaboration, and service to the local community ("About Us"). Graeae theatre is dedicated to "creat[ing] political platforms through artistic engagement" for people with disabilities ("Our History"). Graeae sees itself as "a force for change in world-class theatre, breaking down barriers, challenging preconceptions, championing diversity across the sector and boldly placing Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent artists centre stage" ("Graeae" 18). The author of *Kerbs*, Michael Southan, is a playwright and poet with cerebral palsy using a power chair and an alumnus of Graeae Theatre's "Write To Play" project. *Kerbs*, as the author says, was started

as the final assignment that he was given in the Graeae's project and developed into a full-length play. The play was staged after the lockdown period and was thought to be a good choice for the return to theatres thereafter. When answering the question "Why is *Kerbs* important?," Michael Southan explained:

> *Kerbs* is about two people looking for a connection and I think after the two years we've had, I look forward to people connecting together in a theatre and watching a story play out in front of us. *Kerbs* also puts a disabled narrative front and centre, and to me that's the most important thing. ("Interview" 7)

Acknowledging both of these contexts—the post-pandemic need for connection and centrality of the disabled narrative—as significant, I will examine how navigating space in *Kerbs*—both physical and social—for people with disabilities demands redefining privacy and intimacy, as well as the relation between independence and dependence. I will focus on the character of Lucy, a 24-year-old wheelchair user living with her mother, who struggles with her misconceptions of independence and ideals of non-disabled love, and who learns during the course of the play to accept the difference of disability sexuality and intimacy.

Kerbs presents this process in several stages, each featuring complications characteristic of the conventional romantic plot structure, based on misunderstandings and conflicts between Lucy and David, a 26-year-old student using a wheelchair, as well as obstacles, both physical and psychological, leading to a postponed happy ending. It is important, however, that these complications result from or are further complexified by lack of access and accessibility, beginning with physical access (the titular kerbs), and finishing with a failure to go beyond it to cater for more complex needs forming access intimacy (including the psychological implications of access to a disposable plastic straw in a pub or personal assistance). We watch the characters through the stages of searching for a partner on the dating application (dedicated to users with disabilities), the kerbs accident during the first date, and increased control from Lucy's mother after her brief stay in hospital as a result. This, in turn, leads to exacerbating problems with finding safe and accessible space for intimate encounters. A trip to a seaside caravan, intended to be a solution, initially only increases the tensions and misunderstandings between the couple, before being unexpectedly resolved in—paradoxically enough—the "public" space of an accessible toilet. The play ends with the couple planning another trip to celebrate David being awarded a doctoral degree, and arranging for their lesbian family friend to assist them once again.

In what follows, I will begin my discussion by elucidating the connections between crip and queer sexualities, while focusing on the features of disability sexuality that make it alternative to mainstream sexualities. The second major theoretical context will be formed by theories of disability intimacy and access intimacy, defining alternative ways of being with each other and responding to complex access needs. In my discussion of *Kerbs*, I will first focus on domains in which crip and queer sexualities and intimacies converge, mostly by exploring alternative intimate geographies in order to trace ways of opposing marginalisation and erasure. These geographies will embrace both physical and digital spaces. I will then examine how the play addresses the problem of crip and access intimacies, focusing first on the positive effects of relational and intersectional care and then presenting the negative impact of disregarding more complex access needs, in the context of eco-ableism and disability activism.

CRIP/QUEER IDENTITIES AND SEXUALITIES

The general theoretical context for my discussion comes from Robert McRuer's observation on the deep roots of prejudice and stigmatisation that connect the history and present experiences of ableism and gender discrimination. In his 2020 essay on compulsory able-bodiedness (which is a commentary on his 2002 publication on the same subject), McRuer points to the parallels between queer and crip identities by noticing that "an attention to . . . gender trouble is always already haunted by ability trouble" ("Compulsory" 64). While building on the earlier developments in queer (and also feminist) theory, the discussion on discrimination and marginalisation caused by compulsory able-bodiedness is seen as instrumental in understanding the roots and mechanisms of all stigmatisation and silencing. Able-bodiedness and its connections to queer theory became for McRuer the foundations for what was called "*crip theory*, a project that draws on artistic, activist, and academic reclamations and reinventions of the word *crip*" (62). The concept of "queer/disabled existence" was seen as "a form of resistance to compulsory able-bodiedness" (63). In his commentary on the mutual definitions of queer and crip identities in homophobic and ableist contexts,[1] McRuer insists on the necessity to combine crip and queer perspectives to effectively oppose "the ongoing, performative consolidation of both heterosexual and

[1] McRuer comments on how disability is always "a bit" queer and queerness—"a bit disabled" ("Compulsory" 63).

able-bodied dominance" (ibid.), while "accessing in the process new ways of thinking, feeling, and being in common" (66) and "imagining bodies and desires otherwise" ("Introduction" 32). Being together in difference and imagining alternative corporealities provide an important general context for the relationships presented in Southan's play, the characters' solidarity but also their cultural and social marginalisation.

For Tobin Siebers, the analogies and connections between queer and disabled sexualities mostly concern the struggle for the recognition and rights of disabled people "as a sexual minority" (148). In *Disability Theory*, he notes an important tendency emerging among people with disabilities to claim "a sexual culture" in which disability is seen "not as a defect that needs to be overcome to have sex but as a complex embodiment that enhances sexual activities and pleasure" (ibid.). Siebers highlights the differences between normative and disabled sex, emphasising that "disabled people may advance a different sexual geography both for the body and the places where the bodies express their sexuality" (152). For discussion of *Kerbs* the latter, in particular, will be significant: "reorganiz[ing] places inhabited by bodies as locations for sexual culture" (ibid.). This will include physical space readjustments as well as online intimacies, many of which show important analogies to how other minorities use space and communication channels, or how they have been ghettoised. In her study on "Intimate Discrimination," Elizabeth F. Emens comments on the presence (or rather absence) of people with disabilities on dating websites, stating that "[d]isability is almost entirely absent from the mainstream dating websites, suggesting . . . its assumed importance (that is, its status as disqualifying). . . . Marginal dating sites fill the gap for disabled people and, in so doing, articulate the exclusion felt by disabled people on the mainstream sites" (1326). This exclusion also creates a meaningful context for *Kerbs* and its problematisation of sexual marginalisation.

Another important context for the spatial reordering of crip intimacy is what Siebers describes as the need for transferring citizens' rights to places where people can or want to enter sexual relationships. Here Siebers comments on the use of the public accessible toilet, where the disabled and assistant relation is a way of camouflaging sexual intimacies (152). Accessible toilets have also connected people with disabilities and other minority groups, such as transgender and transsexual people, turning into what Alison Kafer calls, referring to Judith Plaskow's research on the significance of public toilets, "sites of intersectional study and activism" (154) and "queercrip alliances" (155). In her *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Kafer examines the importance of public accessible toilets not only to people with disabilities, but other

identities not included in the binary gender division of sanitary spaces: "with disabled people and disability movements working to undo the gendered conventions of the toilet as part of our larger struggles for access to public space" (156–57).

With reference to how disability sexuality differs from the normative one, Siebers also notes that disability sexuality rejects many myths and expectations of normative sexuality, such as spontaneity, which might result from the need for extensive preparations, taking into account the limited access to privacy that some people may experience and the need for "arrangements with personal attendants" (150). Referring to multiple examples, Siebers shares an important "consideration" that people with disabilities should not "judge their sexuality by comparison to normative sexuality" (151). This issue is also emphasised by Kirsty Liddiard in her 2018 book *The Intimate Lives of Disabled People*, which is a collection of stories told by disabled people about their sexual lives: the attitudes to forms of assistance or even more so—sexual support—often reflect "the ableist myth of the sexually self-sufficient and self-governing body" (3). Referring to Hilary Brown (125), García-Santesmases et al. observe that "[s]exuality has been a paradigmatic area of oppression for people with functional diversity who have been placed in two equally stereotyped categories: oversexed perverts or asexual innocents" (270).[2] Liddiard points to an important aspect of disabled sexuality, suggesting that caught between these polar opposites people with disabilities are thought to be in need of protection and control. Part of this approach, as Liddiard further notes, is connected with the denial of disabled sexuality based on the belief in their "passive, vulnerable and childlike" nature (3) or "asexual objectification" discussed by Garland-Thomson after Harlan Hahn (25). Disabled sexuality could thus be seen as something shocking and abnormal (Liddiard 3), which makes access to intimacy particularly problematic, also for the main character of *Kerbs*, living with her mother, who is her personal assistant on an everyday basis. All these considerations will be of particular importance in the discussion of the main character's initial romantic expectations, based on myths and preconceptions about disability intimacy and sexuality, as well as the process through which she negotiates her independence and comes to accept assistance.

[2] Kirsty Liddiard also emphasises that while "most disabled people are assumed to lack the capabilities and capacities to embody sexuality, sensuality, expression and desire" (1), some of them are often perceived as "hypersexual" and thus "in need of containment" (2). Liddiard points out that the concept of disabled asexuality differs largely from the present self-definition of being asexual and is a product of ableist and disableist attitudes (1–2).

DISABILITY INTIMACY AND ACCESS INTIMACY

The way that the difference of disability sexuality is presented in *Kerbs* involves an alternative perspective on intimacy, going beyond romantic love, on the one hand, and responding to the needs of people with disabilities that are not limited to simple access, on the other. These aspects are considered here with reference to theories of disability intimacies by Alice Wong and the discussion of access intimacies by Desiree Valentine, Mia Mingus, and Andrea García-Santesmases Fernández. In her introduction to *Disability Intimacies: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, Alice Wong argues that "[i]ntimacy is more than sex or romantic love. Intimacy is an ever-expanding universe composed of a myriad heavenly bodies. Intimacy is about relationships within a person's self, with others, with communities, with nature, and beyond" (xviii). In this broad concept of intimacy, disability sexuality can be considered as relational and intersubjective. While the main focus in Southan's play is on romantic and sexual intimacies, these expand to include other relationalities, particularly those with the family friend and assistant, whose role will be discussed in further sections.

Similarly, from a broader perspective, access involves not only physical accessibility—"what we might call logistical, accommodationist access"—but, as Desiree Valentine notes, "appreciat[ing] the depths of access-related issues" (77). Access intimacy is based on "an ongoing, interpersonal process of relating and taking responsibility for our inevitable encroachment on each other"; it "invites attention to our . . . intersubjectivity, . . . vulnerability, and the asymmetries of power in any relationship" (78). Access intimacy is particularly important in the relationship between a disabled person and their assistant, and operates in both directions, taking into consideration the complex and problematic nature of power relationships. For a disabled person, as Valentine observes in her discussion of the essay "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link" by Mia Mingus and her later texts, access intimacy means "the feeling of someone genuinely understanding and anticipating another person's access needs," which is opposed to "a rights-based framework of accessibility that prioritizes the logistics of access" (82).

With reference to Southan's play, this important difference will be addressed in positive terms in the discussion of the assistance the main characters receive in an intimate situation from their friend; in a critical context, the difference is exposed in how many places the characters use are designed to cater only for the most basic physical access needs. As a result, the play shows the difference between how physically accessible spaces are used by "fitter" persons with disabilities (like David), while others might need more fully accessible solutions (Lucy). This distinction illustrates

an important redefinition of positionality in access intimacy, "demanding abled people inhabit the world of disabled individuals rather than better 'fitting' disabled individuals within the abled world" (Valentine 81–82). Finally, what also seems significant in the way *Kerbs* presents intimacy is how it builds a strong, positive, and rewarding interconnection between the characters involved. As Mingus explains, the feeling one experiences in access intimacy is not based on "charity," but it is "a freeing, light, loving feeling. It brings the people who are a part of it closer; it builds and deepens connection."

CRIP/QUEER GEOGRAPHIES IN *KERBS*

The way in which space is navigated in *Kerbs* points to significant analogies between how people with disabilities may use space—both physical and digital—and how other discriminated groups have been forced to manage their erotic lives, including dating. This redefinition illustrates a different geography of sexuality and intimacy for people with disabilities mentioned by Siebers, pointing, in general, to a different use of space by marginalised groups because of various forms of discrimination, going beyond physical access. This is partly connected to the secrecy and invisibility of disability sexuality, on the one hand, and lack of accessible intimate spaces, on the other. In my discussion, I will focus on the redefinitions of public and private spaces as well as on the significance of online communication for people with limited mobility and restricted access to privacy, including the first scene of the play, which establishes the marginal position of the characters in relation to the able-bodied mainstream.

An important part of crip/queer geographies in *Kerbs* is the redefinition of physical space, including how homely and intimate spaces become public, and vice versa. Ironic reversals are most spectacular and resonant with meaning on two occasions—first when the private home becomes public through online communication and then when a public facility becomes an intimate, yet illegal, environment for a sexual encounter. The latter scene, more crucial for the discussion of crip/queer spaces and their tendency to represent a different sexual geography, takes place towards the end of the play, in a public toilet. After an argument and a game of laser quest, Lucy and David finally feel ready to be together, while the only private place they can occupy at this moment is a large, fully accessible and clean public toilet with a hoist. With the help of a family friend (to be discussed further in this article) and the hoist, the couple manage to finally have sex that is described in stage directions as "brilliant" and "[a]lmost like a ballet" (Southan, *Kerbs* 63).

The love scene in a public toilet resonates with important implications. As it is legally forbidden to have sex in a public toilet, the characters' intimacy becomes transgressive, echoing the tendency to see disability sexuality as transgressive, but also pointing to the significance of alternative spaces for marginalised intimacies.[3] The accessible toilet, as has already been suggested, functions as a symbolic space for non-normate identities and sexual minorities. According to the play's theatre director, Nickie Miles-Wildin, "using an accessible toilet for pleasure" is one of the play's main themes (8). In practical terms, the sanitary space offers an alternative to the caravan that was supposed to be their romantic weekend shelter, but did not meet Lucy's expectations. Being old and rather dirty, the caravan was also not accessible and demanded the personal assistant's presence.

The toilet scene comments on the effectiveness of public spaces' physical accessibility, and the ineffectiveness of solutions for intimate spaces. This is what Valentine observes in her earlier-mentioned study, noting how logistics overshadow other, more complex accessibility needs. This bias is particularly visible in disregarding more complex needs in which other forms of accessibility matter. The "pristine" toilet scene also contrasts with an earlier accident that Lucy had in a toilet (inadequate, dirty, unlockable) on a train when going to the seaside, which also reveals the tendency to limit accessibility only to technical solutions without taking into consideration the psychological needs and practicalities that form part of access intimacy (being able to see the space from a disabled person's position).

In the second situation, demonstrating private/public space reversals (chronologically prior to the toilet scene), which occurs at the beginning of the lovers' acquaintance, Lucy and David arrive at Lucy's flat, thinking that her mother has gone out to a party. Believing that they are alone, they enter the dark flat "in a state of undress" (Southan, *Kerbs* 15), when all of the sudden the lights are switched on, revealing not only the people waiting for her at home but many more turning on their cameras and microphones on Zoom to greet Lucy at the party to celebrate her return from the hospital. The scene presents an increased level of vulnerability and the oppressiveness of the home as a childhood space for Lucy, one in which she cannot negotiate privacy. Living with her mother, who also acts as a personal assistant to her on an everyday basis, turns her into a dependent

[3] Desperate to find an intimate place before the trip, when Lucy is kept captive at home by her mother because of her earlier misbehaviour, the couple speculate about the possibility of using the public toilet for this purpose, playing quite daring erotic games:

"DAVID: '*Evening babe, asking for a friend, is it legal to have sex in a public toilet?*'

LUCY: '*Googling. . . . Tell your friend *crying/laughing face emoji* outlawed under section 73 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003*' (text messages in screen reader voice)" (Southan, *Kerbs* 27).

person, more childish and childlike, whose coming of age is delayed not only because of her mother's fears and control but also because of her own projections of her mother's expectations. This accounts for her feeling that her sexuality is "a bit" illicit and closeted, before her coming out as sexually active in the conversation with her mother after weeks of being forbidden to leave home alone.[4] Although part of the home's oppressiveness is based on Lucy's mistaken belief in her mother's opposition to her sexual relationships, she tries to keep her relationship with David a secret.

The use of a dating application by Lucy and David as well as their subsequent exchanges of texted messages also invite important comments on crip-queer spaces, disability intimacy, as well as crip digital intimacy. It is worth noting that digital communication features strongly in the performance stage design, with both dating application exchanges and communicator messages projected onto the back wall. Amanda Mascarenhas, the show's stage designer, explained: "I was highly inspired by apps and the sleek design of the icons. We wanted to bring the swift nature of digital software into the show" (14). My first observation concerning the digital communication in *Kerbs* is connected to how marginalised sexualities use less visible or unexposed forms of communication and matching. For people with disabilities, as well as members of other minorities, the web has offered an alternative to the "conventional social spaces," to which they have had "restricted access" (Kuppers 111).

The opening scene critiques the wider tendency to exclude people with disabilities from mainstream dating websites, by first showing on the screen: "*Lucy on non-disabled dating app . . . being ghosted or trolled/ fetishised*" (Southan, *Kerbs* 3). Despite technical accessibility, the non-disabled dating application does not allow Lucy to connect to a partner, or even to try searching, because she is rejected by others or objectified through fetishisation. After a while, the screen shows Lucy on the disabled dating app, with an almost immediate response from the match—David. While the whole play is dedicated to the exploration of the young disabled people's relationship, beginning with the non-disabled dating site is an important definition of the environment in which the love story is developed—the ableist or disableist society.

The first scene largely reflects the results of the study conducted by Elizabeth F. Emens and described in the aforementioned "Intimate Discrimination." Emens notes that "[d]isability is almost entirely absent from the mainstream dating websites," which implies "its status as disqualifying" (1326). In contrast, "[m]arginal dating sites" offer a meeting

[4] This is caused by an accident she had after her first date with David; having drunk too much, she hits a kerb, falls off the wheelchair, and hurts her wrist.

space for people with disabilities but "in so doing, articulate the exclusion felt by disabled people" elsewhere (ibid.). While the story developed in *Kerbs* never returns to this problem, it is an important context in which we, as audience or readers, are confronted with the marginal positioning of disabled persons as users of dating applications, in particular, and as sexual citizens, in general.

With reference to marginalised sexualities, as well as the problem with access to privacy, Lucy and David start dating quickly, without getting to know each other well. This is mostly imposed by Lucy, who has very little time alone and can hardly ever go out without her mother's knowledge. Because of secrecy and urgency, their communication on a dating application is very explicit and straightforward, beyond what especially Lucy can actually manage in face-to-face communication. Filled with suggestive emojis, the messages reflect what could be seen as spontaneity and desire (e.g., "a quickie in the quickie"[5]), but, from another perspective, demonstrate the alternative temporalities that intimacy entails for characters with restricted mobility and freedom (being partly relegated to mediated communication).

The second comment pertaining to digital communication concerns the context of technological affordances, in particular their "mechanisms." By crip digital intimacy, Johnson et al. mean "the relational connections and affects that spring from the ways disabled people approach and relate to each other within digital spaces" (6). In their discussion of Jenny Davis's study of affordances, Johnson et al. define mechanisms of affording as "the ways that technologies '*request*, *demand*, *encourage*, *discourage*, *refuse*, and *allow* particular lines of action and social dynamics'" (17). When considered in the context of technological affordances, online applications and communicators in *Kerbs* not only offer technical opportunities to the characters but also prescribe certain forms of relational connections that are expected from their users. The dating application, for instance, encourages more forward attitudes and explicit expressions, which later shape the characters' exchanges when texting messages or even in face-to-face conversations.

As Mark Fisher in his *Guardian* review aptly notes, "texts [in *Kerbs*] are heavy on innuendo, every winky face matched by an aubergine emoji. They are witty and sexually assured." The explicitly erotic language that the characters use on the application is then transferred to other exchanges. Hashtags used on messaging apps are also spoken by the characters in a face-to-face conversation, such as "Hashtag wheels on fire" (Southan, *Kerbs* 5), "Hashtag DavidIsOnFire," or "Hashtag CoolMeDown" (26). As

[5] A pun on a type of wheelchair and a quick drink or sex (Southan, *Kerbs* 3).

the plot develops, it becomes evident that the characters do not keep pace with their projected digital selves. Part of the story presented in *Kerbs* is about the process of catching up with and redefining this projection, as in face-to-face situations dating proves to be much more complicated and involves assistance from others.

Yet another important aspect of digital communication presented onstage is its ability to make the performance itself accessible through audiodescription (when the characters are texting) and captioning (when the characters are speaking). The characters seem to inhabit this inclusive space in which switching the medium of communication comes naturally. "Code switching" is thus as much a feature of the main characters' relationship as it is part of inclusive communication in theatre. Accessibility is not added to the existing play in performance but is aesthetically inherent in its modes of communication and structure. In this respect, *Kerbs*—with its captioning and audiodescription as well as an easily modifiable and accessible stage design for wheelchair-using actors—integrates disability aesthetics with access.[6] It posits a different perception of theatre space, which, as Kirsty Johnston suggests, "has a long connection to the ideology of ability" (81).

ACCESS INTIMACY IN *KERBS*

In my discussion of how access intimacy is problematised in *Kerbs*, I will focus on two aspects of relationality: personal assistance (linked to intersectionality) and eco-ability/eco-ableism, both of which are connected through the concepts of care and anticipation of one's needs, or lack thereof. As mentioned before, one of the major problems addressed in the play is Lucy's preconceptions about sexuality and romantic relationships, partly based on ableist notions. What she feels is the pressure to be spontaneous, on the one hand, and erotically appealing, on the other. In both, she wishes to enter the relationship as an independent lover, refusing to accept David's assistance. Part of the solution to this is asking a family friend, Toni, to accompany Lucy and David during their weekend at the

[6] In her chapter on universal design and its applicability in disability theatre, Bree Hadley describes this type of theatre as the one that "would incorporate accessibility into the performance as an integral part of the aesthetic, rather than as interpretations, captions or descriptions that run alongside" ("A 'Universal Design'" 183). *Kerbs* avoids the problem raised by Hadley in her study, namely being "co-opted by non-disabled artists and/or audiences" (186) in situations when they severed from "the physicality, phenomenological intentionality, and perspectives that disabled people deploy in their day-to-day lives" (Hadley, "Participation" 166).

seaside. While the play does not raise the issue of care assistance, it does insist on how intimacy differs for a person who needs help when entering a love relationship.

The whole trip to the seaside with Toni shows the nuances and complexities of access intimacy and crip intimacy, with attention given to the needs, vulnerabilities, and power relations between all three participants. This is particularly visible in how Toni manages her position in relation to the lovers, how she anticipates what their needs are and remains in the margins so as not to dominate them as a non-disabled person. Toni is a lesbian friend of Lucy's mother, who has recently lost her disabled wife, Christine, and is still mourning. Her decision to help Lucy and David requires her to confront her loss and grief, as Minehead is the place where Christine proposed to her years ago. With her "experience of caring" and being "wonderful with Christine, right to the end" (Southan, *Kerbs* 33), Toni can understand Lucy's uncertainty and vulnerability. When Lucy is getting ready for a romantic evening in the caravan, Toni tries to reassure her, assists her in all the preparations, and gently advises her on what to do, using humour to decrease her tension and stress. She also feels the importance of the event, is compassionate and empathetic. In a sense, Toni is also instrumental in bringing in the motif of alternative geographies of crip/queer sexualities by telling Lucy a story of her erotic adventure during a political meeting when she was young. Therefore, intimacy in *Kerbs* is shown as both private/individual and relational, linked to other people's experience and feelings, engaging all of them in supporting one another and showing their understanding of each other's needs. It also brings together memories of lesbian love and the development of a new disabled relationship.

Toni's assistance to both Lucy and David also exposes the difference in disability intimacy for its complex logistics. In an interview, Southan observes:

> As much as it is a love story, I think it's also a play about logistics, the logistics of a romantic relationship when disability is a factor, sharing space with non-disabled people and the very literal sense of moving from one place to another. It allowed me to write about what living with a disability can be like. (7)

Toni's preparations for the trip resemble getting ready for a scouting expedition or "taking industrial action at a moment's notice," when she was "a union organiser back in the early eighties" (Southan, *Kerbs* 40). In a way, this attitude plays with the idea of logistics, both exposing its significance and simultaneously exaggerating it to the point of comedy. Toni's decision to communicate with the two lovers by a walkie-talkie is initially viewed by Lucy

as childish and embarrassing. However, as it turns out later, using a walkie-talkie proves to be extremely helpful in preserving distance and being invisible while remaining "ready to hand," when she is needed. In the "toilet" scene, Toni appears "[a]s if by magic" (62), just seconds after she is summoned via a walkie-talkie to help with the hoist. Directing some of the lovers' embarrassment to herself, showing enthusiasm and commitment, getting ready for the romantic weekend the way one prepares for protest action—all these strategies help to reduce the young people's insecurity and uncertainty, ignore their own emotional clumsiness, and get ready for making an effort to succeed. Toni thus represents a form of care on which access intimacy relies, by seeing the world from the disabled perspective and identifying particular needs, meeting those needs in advance, and finding help a source of pleasure.

The other aspect of access intimacy, this time related to eco-ableism and eco-ability, is foregrounded in the plastic straw scene. On the primary level, the scene presents a situation in which people with disabilities can access places physically, but cannot have full access to the activities that are practised in those places. This is a situation in which access intimacy occurs only between the disabled characters, while in the outside world, access is limited only to "the logistics of access," disregarding other access needs. On one of their dates, Lucy and David drink wine in a bar from wine glasses. Lucy has a problem drinking her wine without a straw, spilling it because of her shaking hands. When asked whether David should inquire about a straw for her, she responds: "I checked, the only ones they have are those small ones that fall into your glass. I questioned them about it and the man looked at me like I'd shouted 'Screw the Turtles'" (Southan, *Kerbs* 26). Viewing a straw problem as important to people with disabilities is a step towards understanding that, on certain occasions, it allows them to preserve personal dignity in a public place and in front of a lover. It also points to the fact that the physical accessibility of a café or bar is not sufficient because of other vulnerabilities and needs that are more complex and that demand reflection and care.

This exchange also points to the larger problem of eco-ableism, and references disabled activism against the plastic straws ban. Lucy's reference to the campaign to save turtles and other sea animals from the danger posed by plastic waste, in particular plastic straws, is followed by the hashtags exchange: "Hashtag DisabledExtinction" and "Hashtag SurvivalOfTheFittest" (ibid.). The couple start communicating in hashtags, appropriating environmental discourse to signal the precarity of their position and expose the inequity at the intersection of disability and climate.[7]

[7] The way the two characters use the crisis rhetoric in the scene in a way draws the connection between the fate of endangered species and people with disabilities.

This is a problematic moment when the needs of disabled people are in conflict with eco-friendly trends, with disabled people being "otherniz[ed] by vanguard of academics and activists" (Schatz et al. xxii–xxiii).

As suggested by J. L. Schatz et al., environmental or social activism often "produce[s] hostile spaces" that marginalise people with disabilities: "This happens when ecological or social justice movements call on individuals to curb environmental consumption when such consumption is often necessary for survival and overcoming self-hatred" (xxii). The authors suggest a different approach, which they call "eco-ability": "eco-ability does not place pressure on individuals for the politics of environmental purity. Rather, it calls for diverse relational tactics" (ibid.). A relational community, as the authors further explain, implies a shared and supportive network of connections in which responsibility is distributed among its members. With the awareness that "[p]eople with disabilities are at increased risk of the adverse impacts of climate change, including threats to their health, food security, access to water energy, and sanitation, and livelihoods, particularly in developing countries" (United Nations Development Program), it is important to acknowledge that they might be unable to reduce their individual negative impact on climate due to such factors as increased electricity consumption or technologies that they need to live (Schatz et al. xxii–xxiii).

The comments on the straw problem and hashtags exchanged in *Kerbs* allude to the straw ban and its consequences for people with disabilities, referencing disabled activists' protests. In an activist context, the situation depicted in *Kerbs* can illustrate a more general change of the status of disabled individuals into those in need of help. In her critical commentary entitled "The Rise and Fall of the Plastic Straw: Sucking in Crip Defiance," Alice Wong describes the consequences of this change in ways that are closely applicable to Southan's play: "The power dynamic shifts from a consumer who has access to a straw as they would a napkin or fork to a situation where individuals must disclose a need of some sort when requesting one with wait staff or bartenders who become de facto gatekeepers of access" (6). Similarly, the man's reaction to Lucy's query represents a larger tendency to judge people with disabilities by their need to use plastic straws, perceiving them as harmful and unethical. Wong poignantly comments on a similar situation in reality: "The withholding and hiding of plastic straws in public spaces sends a message that people who use them are deviant consumers marked with a number of moralistic labels (e.g., wasteful, turtle killer, irresponsible). Its aim is to make our worlds smaller and less accessible" (7).

Reading the straw scene thus yields a number of interpretations, placing the single incident in the characters' lives in an activist and political context

of seeing the straw bans—and on a larger scale popular "environmentalism that shames disabled people"—as "ableist and exclusionary" (ibid.).[8] Like the toilet scene, the one featuring the straw problem adds important activist contexts to everyday situations, pointing to the necessity—and failure—of viewing access and accessibility from disability perspectives and anticipating a whole range of potential needs.

CONCLUSION

Considering the marginalisation of disability sexuality, a tendency to understand accessibility only through physical access as well as the dominant—often ableist—assumptions about disability intimacy, *Kerbs* is an important play that openly discusses these issues while presenting a humorous and enjoyable story. It creates a sense of intimacy by exploring the nuances and complexities of beginning a romantic relationship as a young disabled person. It also teaches by presenting alternative geographies of space and logistics of navigating movement within them. The play shows that access intimacy and disability intimacy demand care and attentiveness to others, while also being a source of pleasure and connection to the caregiver.

While its plot is based on the rather conventional formula of a romantic comedy, *Kerbs* can be productively read through the prism of crip/queer theory and contextualised in disability activism. In its exploration of marginalisation, exclusion, and relegation to alternative spaces—both physical and digital—*Kerbs* points to an important heritage of non-normative sexualities, defining disability intimacy as a sexual minority and pointing to the residue of crip/queer transgression in how it can be placed in contemporary sexual culture. This is most poignantly represented by the presentation of the accessible public toilet as one of the spatial and mechanical affordances readily used by the young lovers, which is also inscribed in an alternative space for other identities and sexualities. The assistance given by a lesbian friend further invites intersectional readings of relationality and solidarity. The other activist extension of the play—the anti-straw-ban protests—appears in the scene that shows the difference

[8] It is worth noting that a similar campaign took place in other countries, including the United Kingdom. There is a sizable coverage of protests and critical comments from people with disabilities publicly speaking against ableist solutions in environmental protection, emphasising the plastic straw's assistive function, e.g. Shona Louise, https://shonalouise.com/2018/11/19/the-plastic-straw-ban-how-it-harms/, Penny Pepper, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/09/disabled-person-plastic-straws-baby-wipes, Sarah Bell and Emma Geen, https://sensing-climate.com/news/reflecting-on-eco-ableism.

between the logistics of access and access intimacy. With the characters' explicit reference to the protests through the use of hashtags, the struggle for having their needs met resonates with political awareness and engagement.

Although the problem of disability sexuality has been addressed in a number of recent plays, such as *All of Us* by Francesca Martinez, *Reasons You Should(n't) Love Me* by Amy Trigg, *The Solid Life of Sugar Water* by Jack Thorne, or *The Almighty Sometimes* by Kendall Feaver, it needs to be emphasised once again that Michael Southan's *Kerbs* offers an interesting aesthetic solution based on access aesthetics. The play is structured in a way that its script already contains directions that make it (more) fully accessible. This is not only about stage directions pointing to such a need, but rather how the play already contains forms of communication that naturally interweave audiodescription with subtitling (text projections) as a prerequisite for access intimacy. Taking into consideration its authorship, directing (by Nickie Miles-Wildin), and fair casting strategies, *Kerbs* represents a high level of access aesthetics rooted in authentic disability experience, while offering an innovative theatrical form to its audiences.

Works Cited

"About Us." *Belgrade Theatre*, https://www.belgrade.co.uk/about/, accessed 3 Apr. 2026.

Brown, Hilary. "'An ordinary sexual life?': A Review of the Normalisation Principle as It Applies to the Sexual Options of People with Learning Disabilities." *Disability & Society*, vol. 9, 1994, pp. 123–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599466780181

Emens, Elizabeth F. "Intimate Discrimination: The State's Role in the Accidents of Sex and Love." *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 122, no. 5, 2009, pp. 1307–1402. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1694174

Fisher, Mark. "*Kerbs* Review—Tender Comedy about the Road to Romance." *The Guardian*, 3 Mar. 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/mar/03/kerbs-review-belgrade-theatre-coventry, accessed 3 Apr. 2026.

García-Santesmases Fernández, Andrea, Núria Vergés Bosch, and Elisabet Almeda Samaranch. "'From Alliance to Trust': Constructing Crip-Queer Intimacies." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2017, pp. 269–81. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1273100

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia UP, 2017.

"Graeae." *Kerbs: Education Package*, Graeae, 2022, pp. 18–19.

Hadley, Bree. "A 'Universal Design' for Audiences with Disabilities?" *Routledge Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts*, edited by Matthew Reason, Lynne Conner, Katya Johanson, and Ben Walmsley, Routledge, 2022, pp. 177–89.

Hadley, Bree. "Participation, Politics and Provocations: People with Disabilities as Non-Conciliatory Audiences." *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2015, pp. 154–74. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003033226-14

Johnson, Megan A., et al. "Crip Digital Intimacies: The Social Dynamics of Creating Access through Digital Technology." *Societies*, vol. 14, no. 9, 2024, pp. 1–17. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14090174

Johnston, Kirsty. *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama: Recasting Modernism*. Bloomsbury, 2016. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781408185179

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana UP, 2013. https://doi.org/10.2979/6841.0

Kuppers, Petra. *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge*. Routledge, 2003.

Liddiard, Kirsty. *The Intimate Lives of Disabled People*. Routledge, 2018. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315556598

Mascarenhas, Amanda. "The Designer. Interview." *Kerbs: Education Package*, Graeae, 2022, p. 14.

McRuer, Robert. "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness." *50 Concepts for the Critical Phenomenology*, edited by Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon, Northwestern UP, 2020, pp. 61–67. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvmx3j22.13

McRuer, Robert. "Introduction: Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence." *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, New York UP, 2006, pp. 1–32.

Miles-Wildin, Nickie, "Interview with the Director of *Kerbs*." *Kerbs: Education Package*, Graeae, 2022, pp. 8–9.

Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link." *Leaving Evidence*, 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/, accessed 3 Apr. 2026.

"Our History." *Graeae*, https://graeae.org/who-we-are/our-history/, accessed 3 Apr. 2026.

Plaskow, Judith. "Embodiment, Elimination, and the Role of Toilets in Struggles for Social Justice." *Cross Currents*, Spring 2008, pp. 51–64. https://doi.org/10.1353/cro.2008.a782415

Schatz, J. L., Amber E. George, and Anthony J. Nocella II. "Introduction: The Environment, Animals, and Disability Justice within the Liberation Movement." *The Intersectionality of Critical Animal, Disability, and Environmental Studies*, edited by Anthony J. Nocella II, Amber E. George, and J. L. Schatz, Lexington, 2017, pp. xix–xxvii.

Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. U of Michigan P, 2008. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.309723

Southan, Michael. "Interview with the Writer of *Kerbs*." *Kerbs: Education Package*, Graeae, 2022, p. 7. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350339002.00000003

Southan, Michael. *Kerbs*. Methuen Drama, 2022. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350339002.00000003

United Nations Development Project. "Climate Change is a Matter of Justice—Here's Why." *Climate Promise*, 30 June 2023, https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/climate-change-matter-justice-heres-why, accessed 3 Apr. 2026.

Valentine, Desiree. "Shifting the Weight of Inaccessibility: Access Intimacy as a Critical Phenomenological Ethos." *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2020, pp. 76–94. https://doi.org/10.5399/PJCP.v3i2.9

Wong, Alice. Introduction. *Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2024, pp. xv–xx.

Wong, Alice. "The Rise and Fall of the Plastic Straw: Sucking in Crip Defiance." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–12. https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v5i1.30435

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska is Associate Professor in the Department of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Comparative Studies at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland. Her research interests include disability studies and disability drama in English, trauma studies, and hauntology. She has also published on site and environment in performance as well as gender, corporeality, intertextuality, and transmediality. The author of *Hauntology and Intertextuality in Contemporary British Drama by Women Playwrights* (2013) and co-editor of themed journal issues on haunted cultures, authorship, sound of the Urbanocene, The Residents, and others. Co-editor-in-chief of the doctoral students' academic journal *Currents: A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review*.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5492-4255

lorek@umk.pl

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.15

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Nora Steiner
University of Bern

Intimacy as Crip-Queer Interdependence in *The Dan Daw Show* (2021)

ABSTRACT

Based on an analysis of the Crip-queer BDSM performance *The Dan Daw Show*, this article shows how intimacy is constituted (1) as an orientation towards each other and (2) by means of actions such as consensual practices. In the performance, intimacy manifests itself not only between the two performers but also between the performers and the audience. Thus, a tangible or felt interdependent network is created in which a corresponding, relational understanding of the subject is embedded—which in turn entails ethical implications. An alternative world is imagined on stage, which is mirrored in the care measures of the larger performance setting in the form of trigger warnings.

Keywords: performance, BDSM, interdependence, consent, trigger warning, care ethics.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 26 Aug. 2025. Verified: 6 Feb. 2026. Accepted: 17 Mar. 2026.

In hegemonic and heteronormative European discourse, intimacy is framed as a *private matter* and therefore excluded from a supposedly delineated public sphere, as well as narrowly defined as an exclusively heterosexual and/or romantic closeness (Dankwa 22-21). Thus, the constitution of intimacy seems impossible in a public context such as a theatrical performance which divides the participants into performers and spectators and, in doing so, always creates an audience. The Crip-queer theatre performance *The Dan Daw Show* (2021), however, makes a critical and transformative reference to the dominant discourse on intimacy. It shows how intimacy among performers and between performers and audiences can be constructed and thus made tangible as a spectrum.

The Dan Daw Show is a theatrical stage performance that uses a queer BDSM setting to address issues of interdependence (Tronto 131–32, 162–64; Butler, *Force of Nonviolence* 15–18, 35, 37–48), dependency, intimacy, pleasure, needs, (physical) boundaries, care, and Crip-queer joy. The queer and disabled performer Dan Daw takes on the role of the sub, while the able-bodied performer Krisx assumes the dominant role. This explicit artificial setting of their (power) relationship structures the dynamics of movement and touch in the performance. The unequal, yet controlled power dynamics are repeatedly shown as iterative and constantly evolving (Schiel 214–16), thereby constituting intimacy. In my analysis, I will start from a performative understanding of emotions, following Sara Ahmed. Instead of conceptualizing emotions as something internal or external, Ahmed thinks of them as practices that give shape to bodily surfaces as such in the first place (*Cultural Politics of Emotion* 1, 4). She conceives of emotions as circulating forces that align us with certain objects (45).

In this article, I will elaborate on how intimacy in *The Dan Daw Show* can be analyzed as a queer-phenomenological "orientation" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 1), as an alignment of the performers and the audience towards each other. Then, I will show how the performance engages in practices of consent as a way of creating and revealing intimacy in relation to an always interdependent world from which ethical demands are derived. Those are also incorporated into the broader performance context in the form of trigger warnings. Drawing on these key aspects of the performance, this article will illustrate how the show engages critically with normative and exclusionary understandings of intimacy, sexuality, consent, and well-being, thereby "cripping" and "queering" (Sandahl *passim*; Kreuser 83–89) these notions and articulating an alternative grasp on autonomy, responsibility, and interdependency.

CRIP-QUEER INTIMACY AS MUTUAL VULNERABILITY

"For those of you not used to seeing a 38-year-old Crip in their power, I've got ya'." With this line at the start of the performance, the performer Dan references the still poor representation of queer disabled bodies on theatre and dance stages, and the continuing tendency to portray Crip-queer bodies primarily in terms of their suffering or as an inspiration for resilience (Kreuser 14, 78–81). With this statement, he already hints that the following performance rejects these narratives. The compound of the politically re-appropriated, formerly pejorative terms Crip and queer marks their intersectional entanglement (McRuer 40–41) in the performance.

The Dan Daw Show constructs Crip-queer intimacy not only between the two performers, but also between them and the spectators, thus creating a multi-layered, relational network that is experienced emotionally and felt by the audience. This intimate atmosphere is created through various practices which not only undermine hegemonic notions of intimacy, but also exemplify alternative, more caring relationships between bodies whose sexuality is systematically denied in a heteronormative and ableist discourse (Kreuser 121; Oeming 9–10; Tellier 485). The performance impressively demonstrates how feelings of vulnerability, sexiness, closeness, and connectedness are produced through certain actions, and thus encompasses a broad spectrum of intimacy. Mutual dependencies and vulnerabilities are re-interpreted in a Crip-queer understanding, and in doing so, re-framed as desirable (Hall 413–14).

According to Lauren Berlant, intimacy can be understood as a permanent process which can be either successful or unsuccessful and can either stabilize or subvert hegemonic structures. Intimacy is thus not a fixed pre-existing relationship between supposedly separate subjects but must constantly be created, reproduced, and negotiated between its participants (Berlant 282). Therein, the fundamental vulnerability of bodies becomes evident as a human condition which is structured through different hierarchized and hierarchizing categories (Butler, *Force of Nonviolence* 45–47): when bodies are understood and recognized as inherently vulnerable, the necessity for mutual care and responsibility, as well as the need for reflection on our intimate relationships and their constant recalibration becomes evident. This tension is negotiated in *The Dan Daw Show*, in which the constitutive processes and conditions for a caring yet sexy relationship are repeatedly revealed. This happens first and foremost in the context of the performed BDSM relationship between Dan and Krisx. A stereotypical BDSM-procedure structures and guides the larger dramaturgy of the evening: the performance begins formally

with thorough information on BDSM and consent, then switches to the hierarchized play as the main part of the piece, and ends with aftercare, a ritual in which the different power positions are consciously abandoned again and togetherness and connection on an equal level are practised in a caring and soft manner.[1]

BDSM functions as a very broad "self-description" (Schiel 205, translation mine) of the community for diverse practices of "Bondage, Discipline, Domination and Submission" (205). Its representatives distance themselves from a "one-dimensional reading of sexuality" (209, translation mine) and subvert the (hetero)normative fixation on genitalia, celebrating a much wider spectrum of sexual, intimate, and erotic actions instead (Weiss vii; Bauer, "BDSM Studies" 24). These practices are also often summarized under the umbrella term "kink" (Simula 8). According to Margot Weiss, even though non-normative sexualities can have a transformative potential, the dominant and affirmative narrative suggesting BDSM breaks with all norms has to be contested. BDSM does not take place in an isolated space outside of social power dynamics (Weiss 24, 160-161; Norman 222). In fact, social hierarchies, power dynamics, and exclusions continue to operate in BDSM scenes and communities (Weiss 15), whereby it often remains ambiguous whether a scene unquestioningly reproduces or breaks with stereotypes (Sexsmith 207–16; Cruz 409–36). That is why it is all the more interesting to take a closer look at practices that engage critically with this issue.

The Dan Daw Show can be placed in a rich context of Crip-queer performance art (Tadman *passim*; Campbell and Farrier *passim*), in which BDSM practices are used as a means of reappropriating pain, Crip bodies, control, and desire (e.g., the works of Crip performer and BDSM practitioner Bob Flanagan). This undermines the tendency to discuss sexuality and disability primarily in relation to "reproduction and sexual function" (Tellier 485), thereby asexualizing disabled bodies: "BDSM can focus on the boundaries of pain versus pleasure and has the potential to re-eroticise pain and the body" (489). From a Crip perspective, desired pain or loss of control can replace uncontrollable and unwanted pain and restore a sense of agency (McRuer 171–98; Sheppard *passim*; Reynolds *passim*).

In doing so, BDSM practices in Crip performances do not simply serve as a means to an end, but are in turn cripped. The performance scholar and disability theorist Carrie Sandahl describes "queering" and "cripping" (37) as practices that expose, question, break, and subvert normativities and celebrate bodies, modes of expression, and desires that cannot be

[1] For a performance analysis more focused on Kink and Cripping Sex, see Oeming (69–83).

fitted into supposedly pre-existing or fixed categories of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, but rather radically break them down and reveal their exclusions. BDSM is thus examined in terms of its norms but also its subversive potential, conspicuous, for instance, in the inherent care, the confrontation with pain, control and its loss, and the negotiated co-dependency. *The Dan Daw Show* crips and queers both heteronormative mainstream sexuality and BDSM discourses in the way it performs desire, lust, intimacy, and sexuality. Dan crips and queers sexuality and queers BDSM and his Crip body.

The performance starts out as a relaxed banter between the performers and the audience, including some access information and trigger warnings. There are many different attitudes, ideas, and feelings circulating around BDSM. These include discomfort, uncertainty, pleasure, lust, excitement, and interest. The beginning of the performance leaves room for these ambivalent, contradictory, and competing emotional dynamics, acknowledging them and, at the same time, arousing curiosity.

The BDSM play does not develop gradually but is established through a precise and recognizable switch in tone between the two. The artificiality of the hierarchy in and as role play is thus evident as such from the very beginning, a key element in BDSM (Schiel 214–16). In the shortest possible time, tension is created between the two bodies, which is transferred to the entire theatre space and can subsequently be experienced as a dynamic flow between suspension, desire, redemption, gazes, and physical touch, as well as its interruption by tapping out or using the safe word, followed by care actions. Instead of claiming the supposed intuitive naturalness of a private, normative sexuality and intimacy which must always fail in a public show setting anyway, its constructedness is made explicit (216). Krisx's commands throughout the performance are not always overtly sexualized but nevertheless charge the space erotically through their calm yet deliberate positioning in the power relationship. Thus, a broad understanding of intimacy and sexuality is made tangible from the outset.

The consensual submission of control on Dan's part in relation to his position as a queer, disabled person is noteworthy. What is staged is not the appropriation of control from a marginalized position, but rather its consensual and trustful abandonment by the disabled and queer performer—which is only possible because of the established safe and equal relationship (215). The supposedly fixed hierarchical roles are revealed as ambivalent and fluid throughout the performance. In turn, this not only contributes to the constitution of tension and excitement between the two performers, but also transfers it to the audience, creating a relational network among those present. This becomes clear when Dan addresses the audience: "I need you to understand that this is how I want you to see

me." In doing so, Dan frames the audience as constitutive of the intimacy created on stage and in the performance space.

As a form of intimacy, the tension produced on stage is not merely an effect of the performed BDSM relationship, but can be further differentiated via Sara Ahmed's queer-phenomenological concept of orientation to grasp the intimacy's spatial component (Kreuser 10, 34–38, 40–44). According to Ahmed, boundaries are not pre-existing but are effects of feelings through which subjects are brought into a relationship with one another. Both physical and social bodies are constitutive of each other and therefore remain inseparable and inherently relational. The way in which they relate to each other is largely emotionally structured (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion passim*). Thus, subjects and objects are always directed or oriented towards or away from each other (Kreuser 40; Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 32).

This orientation manifests itself in the performance, thereby constituting intimacy. The first thing that stands out is the extremely sharp attention of the performers towards each other. This focus on each other is interpreted as mutual trust and extends to the whole theatre space. In turn, this atmosphere enables the emergence of situations whose exact course is not entirely predictable. An example of this is Dan's selective exploration of his own physical limits. The quality of movement and contact between the two performers fluctuates between fast, sudden, and vigorous, and slow, tender, and tentative. By maintaining eye contact across the room or over the shoulder as they walk away, the two performers establish a constant relationship. The greater their physical distance gets, the more tension between them becomes affectively perceptible to the audience. Their desire—as well as their pleasure and joy—not only shapes the relationship between them but also their bodies as such, encouraging a reflection on "how bodies are shaped by pleasure and take the shape of pleasures" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 164). The audience witnesses how Dan, with Krisx's support, (re)appropriates his body piece by piece as desiring and desirable and stages it, or rather has it staged by Krisx as he wants it to be. Queer desire is made tangible as a spatial orientation (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 147–48; Kreuser 43).

By perceiving and describing entities in their orientations, their supposedly natural separation as demarcated individuals is called into question as their constitutive relationality is revealed. When intimacy is understood as an emotionally and physically felt connection, as an openness and directionality towards other people, supposedly rigid subject boundaries become tangible as inherently porous and permeable. In *The Dan Daw Show*, this is shown through the intense focus of the performers towards each other, practising mutual responsibility and respecting each

other as vulnerable beings. This relationality is adopted as a fundamental principle of living together in this world, emphasizing a Crip perspective.

The play with proximity and distance is not limited to what happens on stage. The interdependent network is expanded spatially and oriented towards the audience, thereby involving the spectators in the performance that takes place. It is emphasized several times that Dan needs the audience in order to be seen in his self-empowerment. Thus, voyeuristic and violent gazes where a subject looks at a hierarchically lowered object for its own pleasure, which is historically inscribed in the theatrical context, are undermined and redefined (Schiel 110–11; Czirak 54, 118, 220). The audience does not merely witness an intimate and tense relationship between the performers; it becomes part of it. It is swept along and invited to let itself go along with Dan. If emotions are understood as dynamic and circulating, the audience cannot remain distanced at all. In fact, the tension created on stage circulates in the performance space; it touches, and moves the spectators, including them in an unfolding relational web.

Thus, the performed intimacy is only created as an atmosphere *because* the performers reveal their orientation towards each other and their spatiality in such an observable, tangible, and public way. As the porousness of the (physical) boundaries becomes more tangible, space is created to recognize each other as vulnerable human beings. A mindful attitude towards each other is necessary for successful intimacy, which is exemplified in *The Dan Daw Show* through the practice of consent.

CONSENT AS SUBJECT-CONSTITUTING PRACTICE

All too often, (sexual) intimacy is perceived as natural or as a given, as something intangible or magical that naturally accompanies certain actions or ways of relating (Schiel 215–16). This unfortunately still prevailing understanding of intimacy makes it difficult to discuss closeness and sexuality, needs, desires, and boundaries. Practiced and negotiated consent can be identified as a central strategy for creating intimacy in *The Dan Daw Show*, starting with the negotiation before play, as mentioned above. Analytically, this opens up various areas of tension and ambivalence.

Even though there is growing social awareness of sexualized violence and the role of consent in its prevention, the so-called affirmative understandings of consent are imbued with heteronormative ideas and neoliberal-contractualist notions of the subject (Graybill 175–76; Corteen *passim*; Saketopoulou 3, 6, 57; Buggs and Hoppe 1–18). As Fenner explains, "In this traditional script, men are the sexual initiators whose consent is constant and implied while women are the sexual gatekeepers whose consent

or non-consent is contractual" (455). In consent campaigns and in most research on consent, verbal consent is normalized as the "gold standard" (Beres 142) and the one and only means "to solve the problem" (137) of sexualized violence: "Consent is often positioned as the linchpin of sexual ethics and justice, framed within binary paradigms such as 'yes means yes' and 'no means no.' However, this fails to account for the complexities of power dynamics, ambiguous desires, and the interplay of verbal and non-verbal communication in sexual encounters" (Fanghanel 1).

Therefore, it is insufficient to assess consent *per se* as a subversive and ethical practice. Instead, it is important to reflect on the inherent norms and power dynamics. Especially in BDSM contexts, consent remains a contested field. Consent is regarded both within the BDSM scene and in academia as a key practice for distinguishing and differentiating BDSM from non-consensual, abusive violence (Weinberg 4–7, 17–18; Weiss 83; Bauer, *Queer BDSM Intimacies* 77). Various slogans or frameworks such as *Safe, Sane, and Consensual* (SSC) (Schiel 206), *Risk Aware Consensual Kink* (RACK) or *Caring, Communication, Consent, and Caution* (4C) (Williams et al. *passim*) have been articulated and used, first, to ensure that the practices carried out are consensual between the players and, second, to identify BDSM as a legitimate, cautious, and thoughtful sexual practice in a larger public discourse on sexuality.

Criticized as being too simplistic, these slogans are repeatedly rejected and/or reformulated by the community (Williams et al. *passim*; Weiss 84). Their applicability in scenes that play with consensual non-consent, or the question of to what extent lived sexuality can ever be guaranteed to be safe and "sane," are heavily discussed (Weiss 80–85). It is important to emphasize that these discussions within and outside the BDSM scene are not about rejecting consent practices, but rather about constantly reflecting on them and dealing with their irresolvable opacity and ambivalence (Simula 7; Buggs and Hoppe 1–18; Bauer, *Queer BDSM Intimacies* 75–106). Even though there is no explicit consensual non-consent play in *The Dan Daw Show*, Dan also emphasizes that he wants to be in control and be surprised at the same time.

In the performance, consent becomes tangible as a performative act of permission that is only effective when the statement or action is heard and taken seriously by the other person (Schnüriger 21; Müller and Schaber 1; Buggs and Hoppe 1–18; Butler, "Consent" 20). Even though Dan emphasizes at the beginning of the performance that he has given his consent to everything that follows, Krisx repeatedly asks for Dan's approval and checks in about Dan's current needs. They also show the sudden withdrawal of consent several times in an aesthetic of immediacy and realness, even though these moments may have been meticulously rehearsed.

In scenes in which Dan is pushed to his physical limits—once when he is asked to stand on a stretcher without help, another time when Krisx sweepingly whirls him around the room—Dan shouts his safe word "SPOONS!" As a spectator, one can be startled: has a boundary been crossed? Has something happened that was unplanned and should not have occurred? But Krisx always reacts promptly to Dan's exclamation, helps him down from the stretcher or stops the movement, brings a chair or water, looks at Dan seriously and talks to him reassuringly, his voice unamplified and therefore inaudible to the audience, whereupon Dan nods and takes a deep breath. The intimacy is thereby intensified as the viewer gets the impression of being part of an intimate relationship that is actually taking place —a relationship that is evolving performatively and in which boundaries and needs are explored in the moment of creating them. Tension and excitement are increased. Simultaneously, the audience is reassured that they are not witnessing intrusive, transgressive actions—because in moments in which boundaries are reached or crossed, acts of care take place. Krisx immediately stops, checks in, offers physical support, gets water, or a chair for Dan to sit on. In these moments, it remains unclear whether the actions are happening because of Dan's Cripness or as established practices within the context of kinky encounters. This is irrelevant: the simple moments of pausing, slowing down, and tending to one another's needs are shown as an important part of being intimate together.

Particularly in BDSM contexts that involve marginalized individuals, it is considered essential to reflect on consent practices in relation to ongoing power dynamics. It is crucial to be aware that BDSM scenes do not take place in a "safe, sane, and consensual vacuum" (Weiss 20) that exists untouched by the real world, but "in relation to economic, social, and cultural regimes and embedded systems of privilege and power" (Weiss 20). According to Weiss, neoliberal notions of a responsible, rational, autonomous subject with the ability of free choice are strongly linked not only within affirmative mainstream concepts of consent but also in BDSM contexts (18–19, 165–66). Both discourses often assume a "coherent subject" that remains "consistent" over a certain period of time—if not forever—in order to be able to engage in consent interactions at all: "It [the subject] must continue to be the same self that wants the same things" (Greenblatt and Valens 3). Thus, the acting subject is assumed to be a fixed entity, which implies that once consent is given, it remains constant. The very idea of stability is thereby associated with rationality or the ability to think reasonably, and thus has massive gendered, ableist, and racist implications.

Due to these historical exclusions, affirmative (re)claims of autonomy by oppressed people remain important as a counterpoint to their constant objectification and experienced paternalism. It is nonetheless key to not

just reproduce a hegemonic understanding of the apparently independent individual but to rethink this idea. *The Dan Daw Show* counters it with a relational and interdependent understanding of the subject. Verbal consent may be an important part of the performance, but it goes beyond a simple *yes means yes* since it is constantly re-negotiated. Communication about past scenes takes place. Dan also expresses which acts he desires and in what way. The palpable attention that the two performers pay to each other, their orientation towards each other, as described above, makes it evident that non-verbal cues are also indispensable to an intimate relationship. Consent is only established when the statements or non-verbal signals are taken seriously by the other person.

The performance thus draws on queer consent practices which emphasize ongoing communication on a verbal and non-verbal level as essential for sexual and intimate encounters (e.g., Beres 146). Beres notes the frequently used terminology of "tune in" (137) or "being 'in-tune'" (144) in queer consent discourse, referring to focused attention on the partner, which makes it possible to respond appropriately to feelings of well-being, discomfort, or hesitation (147).

The way in which the two performers are attuned to each other is transferred to the audience. The felt orientation can be recognized as *being tuned in* which becomes a dramaturgical strategy to captivate the audience and, at the same time, queers dominant and affirmative understandings of consent and subjectivity. Weinberg describes a "bodily understanding of consent" (16), referring to the embodied knowledge of one's own boundaries and needs, and memories of them being respected or violated. *The Dan Daw Show* draws on this embodied knowledge: by tuning in, the spectator's own, supposedly fixed subject boundaries are experienced as open, permeable, and vulnerable. Weinberg, among others, understands consent as a "boundary-making function that demarcates desired or undesired conduct, and, by extension, permissible and impermissible behaviour" (7) or, in other words, as a practice that creates boundaries. But at the same time, consent and the experienced tuning-in in the performance enable connection and fluidity, too.

The Dan Daw Show renegotiates consent throughout which it is experienced as a relational practice. This does justice to the Crip and queer idea of a processual subject that constantly (re)produces itself and is continuously (re)produced within certain structures. The neoliberal notions of subjectivity are rejected. The subject in *The Dan Daw Show* is fragile, fluid, and contradictory and, as such, is recognized in a dynamic understanding of consent. Hence, consent and BDSM are cripped: the inherent instability of (Crip) subjects is not a deficit or deviance but rather a fundamental aspect of existence as is (Kreuser 71). A relational, tangible

network stretches out across the space between performers and spectators. One becomes physically aware of one's own vulnerable and relational being which creates felt intimacy.

FEELING COMFORT, FEELING INTIMACY: TRIGGER WARNINGS

Intimacy is not only created during the performance through focused orientation and the practice of consent, but also through the awareness and access measures implemented in a broader performance context. In doing so, the performance not only establishes an alternative, relational concept of the subject on stage as in a distinct parallel universe, but also mirrors its ethics in a bigger setting, marking them as perfectly viable practices. When access needs are unconditionally met and valued, the so-called "access intimacy" can take place (Mingus *passim*).

The being-in-the-world of a body that is not norm-conforming can be experienced as a permanent friction of not fitting in. It is constantly confronted with socially evolved contours that are not perceptible to bodies that conform to normative frames (Kreuser 43; Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 147–48). In *The Dan Daw Show*, this is revealed by providing accessibility information at the beginning of the performance, thus marking supposedly self-evident elements such as loud music or bright lights as possible barriers for spectators.

In the following, I would like to draw attention to the trigger warnings of the performance and discuss them as a potential access and care strategy in relation to a performative concept of emotion (for a better overview of the Trigger Warning Debate, see e.g., Hilger 148–66; Ahmed, "Against Students").

If emotions and their objects are understood as circulating and performative, thereby producing bodily surfaces and subjects, not only the performance itself but also the trigger warnings for *The Dan Daw Show* can be analyzed through this concept of feeling. By informing the audience about potential triggers, it is acknowledged that the stage event does not take place in isolation. The spectators do not look at it from a distance. Rather, they get the chance to actively decide to visit the show and stay—to consent—to be emotionally touched and moved by the events unfolding on stage. They choose to be affected and thus to become part of the relational and intimate network that is created.

The production provides a detailed trigger list, available on their website, which makes no explicit distinction between sensory and content-related stimuli. Keyword-like triggers, such as Suffocation, Choking,

Sexually Explicit Depictions, Reaching Physical Limit, or Restraint, along with Loud Sound or Bright and/or Flashing Lights are listed (e.g., *Dan Daw Productions* website). The keywords are then explained in more detail—accessible with an extra click. The intensity of the triggers and how exactly they fit into the larger stage process are explained. It is important to emphasize that *The Dan Daw Show* reframes the above-mentioned acts. They can be understood and felt as assaultive actions, but are reinterpreted in line with the BDSM context of the performance as sources of pleasure, enjoyment, and empowerment (Weinberg 4–5). Still, the disturbing potential of these actions, despite their consensual and sexy-coded framing on stage, is acknowledged in the comprehensive trigger list.

The Dan Daw Show formally incorporates two decision points on its website, which considers the desires of those viewers who wish no prior information and want to be surprised, while also addressing the inevitable lack of precision of keyword- and exclamation-like warnings. Only those who intentionally choose to read the warnings by clicking on the relevant terms are informed. It is also possible to choose how much detail one wants to know about the warnings. It can thus be argued that the production not only negotiates the practice of informed consent aesthetically, i.e. on stage, but also thinks about it before the audience even attends the show.

A dominant criticism of trigger warnings or content notes suggests that the practice makes it impossible to confront and discuss uncomfortable, disturbing topics. Furthermore, the moment of "surprise" is described as evaporating because of anticipating "shocking" elements (Klieber 1–21; Washick 98–99). Without intending to equate shock with surprise, *The Dan Daw Show* evokes feelings of alertness and surprise in spite of the detailed warnings. These moments can also be linked to complex discussions about the limits of consent and pre-negotiated actions in kinky encounters. Robin Bauer emphasizes the inevitable opacity of consent: "one can never fully foresee and therefore understand all the possible ramifications of a certain act of consent" (*Queer BDSM Intimacies* 93). Dan is not the only one taking risks. It is also the spectator who is invited to carefully test their own boundaries. Through the implemented care actions and the mutual focus between the performers, the intimacy intensifies. Dan's physical boundaries are deliberately pushed to the limit, which is also repeatedly exposed and commented on. This pushing is a performative-aesthetic experience in co-presence which cannot be anticipated in a written warning, hence undermining the criticism mentioned above.

The trigger list ends with the keyword "sexy disabled people" (e.g., *Dan Daw Productions* website)—a statement that at first glance undermines the previously serious and objective instructions. Positioned at the end of the list, the warning about "sexy disabled people" as potentially

disturbing content can be interpreted as an ironic comment that mocks the practice of trigger warnings—are the previous warnings even meant seriously? Or are they rather making fun of the practice of giving (too) detailed warnings? If one considers how consistently care measures are considered and implemented in the whole performance and stage setting, I would rather assume an offensive approach to the inherent ambivalences of trigger warnings; an ambivalence which, while supporting the notion of giving information beforehand, still acknowledges the difficulties of it. It is important to reflect on what content or which stimuli are actually framed and (re)produced as worthy of forewarning (Hilger 150; Washick 98–99), which contents and stimuli are at all thought of and by whom. How can the fact that trigger warnings or content notes are inevitably "inadequate" (Ahmed, "Against Students"), as it is never possible to provide sufficient warning for every single person in a room, be dealt with?

To warn from "sexy disabled people" critically references heteronormative, able-bodied gazes in which Crip-queer desire finds no place. Moreover, exclusionary hegemonic structures only offer comfort to certain people who can live up to an able-bodied and/or heterosexual matrix. In this normative frame, the display and the lived experience of *other* desire function as a trigger of discomfort and are therefore often ignored, hidden, or fought against (Kreuser 50–54; Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 146–65).

When a sensation is perceived as an "intrusion" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 27), something hurtful, the sudden erection of a blockage follows (91, 200). This defensive and protective reaction results in the re-establishment of invaded subject boundaries and a turning away from the pain-inducing (triggering) object. When preparing the audience in advance for what they are about to see, scenes potentially interpreted as abusive are framed as deliberate moments and not unforeseen and unwanted interventions. One is invited to test these boundaries together with the performers, knowing that the implicitly given consent can be withdrawn at any time and the space can be left. In addition, the consent practised on stage reinforces the certainty that one will not witness an unconscious overstepping of boundaries. This does not reduce the tension but rather intensifies it through performed caution and therefore creates intimacy.

Becoming aware of one's own body can evoke feelings of discomfort or unease. This discomfort is triggered by the sense of not fitting into a certain context, compared to other objects and people. In realizing one's own relationality to and in certain structures, one materializes oneself (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 146–48). Importantly, as Ahmed writes, "comfort is very hard to notice when one experiences it" (147). People who are marginalized constantly navigate this feeling of not fitting into normative structures that do not allow or include their

specific positionalities. Moreover, they are constantly made aware of their *otherness*, which they are forced to deal with by either adapting as best they can or making their otherness obvious. *The Dan Daw Show* focuses on creating comfort. The show tries to evoke feelings of safety, togetherness, and well-being in bodies that typically do not feel comfortable and relaxed in an able-bodied and heterosexually structured society. The detailed trigger warnings recognize and value a vulnerable spectator and attempt to develop a framework in which this vulnerability is not concealed but can be allowed. Relationality and interdependence are thus not only created and valued on stage, but also revealed off stage, whereby ethical responsibility is assumed for the actions performed.

Intimacy is created when people orient themselves towards each other and thus open themselves up to impressions, impulses, and emotions, both their own and those of the other person or people. Importantly, this openness and becoming permeable are not understood as an exception to the usual being in the world; rather, they reveal the inherent permeability and relationality of being. Furthermore, they expose the Western patriarchal idea of a firmly closed, constant, and independent individual as a fantasy.

According to Margot Weiss, BDSM scenes are often framed by the community as "as if," as fiction, played out without real consequences, passing without having any influence on reality (17–19). Framing these practices as "not real" (153) serves to legitimize them in mainstream discourse on sexuality. This strategy not only fails to recognize that hegemonic patterns and norms continue to operate even in role-playing games that are supposedly separate from reality, but also ignores their performative and transformative potential. *The Dan Daw Show* uses BDSM as a dramaturgical and aesthetic strategy to make Dan's Crip-queer body and his desire, his pleasure, intelligible—not in a fictional scene, but as a performative process of self-appropriation. Dan rejects a narrative that primarily codes disabled bodies as asexual and presents himself as desiring and desirable.

BDSM is not presented as a form of escapism from normal everyday life, to which one then returns unchanged (Weiss 181, 231). The performance does not enact escape, but celebrates arrival, thereby cripping a key element of BDSM. The intimate atmosphere of the performance intensifies at the end, when Dan and Krisx leave their roles, sit on the floor, leaning against each other, eyes closed, breathing heavily. They also allow the viewer to slowly let go of the built-up tension, take a deep breath, and become aware of what they have just witnessed. When Dan says: "Fuck me. I've arrived," the spectators are not only touched by his arc in this performance. They also realize that in allowing, opening up to, and thus co-constituting intimacy, they have to some extent "arrived" with Dan in their own bodies as deeply relational beings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Sari Pamer, Mena Taverna, and David Castillo for their feedback and to Corinne Kneubühler for her careful proofreading of the English translation.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. "Against Students." *The New Inquiry*, 29 June 2015, https://thenewinquiry.com/against-students/, accessed 12 Jan. 2026.

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology. Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke UP, 2006. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388074

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748691142

Bauer, Robin. "BDSM Studies." *Elgar Encyclopedia of Queer Studies*, edited by Rob Cover and Christy E. Newman, Edward Elgar, 2025, pp. 24–26. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803922102.ch006

Bauer, Robin. *Queer BDSM Intimacies. Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137435026

Beres, Melanie. "From Ignorance to Knowledge: Sexual Consent and Queer Stories." *Feminism and Psychology*, vol. 32, 2022, pp. 137–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535211059003

Berlant, Lauren. "Intimacy: A Special Issue." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, 1998, pp. 281–88. https://doi.org/10.1086/448875

Buggs, Shantel Gabrieal, and Trevos Hoppe. Introduction. *Unsafe Words. Queering Consent in the #MeToo Era*, edited by Shantel Gabrieal Buggs and Trevos Hoppe, Rutgers UP, 2023, pp. 1–18. https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978825444-002

Butler, Judith. "Consent. Some Thoughts on Psychoanalysis and Law." *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2011, pp. 3–27.

Butler, Judith. *The Force of Nonviolence. An Ethico-Political Bind*. Verso, 2020.

Campbell, Alyson, and Stephen Farrier. "Crip/Queer Performance. A Dialogue with Margrit Shildrick and Robert McRuer." *Queer Dramaturgies. International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer*, edited by Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 263–78. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137411846_15

Corteen, Karen. "Beyond (Hetero)Sexual Consent." *Making Sense of Sexual Consent*, edited by Mark Cowling and Paul Reynolds, Routledge, 2004, pp. 171–93.

Cruz, Ariane. "Beyond Black and Blue. BDSM, Internet Pornography, and Black Female Sexuality." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2015, pp. 409–36. https://doi.org/10.1353/fem.2015.0004

Czirak, Adam. *Partizipation der Blicke. Szenerien des Sehens und Gesehenwerdens in Theater und Performance*. Transcript, 2012. https://doi.org/10.1515/transcript.9783839419564

The Dan Daw Show. *Dan Daw Creative Projects*, https://dandawcreative.com/productions/the-dan-daw-show/, accessed 12 Jan. 2026.

The Dan Daw Show. Directed by Dan Daw and Mark Maughan, performance by Dan Daw and Krisx, Dan Daw Creative Projects, 19 May 2023, Bern, Switzerland.

Dankwa, Serena. *Knowing Women. Same Sex Intimacy, Gender, and Identity in Postcolonial Ghana*. Cambridge UP, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863575

Fanghanel, Alexandra. "Queerying Consent. Romantic Relationship Scripts, Rape Myths, and the 'Sex Game Gone Wrong.'" *Sexualities*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2025, pp. 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607251372223

Fenner, Lydia. "Sexual Consent as a Scientific Subject. A Literature Review." *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2017, pp. 451–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2017.1393646

Graybill, Rhiannon. "Critiquing the Discourse of Consent." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2017, pp. 175–76. https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.33.1.22

Greenblatt, Jordana, and Keja Valens. "Introduction. The Subject of Consent." *Querying Consent: Beyond Permission and Refusal*, edited by Jordana Greenblatt and Keja Valens, Rutgers UP, 2018, pp. 1–8. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vxm8b1.4

Hall, Kim Q. "Feminist and Queer Intersections with Disability Studies." *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Ann Garry, Serene J. Kahder, and Alison Stone, Routledge, 2017, pp. 405–18. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315758152-34

Hilger, Janna Mareike. *Safe Space. Sorge und Kritik nach Michel Foucault und Eve Sedgwick*. Campus, 2023. https://doi.org/10.12907/978-3-593-45384-2

Klieber, Anna. "On the Epistemology of Trigger Warnings; or, Why the Coddling Argument against Trigger Warnings Is Misguided." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2021, pp. 1–25. https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2021.4.13623

Kreuser, Mirjam. *Crip-queere Körper. Eine kritische Phänomenologie des Theaters*. Transcript, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839467725

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory. Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York UP, 2006.

Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link." *Leaving Evidence*, 5 May 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/, accessed 12 Jan. 2026.

Müller, Andreas, and Peter Schaber. "The Ethics of Consent: An Introduction." *The Routledge Handbook of the Ethics of Consent*, edited by Andreas Müller and Peter Schaber, Routledge, 2018, pp. 1–5. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351028264-1

Norman, Amber R. "The Politics of BDSM Play. Racial Dynamics and Critical Consent." *The Power of BDSM. Play, Communities, and Consent in the 21st Century*, edited by Brandy L. Simula et al., Oxford UP, 2023, pp. 219–39. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197658598.003.0013

Oeming, Debora. "Cripping Sex. Zur performativen Inanspruchnahme des Sexuellen durch behinderte Menschen." 2024. Freie Universität Berlin, MA thesis. http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-45463

Reynolds, Dawn. "Disability and BDSM: Bob Flanagan and the Case for Sexual Rights." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2007, pp. 40–52. https://doi.org/10.1525/srsp.2007.4.1.40

Saketopoulou, Avgi. *Sexuality beyond Consent. Risk, Race, Traumatophilia*. New York UP, 2023. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479820276.001.0001

Sandahl, Carrie. "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance." *GLQ. A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1–2, 2003, pp. 25–56. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9-1-2-25

Schiel, Lea Sophie. *Sex als Performance. Theaterwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf die Inszenierung des Obszönen*. Transcript, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839451489

Schnüriger, Hubert. "What Is Consent?" *The Routledge Handbook of the Ethics of Consent*, edited by Andreas Müller and Peter Schaber, Routledge, 2018, pp. 21–31. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351028264-3

Sexsmith, Sinclair. "Dominance, Submission, and Intersectionality. The Liberatory Potential of Authority Exchange." *The Power of BDSM. Play, Communities, and Consent in the 21st Century*, edited by Brandy L. Simula et al., Oxford UP, 2023, pp. 207–16. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197658598.003.0012

Sheppard, Emma. *Chronic Pain, BDSM and Crip Time*. Routledge, 2024. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003006237

Simula, Brandy L. "Introduction. Understanding BDSM." *The Power of BDSM. Play, Communities, and Consent in the 21st Century*, edited by Brandy L. Simula et al., Oxford UP, 2023, pp. 3–21. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197658598.003.0001

Tadman, Beck. "Diffractive Co-conspiracy in Queer, Crip Live Art Production." *Performance Research*, vol. 25, no. 5, 2021, pp. 92–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2020.1868850

Tellier, Stephanie. "Advancing the Discourse. Disability and BDSM." *Sexuality and Disability*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2017, pp. 485–93. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-017-9504-x

Tronto, Joan C. *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. Routledge, 2009.

Washick, Bonnie. "An App for That: The Case against the Equal Access Argument for Trigger Warnings." *Trigger Warnings. History, Theory, Context*, edited by Emily J. M. Knox, Rowman and Littlefield, 2017, pp. 88–122. https://doi.org/10.5040/9798881818449.ch-006

Weinberg, Jill D. *Consensual Violence. Sex, Sports, and the Politics of Injury*. U of California P, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520964723

Weiss, Margot. *Techniques of Pleasure. BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*. Duke UP, 2011. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smtgc

Williams, D. J., et al. "From 'SSC' and 'RACK' to the '4Cs.' Introducing a New Framework for Negotiating BDSM Participation." *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, vol. 17, 2014, n.pag.

Nora Steiner (she/her) is currently working on her PhD project at the Institute for Theatre Studies at the University of Bern, Switzerland, where she writes and teaches about emotions, care, dramaturgy, and ethics in theatre. Her research focuses on how feelings and discourses on feelings are negotiated dramaturgically to convey ethical demands and stances. She also works as a dramaturge and director in the independent theatre and dance scene in Switzerland (https://www.theaterwissenschaft.unibe.ch/ueber_uns/team/assitentinnen_assitenten/steiner_ma_nora/index_ger.html).
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0759-8607
nora.steiner@unibe.ch

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.16

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Katharina Wiedlack
University of Vienna

Anna T.
Interdependent Scholar, Curator, and Artist

Ema Benčíková
Academy of Fine Arts Vienna

Dis_ability and Pleasure: Cripistemology, Intra-action, Intercorporeality

Abstract

This paper approaches dis_ability at the intersection of racialised (Chen), sexualised (McRuer), and gendered (Kafer) neurobiodiversity, as a point of relationality, solidarity, and care through an analysis of *Yes, We Fuck!* (dir. Antonio Centeno and Raúl de la Morena, ES, 2015). *YWF!* employs standard documentarian aesthetics (talking heads, street interviews) as well as footage from sex workshops and group discussions, and foregrounds alongside dis_ability, migration, class, sex-work, and BDSM themes. The authors show that dis_ability emerges in *YWF!* as an aspect of relationality and connection rather than something to be pitied or vilified, and resolved in isolation (Mitchell and Snyder). They explore decolonial and queer aspects of care and pleasure-making through three concepts: *cripistemology* (Johnson and McRuer), *intra-action* (Barad), and *intercorporeality* (Merleau-Ponty). Barad's concept of *intra-action* is particularly pertinent to dis_ability and sexuality as it reorganises ontological understandings of causality, agency, matter, discourse, responsibility, and accountability. There are no pre-established bodies, merely bodies that co-constitute each other upon coming into proximity. An *intercorporeal* understanding of queer/crip intimacy can show how the interdependent self is constructed through touch, gaze, and the development of body schemas in relation. A *cripistemological* perspective further emphasises *YWF!* open-ended meaning production. Such a perspective acknowledges the film's depiction of different types of interabled relationships and moments where ableism, exoticisation, and asymmetrical dynamics are at play. *YWF!* presents moments when knowledge and beliefs are fractured and queer crip pleasure emerges.

Keywords: dis_ability art, sexuality, post-representational aesthetics, queer crip kinship, intersectional care.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 27 Aug. 2025. Verified: 1 Feb. 2026. Accepted: 17 Mar. 2026.

In a world with mass disabling events (pandemics, war, poverty), issues of dis_ability are not only influencing, but restructuring daily life, scientific research, and culture. This paper analyses how contemporary art and popular culture can address dis_ability, beyond a category for minority identity construction, at the intersection of racialised, sexualised, and gendered neurobiodiversity, as a site of relationality, solidarity, and care. Writing the term dis_ability with a spectrum gap, or what Swantje Köbsell calls the "ability gap" (89), we want to mark the category's fluidity and non-binary nature. This spelling aligns with other language strategies, such as the slash (dis/ability) (Goodley 36, 103–09), yet the underscore does not clearly divide disability and ability into a binary opposition, but rather signals a fluidity and ambiguity between the two concepts, states, or experiences.

Through an analysis of *Yes, We Fuck!* (dir. Antonio Centeno and Raúl de la Morena, ES, 2015),[1] we show that dis_ability emerges as an aspect of relationality and connection and as an aspect of human variance, rather than something to be pitied or vilified, and finally resolved in isolation (Mitchell and Snyder 7). Through a combination of semiotic and textual and audiovisual discourse analysis, the questions "How are solidarity, care, and relationality imagined and narrated in this film?" and "What novel aesthetic forms appear through this relational approach to dis_ability?" will be addressed. We have selected three concepts we see arising in this documentary, which revolve around decolonial and queer aspects of care and pleasure-making: *intra-action*, *intercorporeality*, and *cripistemology*.

METHODOLOGY, METHODS, QUESTIONS

While our research methodology is rooted in cultural studies, what we propose with this analysis is a syncretic transdisciplinary approach. We employ cultural studies tools to read aesthetics and situate ourselves within Critical Disability Studies. In parallel, we import the concepts of intra-action (by feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad), intercorporeality (by phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty), and cripistemology (by Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, both working within English and Cultural Studies) to explore the complexity of what the documentary represents and depicts: dis_ability and sexuality in ways that defy individualism, commodification, and (re)pronormative expectations.

[1] The film is freely available online (CC License: Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives) with many subtitling options, which adds to its value as an education and empowering resource. The film can be watched on the creator's website: www.rauldelamorena.com (password: yeswefuck).

Our methods are an assemblage of semiotic and discourse analysis that employs textual (visual) analysis, visual discourse analysis (including mise-en-scène), and aspects of narratology. Stuart Hall differentiates between three kinds or levels of representation: symbolising, standing for/acting on behalf of, and revisiting what is in the past (28). We are interested in the first and second levels of representation: the symbols of dis_ability and the narratives that report about dis_ability. Importantly, we are not only interested in the elements and meanings of narratives and symbols/signs, but in how they come together in distinct forms of storytelling and their entanglements with political and material practices of becoming.

Additionally, we will draw from queer autoethnography to engage with aspects of reception and affect. As queer and ethnically minoritarian researchers who self-identify with various aspects of dis_ability, neurodivergence, and chronic pain, we believe that making our subjectivities visible and highlighting our positionalities and perspectives through autoethnography adds important insights to the analysis of structural hegemonies, while at the same time critically distancing our analysis from claims to universality. Following Stacy Holman Jones and Tony E. Adams, queer autoethnography "is an effort to set a scene [that] makes witnessing and testifying possible and puts pleasure, difference and movement into productive conversation" (199). It is an attempt to produce knowledge, while at the same time laying bare the hegemonies involved in knowledge production, and highlighting incompleteness. Each researcher watched the film in whole and in fragments on their own over the course of a few months, and we discussed it in meetings and through the produced text. We are interested in exploring this artefact through the lenses of solidarity and relationality. Accordingly, the questions that arise from the chosen methodological framework are: how are solidarity, care, and relationality imagined and narrated in this film?; what novel aesthetic forms appear through this relational approach to dis_ability?

THE FILM

We selected this Spanish documentary *Yes, We Fuck!* from a corpus of diverse media with different potentials as we felt it could allow us to explore questions of agency, intra-action, and intercorporeality, and, crucially, it would situate such an endeavour within the context of European Critical Disability Studies, while much of crip theory and CDS research comes from and focuses on the US and the UK. The film is from 2015, which gives us some temporal distance, while still remaining contemporary and relevant. Also, while it represents a broad range of themes, discussions,

and voices, it has not been analysed sufficiently. Yet another reason is its accessibility: it is freely available online (by the creators' choice) and, as such, does not keep audiences behind a paywall or dependent on the independent festival circuit to experience it.

YWF! offers the viewer several accounts of "functionally diverse" people (the English translation of the Spanish term "diversidad funcional") (Romañach and Lobato), queer people, crip-queer people, activists, and activist groups in their journey to explore their sexualities and bodies, and think about accessibility and pleasure (*Yes, We Fuck!*; García-Santesmases Fernández et al.). It does so by featuring a sex workshop, talking head segments, and street interviews, and foregrounding themes of dis_ability, migration, class, sex-work, and BDSM. It employs standard documentary aesthetics as well as footage from the workshop and group discussions. More importantly, it employs sex, eroticism, sensuality, and horniness, allowing viewers to explore these in different settings. Pleasure is one of the primary epistemological frameworks of the film; as one of the protagonists, Majo, says: "for me [sex] is diversity, imagination, pleasure-knowledge" (*YWF!* 09:59–10:04).

Andrea García-Santesmases Fernández et al. have written about the film in English, and while their analysis is meaningful—also to our research—and informative for understanding the post-porn Spanish radical documentary movement, our analysis presented in this article focuses more on developing a post-representational and relational aesthetic and less on the sociological dimension of the production and reception of the film.

YES, WE INTRA-ACT: RELATIONALITIES AND CRIPISTEMOLOGIES OF *FUCK*ING

We approach *YWF!* from a cripistemological perspective that goes "back and forth . . . about knowing and unknowing disability, making and unmaking disability . . ., and the importance of challenging subjects who confidently 'know' about 'disability,' as though it could be a thoroughly comprehended object of knowledge" (Johnson and McRuer 130). Such a perspective not only acknowledges the film's honest depiction of different types of intimacy between non-professionals and its deconstruction of ableism and crip pride, but also those moments where ableism, exoticisation, and asymmetrical dynamics are at play. If "cripistemology refuse[s] the usual routes of academic knowledge, accumulating meaning in the ephemera of . . . queer gatherings" (ibid.), then *YWF!* must be seen as a work of cripistemology, as it documents how queer crips gather to create and deconstruct dis_ability and sexual knowledge. According to Johnson

and McRuer, cripistemology follows the disrupting force of "an endemic crisis of ability and disability" (131). *YWF!* equally follows the disrupting force, but from the perspective of those inhabiting the affective spaces that emerge, where knowledge fails or there is no "official" or "sanctioned" knowledge. In other words, the film does not pretend to offer authentic or certain knowledge of the sexuality and pleasure of functionally diverse people. Instead, it presents moments when knowledge and beliefs are fractured and ruptured, and when queer crip pleasure emerges.

Understanding relationality and pleasure as organising principles of *YWF!*'s cripistemology, we draw on Barad's intra-action. Barad's concept is particularly pertinent to dis_ability and sexuality as it reorganises ontological understandings of causality, agency, matter, discourse, responsibility, and accountability (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* 32). Seen through the concept of intra-action, it becomes apparent that *YWF!* challenges the form of documentary as an educational cinematographic genre and its genre-typical discourses on both sexuality and dis_ability. While its purpose remains educational, the documentary integrates scenes of collective and collaborative sexual explorations of bodies that are not primarily educational, but rather erotic. These scenes play with cinematic techniques reminiscent of erotic films. One scene that uses erotic or pornographic elements most directly shows a young man with cerebral palsy and a sex worker. Their BDSM play is set in warm colours. The camera fragments the bodies, turned to the sex worker's ass in a tight leather harness rubbing against the client's loins, for example, or offering a close-up of his face and arms, pinned down by a person above him, who is out of focus (*YWF!* 24:15–26:54). While the scene does produce knowledge about dis_ability and sexuality, actively fighting the stereotype that "severely" disabled people are asexual or simply unable to have sex, especially kinky sex, it does not necessarily clarify, explain, or convey any knowledge beyond that.

Rather, by employing techniques from erotic or pornographic film, it invites the distinct mode of looking that Laura Mulvey has termed scopophilia, deriving pleasure from gazing (8). Scopophilia, in Mulvey's terms, is a power structure or exercise of power that sexually objectifies primarily women. In the earlier-mentioned scene of *YWF!*, scopophilia sexually objectifies the male-identified person, quite literally, in the context of a BDSM play, where he is caged, bound, blinded with a black cloth, and spanked, but also through the camera focus that fragments his body, blurring its parts, and illuminates them in soft, warm oranges, reds, and grays. However, rather than degrading him, it can be argued with Martha Nussbaum that this "sort of objectifying attention to bodily parts is an important element in correcting the deformation [of desire] and promoting genuine erotic equality" (290).

While this is the most explicitly erotic or pornographic scene in *YWF!*, and it most directly invites the viewer to experience sexual desire rather than the desire for knowledge, it is not the only one. Other scenes, for example, when the camera follows a group of people with disabilities who are participating in a sex workshop (*YWF!* 05:40–09:35), equally transgress the boundaries of documentary cinema, by inviting the viewer to feel sexual desire for the multiple bodies with dis_ability caressing each other and themselves with their hands, feet, mouths, or toys.

These scenes are followed by others that fit more conventionally into the documentary genre, with people talking about their desires, the social prejudices they experience, the inaccessibility of sexual encounters, for instance, due to these prejudices and anxieties of their caregivers, who infantilise them. In their assemblage, they create a discourse that affirms the sexual agency of people with disabilities and makes a claim for sexual assistance, sexual accessibility, and sexual autonomy. A particularly ambiguous scene that does not reveal clearly who is speaking about what and in which context is a dialogue between two people against a black screen (28:00–30:55). In this conversation, the voices talk about how being perceived as female allows society to pathologise their experiences, for example, of female ejaculation as a bodily dysfunction rather than as a valuable experience. They explicitly address that sexual desire is connected to power, and that inequality of power can seem quite attractive. Their conversation is educational, but also filled with ambivalence. By not seeing who is speaking, the scene does not reveal if the two are physically disabled or not, but what clearly disables them is their social status as women. Thus, *YWF!* deconstructs social categories by visibilising similarities between different, but related vectors of oppression. A different kind of ambiguity is created through the scenes where parents are shown with their doubts and concerns about how much autonomy their adult children with disabilities should have. The viewers can feel the parents' discomfort in speaking about their children's sexuality. Additionally, it becomes clear that although the parents are benevolent, they carry prejudices and some measure their children against ableist norms. Their statements are not directly challenged by the narrative or any commentator, leaving it to the viewer to evaluate them.

FROM INTRA_ACTION TO INTERCORPORALITY: GENDER AND FUNCTIONAL DIVERSITY/DIS_ABILITY

An intercorporeal understanding of functional diversity and queer/crip intimacy can show how the interdependent self is constructed through touch, gaze, and the development of body schemas in their relation.

"Rather than closing the gap between me and the other, intercorporeality opens the gap between me and myself such that I encounter a spectral otherness in the interpretive responsivity of my own body's behavior," writes Marrato (199). The otherness can be extended and integrated through the phenomenological experience of co-embodiment during moments of queer/crip intimacy. As the film's voiceover is heard, the audience can see blurred close-ups of body parts and wider shots of a room full of pleasuring embodiment: "We breathe. I touch a stomach. It is not my body. All the hands. All the bodies. . . We recognise each other. We get lost in the movements of our hands. Let ourselves be pampered. Let ourselves be loved. We can feel ourselves" (*YWF!* 07:01–07:38). In this scene, we approach queer/crip intimacy through the prism of intercorporeality and see how "the experience of the body (however united or fragmented that experience may be) is coconstituted, never sovereign or informed by a maximal kind of agency. It is a process, instead, of relation and negotiation" (Malatino 71).

A useful cultural text here is a podcast episode of *Disability After Dark* in which the host and queer crip activist Andrew Gurza discusses the relationship between queerness and dis_ability with the professional adult-content creator Trip Richards. Their conversation on dis_ability and transness fleshes out elements that are also part of *YWF!*, such as the parallels between essentialism, biologism, and biological determinism in how bodies are rendered unable to do certain things as well as the prohibitions imposed on them. The two also discuss strap-ons (and sex toys/accessories in general) and their role as assistive devices, thus creating one more link between dis_ability and queerness as perhaps a unified project that targets normativity as a whole through its different cues (lookism, ableism, cisgenderism, queerphobia).

A cripistemological perspective emphasises that *YWF!* does not produce a utopia where crip and queer practices take place away from ableism, which is only talked about in theoretical terms, but instead it captures the nuanced, "well-intentioned" expressions of those within interable relationships. An example occurs at the beginning of the film, where a cis-male person from India argues that the Kama Sutra gives solutions to any sexual obstacles, and says that he prefers sex with his dis_abled partner as he gets to do what he wants with her: "Before it was complicated to do everything with women, I was fast and strong and the woman was not strong and didn't finish, and I finished. . . it was difficult. Now with Miriam, this body . . . she doesn't touch me, I touch her, things are the way I like them, the position. . . I like this body" (*YWF!* 15:41–16:07). We see here an asymmetrical power dynamic that is expressed with one partner being able to do everything (including achieving an orgasm), be

strong, and overcome obstacles (thanks to the Kama Sutra) and expressly enjoying this asymmetry, and the other presumably (as she does not get to respond to this statement in the film) being the body that both creates obstacles to overcome and offers the terrain for the other to do what they like the way they like it.

The film (like the podcast) creates direct links between gender and functional diversity/dis_ability in the ways they are perceived and performed constantly, and attempts to confront us with our own dis_abilities, genders, assumptions, relations to others, stance towards sex work, multi-partnered sex, and what is considered solo sex for a person with functional diversity. Pleasure is one of their primary epistemological frameworks, yet *YWF!* also directly addresses the connections between productivity, reproductivity, and capitalism from the very beginning. Urko, one of the film protagonists, says: "We live in a society where some bodies are considered more valuable than others according to some capacities that are considered more valuable than others. Those capacities are the productive ones; if you are a productive body, you are valuable" (05:36–05:51).

YWF! offers us a generous reflection on what McRuer calls "compulsory able-bodiedness" (2) and the invisibilities of dis_abilities and non-normative/non-reproductive sexualities. It forces the audiences to come into proximity with the politics of pathologisation that have historically cast certain people aside, either because of what their bodies look like or what these bodies supposedly can or cannot do (trans and queer people, people with functional diversity, dis_abled people, people whose looks diverge from beauty norms). It contextualises neoliberalism's rhetoric of "personal responsibility," the idea that individuals are responsible for overcoming systemic hurdles, which are seen exclusively as personal failings or choices. It counters the assumption of the lack of eroticism in the lives of dis_abled people and employs sensuality to inform and turn us on. It offers us raw, warm, sexy imagery and honest conversations.

We want to argue that the film's depictions of knowledge-production at the site of a political claim to pleasure and access to pleasure present intra-actions. Intra-actions, according to Barad, "enact an agential cut (in contrast to the Cartesian cut . . . between subject and object) effecting a separation between 'subject' and 'object.' That is, the agential cut enacts a 'local' resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy" ("Posthumanist Performativity" 815). Crucially then, intra-actions enact agential separability—the local condition of exteriority-within-phenomena.

The directors' focus on what happens during and after these encounters between people of variable abilities and experiences, the use of POV, and the inclusion of the bodies and desires of the creators into the "action"

reminds us of this agential disruption of the binary and border of subjects, and objects. Here, the separation of roles becomes murky, and agency (usually connoted with subjects and not objects) is explicitly addressed both thematically and often in the meta-commentary the film offers with interviews that occur after the event (of the sex workshop for instance).

According to Barad, and in simpler language, we come to be through material-discursive intra-actions that we enact agentially. Rather than separate already-formed entities, we are inseparable agentially intra-acting "components" (Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity*" 32). This perspective is particularly useful in experiencing the work of sexual assistants and sex workers in the film, as it allows for interdependent and enmeshed understanding of care/sex work without its politicised dichotomisation and mutual negation. Furthermore, it is largely within dis_ability communities that interdependence comes to substitute independence and self-sufficiency, which in a capitalist culture of hyper-optimisation are deemed universally aspirational. Dis_ability, as presented in the film, is largely understood as the need for each other in situations where people only have the social contract to guide them in sharing abilities and resources, care and time, making communities in the process.

When talking about agency and desire, consent and legal framings are important. Legal and medical language has often attempted to regulate and canonise desires and practices. As Barad writes, "the category 'acts against nature' claims to save or defend but in reality erases and demonizes" ("Nature's Queer Performativity*" 33). Queer pleasures and dis_ability have traditionally been placed outside the domain of society, often under the category of legal language that avoids naming and thus can (and would) include anything deemed divergent from the confines of normalcy. Barad uses the term "acts against nature," also seen, since the 16th century in Europe, as "crime against nature" or "unnatural act" in iterations of various legal systems to cover masturbation, sodomy, fellatio, bestiality (and more recently to include sex work, incest, and public sex). As the term already speaks of nature and outlaw acts that are not reproductive, we can see that the focus is on regulating pleasure or certain instances of violence, but not other (arguably, compulsory heterosexuality and gender, like anything compulsory, are violent by default).

The intimate experience of watching *YWF!* opens up in the viewer the horizon of intercorporeal being-with the dis_abled queer people that are captured within the film. Through making immanent ontological intimacy (Maclaren 18–40) in its concretisation in the act of viewing, we can further sense a deeper political reworking of embodied pleasure, attraction or care. *YWF!* can then be seen as a process of experiencing queer crip intimacy anew.

The way intimacy is represented in *YWF!* makes apparent that touch, sounds, and gaze all constitute a process of co-creating embodied experience, that embodied experience of the world and of one's being in it is a collective undertaking. Following Merleau-Ponty, we can imagine the bodymind as the condition and context through which we are able to have relationships in spacetime. The intertwinement of our being in relationships with others can be termed a "co-intentionality: a coexistence towards the world" (Maclaren 23).

This interdependence is realised intersubjectively through intercorporeality. Intercorporeality refers to a phenomenological notion of being that critiques and overcomes Cartesian dualism (similarly to Barad's intra-actions) of the self-other binary. While understanding being as intercorporeal, we can imagine others not just as distant wilful objects we encounter, but as perspectives and embodiments we partially and temporarily inhabit. Touching another person's skin, I feel its texture and temperature; we inhabit each other's affective registers, we feel through each other and attune to each other's state of being.

To further explain what inhabiting the gaze of the other could mean, Maclaren and Valentine both reproduce an example of a child and mother (Maclaren 23; Valentine 86). This event can be extrapolated to any intimate relationship where a connection is maintained, where the perspective of another enters into one's own: imagine a small child discovering a worm. They pick it up from the ground and proudly show it to their caregiver. The caregiver reacts with visible disgust, puts their hand over their mouth, and looks disconcerted by the dirtiness of the worm. The initially proud attitude of the child, motivated by a discovery, is then transformed by the gaze and gesture of the caregiver into one of shame and apprehension. We inhabit each other's gaze, our self-image, and crucially our body schemata are created intercorporeally; at all times we experience our porosity, our ontological intimacy, or in Merleau-Ponty's words: "It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his. The gesture that I witness outlines an intentional object. This object is genuinely present and fully comprehended when the powers of my body adjust themselves to it and overlap it" (215).

Through this example, one can easily imagine how destructive the normative cis-hetero-ableist gaze is to queer crip non-normative bodyminds not only in the abstract discursive media landscape, but also in the embodied lived everyday experience. How inhabiting the disgusted gaze of the other in an intimate situation can produce pain and shame, activating the stress registers of the nervous system, triggering, disabling connection and access to authentic intimacy. In *YWF!*, the scene where the ableist gaze is most directly addressed, without being fully or unambiguously called upon, is the sex workshop scene. We see a gender-non-conforming person

who leads the workshop and is at the same time its central focus, offering their body to the audience for a vulva examination (*YWF!* 32:39). Rather than being presented as erotic or sexual, the scene potentially reminds one of a medical examination and thus has the potential of pathologising trans bodies and female-perceived bodies. Yet, the queer joy of the sex workshop participants in gazing and being looked at counters such a reading, at least for an audience that can "read" queer joy.

Understanding ontological intimacy within a liberatory, emancipatory, critical framework, as Valentine writes, invites us to ask crucial questions: "[W]hat does it mean to be constituted by others, especially when it comes to the variety of bodyminds we inhabit? How ought we respond to power asymmetries inherent in interpersonal relationships, especially those where one partner may need the other for their immediate survival?" (87). Or, what kinds of responsibility are inherent to intimate situations with others, and what kinds of political action does this responsibility motivate?

In the sex workshop scene and more generally, *YWF!* documents the political practice of answering these questions in immediate embodied presence: "To share intimacy raises awareness about the importance of accessible spaces for all corporealities" (García-Santesmases Fernández et al. 275). What matters is the right to access intimacy for all bodyminds, and that is, intimacy aware of its responsibility for each other's embodied reality. As Mia Mingus writes,

> Access intimacy is that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else "gets" your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level. Sometimes it can happen with complete strangers, disabled or not, or sometimes it can be built over years. It could also be the way your body relaxes and opens up with someone when all your access needs are being met.

The film repeatedly thematises and heavily critiques the inaccessibility of intimacy in a cis-hetero-ableist regime. It also documents the practice of creating queer crip community spaces based on the values of agency, consent, responsibility, and interdependence that enable relaxation and release of stress from inaccessibility into the warmth of intimacy.

Virtual intercorporeality facilitated through the film does not allow for direct interaction, but it does open up a possibility of reorienting towards divergent vectors of attraction and intersubjective connection within the viewer. These orientations then have the potential to influence real-life intimate political crip and queer relationships, ultimately developing experience of the responsibility for embodied mutual co-creation and coexistence in the community.

The way access to intimacy is represented in the film oscillates on the spectrum of political, care, sex work, and personal and sexual assistance, be it through a trans postporn community space, finding and ordering a BDSM experience online, or in an intimate partnership that needs a care worker to prepare the dis_abled partner for the situation of sexual intimacy. The way care and sex work are formulated in *YWF!* does not draw a boundary between the two, which is also not the point of this observation; rather, the film shows the intra-active quality of care/sex work enmeshment; care and sex work are entangled and reshaped in their material-discursivity.

Particular attention can be given to the way sexual assistance is portrayed. Sexual assistance in sociological research is seen as the work that "supports their [dis_abled people's] access to sexuality" (García-Santesmases Fernández 172) or in rights-based discourse as "help or support provided for the performance of sexual activities" (De Asís Roig 137). The last scene of the film (*YWF!* 46:19–55:21) is framed by two dialogue shots of interdependent actors Sole and Teo discussing power, consent, and agency in a relationship of sexual assistance. In between those is a POV of Teo assisting in Sole's intimate exploration of her own body. The softness of the POV invites identification beyond normative ableist gazing, identification through virtual intercorporeal intimacy, through inhabiting the gaze of another. While still framed as labour, highlighted during this POV shot is the affective labour in the touch, voice, and attunement needed for a responsible practice of sexual assistance. As García-Santesmases Fernández writes,

> The other story involving the exchange of money is that of Sole, a woman whose lack of mobility means she cannot touch herself or masturbate. She is assisted by Teo, a sexual assistant, telling him how she wants her body caressed. The scene focuses on Sole's self-discovery, both through her own hands moved by the assistant and through his hands: "what smooth skin I have . . . I have never touched my nipple . . . it's lovely to touch." (169)

This scene (*YWF!* 46:08–54:37) represents trans and crip sexual pleasure non-conforming with the patriarchal rehabilitative narratives of sexual assistance. It underscores how our bodyminds are constituted intercorporeally in an interdependent mesh of relationships.

CONCLUSION

Employing cripistemology, the film moves past "official" or "sanctioned" knowledge and, as it focuses on queer ephemera, it presents moments when knowledge and beliefs are fractured, ruptured, and queer_crip

pleasure emerges. It transcends the documentary as an educational genre and crosses over into the erotic, a corrective scopophilic as well as an interpersonal attempt to "correct the deformation of desire" (Nussbaum 290). Its use of POV places the person discovering her skin and nipples and the pleasure she takes from touching them as the protagonist, allowing her narration and exclamations to lead the narrative. The directors' choices of the encounters of the different protagonists/participants/interviewees, the scenes of the workshops in particular, with the many bodies on the mattresses being with one another, and the focus on sexual assistants bring to mind a non-deterministic (indeed non-biologistic) understanding of ourselves as intra-actions; agentially co-informing material-discursive entangled parts of phenomena (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* 32). Discussing ontological intimacy within a liberatory framework, the film crucially addresses the violence of ableism that keeps certain desires un-enacted and beyond reach; it engages with violence in knowledge-production that does not come from pleasure itself (binary and compulsory understandings of sexuality as [re]productive only). The documentary creates a situation for virtual intercorporeality by opening up the possibility of reorienting towards divergent vectors of attraction and intersubjective connection, expanding from within the viewer to the larger community around them.

Works Cited

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke UP, 2007. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388128

Barad, Karen. "Nature's Queer Performativity*." *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, nos. 1–2, 2012, pp. 25–53. https://doi.org/10.7146/kkf.v0i1-2.28067

Barad, Karen. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2003, pp. 801–31. https://doi.org/10.1086/345321

Chen, Mel Y. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Duke UP, 2012. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822395447

De Asís Roig, Rafael. "Is Sexual Assistance a Right?" *The Age of Human Rights Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2019, pp. 133–47. https://doi.org/10.17561/tahrj.n12.7

García-Santesmases, Andrea. "Crip Is the New Queer?" *The Routledge Companion to Gender, Sexuality, and Culture*, edited by Emma Rees, Routledge, 2022, pp. 165–77. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367822040-17

García-Santesmases Fernández, Andrea, et al. "'From Alliance to Trust': Constructing Crip-Queer Intimacies." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2017, pp. 269–81. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1273100

Goodley, Dan. *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. SAGE, 2011.

Gurza, Andrew. "Is a Strap-On an Assistive Device? Sitting Down with TripleXTransMan Trip Richards." *Disability After Dar*k, episode 208, *PlayerFM*, https://player.fm/series/disability-after-dark/episode-208-is-a-strap-on-an-assistive-device-sitting-down-with-triplextransman-trip-richards, accessed 23 Jan. 2026.

Hall, Stuart. "The Work of Representation." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall, SAGE, 1997, pp. 13–74.

Holman Jones, Stacy, and Tony E. Adams. "Autoethnography is a Queer Method." *Queer Methods and Methodologies*, edited by Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash, Ashgate, 2010, pp. 195–214. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315603223-13

Johnson, Merri Lisa, and Robert McRuer. "Cripistemologies Now (More than Ever!)." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2024, pp. 115–34. https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2024.1

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist Queer Crip*. Indiana UP, 2013. https://doi.org/10.2979/6841.0

Köbsell, Swantje. "Doing Dis_ability: Wie Menschen mit Beeinträchtigungen zu 'Behinderten' werden." *Managing Diversity*, edited by Karim Fereidooni and Antonietta P. Zeoli, Springer, 2016, pp. 89–103. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-14047-2_6

Maclaren, Kym. "Intimacy as Transgression and the Problem of Freedom." *Journal of Critical Phenomenology*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2018, pp. 18–40. https://doi.org/10.31608/PJCP.v1i1.3

Malatino, Hil. *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*. U of Minnesota P, 2022.

Marrato, Lorenzo. "Intercorporeality." *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, edited by Gail Weiss et al., Northwestern UP, 2019, p. 199. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvmx3j22

McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York UP, 2006.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith, Routledge Classics, 2002. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203994610

Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link." *Leaving Evidence*, 5 May 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/, accessed 23 Jan. 2026.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. U of Michigan P, 2001. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11523

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6

Nussbaum, Martha C. "Objectification." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1995, pp. 249–91. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.1995.tb00032.x

Romañach, Javier, and Manuel Lobato. "Diversidad Funcional, Nuevo Término Para La Lucha Por La Dignidad En La Diversidad Del Ser Humano." *Foro de Vida Independiente y Divertad*, 26 July 2005, https://forovidaindependiente.org/diversidad-funcional-nuevo-termino-para-la-lucha-por-la-dignidad-en-la-diversidad-del-ser-humano/, accessed 23 Jan. 2026.

Valentine, Desiree. "Shifting the Weight of Inaccessibility: Access Intimacy as a Critical Phenomenological Ethos." *Puncta*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2020, pp. 76–94. https://doi.org/10.5399/PJCP.v3i2.9

Yes, We Fuck! Directed by Raúl de la Morena and Antonio Centeno, 2015.

Katharina Wiedlack (she/her) is Assistant Professor for Anglophone Cultural Studies at the Department of English and American Studies, University of Vienna.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9236-8819
katharina.wiedlack@univie.ac.at

Anna T. (she/her) is an artist, lecturer, and curator based in Vienna, Austria. Her work exists at the intersection of art and theory, blending forms and playing within and without canonical scholarly formats.
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5354-6259
anna@annatee.co.uk

Ema Benčíková (she/they) is a Vienna-based curator, theatre director, and care worker. In their artistic research, they focus on critical phenomenology of non-normative embodiment.
ema.bencikova@tuwien.ac.at

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.17

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Denisa Tomková
Charles University, Prague

Against Crip and Queer Loneliness: Reclaiming the Freak Show in Contemporary Polish Performance Art

ABSTRACT

Freak shows, part of the entertainment industry that presented "unusual" bodies, used humor, hyperbole, and the grotesque, and reinforced normative ideas about "normality" and "able-bodiedness" (Bogdan; Garland-Thomson; Chemers), became popular in the capital cities of Central and Eastern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries (Herza; Demski and Czarnecka). The contemporary Polish performance entitled *The Freak Show* (2024), presented at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, sought to reclaim the freak show as a genre of performance art and to liberate it from its associations with low culture and oppression. Using their own corporeality, the artists addressed the abuse permeating historical freak shows. They challenged the distorted portrayal of the performers in the narrow, clichéd roles assigned to them and the excessive focus on their bodies' untypicalities, which had commonly been intended to evoke curiosity. The article argues that the artists behind the performance fostered friendship and community, combating queer and crip loneliness—experienced by disabled and queer people in ableist and heterosexual society—through "access intimacy" (Mingus). Furthermore, the visibility of their non-normative bodies in a major Polish art institution sought to foster empowerment among queer and disabled audiences.

Keywords: freak show, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, performance art, loneliness, able-bodiedness, crip and queer aesthetics, access intimacy.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 31 Aug. 2025. Verified: 26 May 2026. Accepted: 31 May 2026.

INTRODUCTION

Before presenting the main argument of this article, I will briefly pause to quote queer/trans disability studies scholar J. Logan Smilges's reflection on the moment "when you finally secure access to something for the first time—maybe a concert, a graduate program, a job, a relationship, a surgery—and you realize that you are still feeling all alone, and that no one seems to care" (8). Smilges problematizes ableism as merely "a collection of access problems" (3), suggesting that even if certain places or institutions are accessible, ableism can still render them challenging and isolating for disabled people. This article will address the sense of loneliness that is disproportionately associated with queer and disabled subjects and discuss what access to (art) institutions means for artists and audiences with disabilities.

In this article, I will analyze the Warsaw performance of *The Freak Show* (2024), based on interviews with the performers,[1] and examine how it addressed the oppression associated with historical freak shows. The artists challenged the narrow scope of clichéd, stereotypical roles assigned to the historical performers and the overemphasis on their physical differences, which were meant to provoke curiosity, as was typical in freak shows of the past. Visual sociologist and disability studies expert Robert Bogdan explains the different modes of representation of freak show performers, which served as projections of the normate's[2] fears and prejudices, and argues that when presented with non-Western Others, the normative audience saw "confirmed old prejudices and beliefs regarding the separateness of the 'enlightened' and 'primitive' worlds; they left the freak show reassured of their own superiority by such proofs of the others' inferiority" (197). By contrast, the contemporary Polish performance sought to present disability from the subjective perspective of the artists who created the show. The article further argues that the performers fostered friendship and community, fighting loneliness through "access intimacy," which disability justice advocate Mia Mingus defines as a "feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs." *The Freak Show* helped them combat crip and queer loneliness by strengthening the sense of kinship in the production process. Moreover, showcasing their non-normative bodies within an art institution aimed to foster empowerment among queer and disabled audiences.

---

[1] While the article was in its final proofreading stage, the documentary *Freak Show* (2026, dir. Łukasz Ronduda and Filip Pawlak), presenting some of these stories, premiered at the Millennium Docs Against Gravity Festival.

[2] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson defines the normate as "the veiled subject position of the cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries. The term normate usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as *definitive human beings*" (8).

THE HISTORY OF FREAK SHOWS

One meaning of the word "freak" is "a person, plant or animal with an unusual physical abnormality. Now regarded as offensive when applied to people" ("Freak, *Noun* (4a)"). However, Bogdan explains that "freakishness" is not a trait of an individual, but rather an aspect of how people such as non-Western Others, people with medically unusual bodies, and people with rare abilities have been presented by entertainment enterprises and public institutions (5). At the turn of the 19th century, this term began to be used in connection with a certain type of display of human "abnormalities" (Chemers 6), and subsequently, during the 19th century, freak shows became part of the entertainment industry (4). They depicted "unusual" bodies through humor, grotesqueness, and hyperbole, while also shaping conventional notions of "normality" and "able-bodiedness."

Along with circuses, amusement parks, museums, and theme parks, freak shows were part of the entertainment industry. They all involved a specific way of life and a similar approach to audiences, or more accurately, customers. As Bogdan notes, "showmen working the freak shows systematically and pervasively misrepresented their exhibits to the public" (85), but the performers themselves also often created characters and stage personas for the entertainment industry. Bogdan illustrates this with the example of the two-headed Mexican man, Pasqual Pinon, who was exposed as a fraud; his second head was either a tumor with facial features or a well-made fake head (ibid.). Disability studies and feminist scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson similarly argues that showmen emphasized the performers' extraordinary characteristics, adding that "[p]osters and broadsides extravagantly proclaimed the peculiarity of the freak's body, provoking the spectators' curiosity" (61). She also notes that even the architecture of the elevated platform was set up to "[hold] the observer's gaze like a magnet, not only foregrounding the body on display, but exposing it in such a way that the physical traits presented as extraordinary dominated the entire person on exhibit" (ibid.). As will be discussed further, this exaggeration of the performers' "freakishness" was problematized in *The Freak Show*.

Freak shows and circuses were popular in the capital cities of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) during the 19th and 20th centuries, as part of the project of European modernity, which involved urbanization, industrialization, trade, tourism, and the establishment of new institutions such as museums and zoos (Demski and Czarnecka 7). Western colonial and imperial systems and discourses were evident in Orientalist trends in architecture and art during the Habsburg Empire and in the art collected by Czech travelers, as well as by museums and galleries (Rampley 6).

The first ethnic exhibitions in CEE took place at the 1873 Vienna World's Fair and at the Budapest Zoo in 1874. The research of Czech cultural anthropologist Filip Herza shows that these displays of human "curiosities" developed in CEE alongside their North American and Western European equivalents, while Polish ethnographer Dominika Czarnecka argues that circuses—"the main 'arenas' of displaying otherness"—"emerged and were developed, negotiated, and challenged" in the region (112). For example, the Warsaw-based Staniewski Brothers Circus was one of the world's most famous circuses. Czarnecka specifically observes how these performances reinforced racial and gender differences: "[F]or instance, in 1884, the Ciniselli Circus featured a show of 'real Indians' in Warsaw . . .; in 1888, the Schumann Circus advertised performances of African Ashanti people to Warsaw audiences; and in 1911, the Devigné Circus promoted shows of a Japanese troupe in Łódź" (115).

By exhibiting bodily differences, freak shows reinforced binary oppositions, such as normal versus abnormal. As a form of lowbrow entertainment, they often pathologized non-normative bodies. At the same time, ideas about scientific rationality, able-bodiedness, white supremacy, and human classification were developed. The concept of "normality" influenced a wide range of disciplines and research fields, including comparative anatomy, pathology, clinical medicine, criminal anthropology, critical race studies, eugenics, sexology, and psychoanalysis (Cryle and Stephens 4–5). Consequently, in the 20th century, due to "the eugenics movement and the medicalization of human differences" (Bogdan 63), the non-normative body was moved "from the stage platform to the teaching hospital amphitheater, the medical text, and the special institution" (Garland-Thomson 78). The following section will focus on the contemporary performance *The Freak Show*, which critically engaged with this history and aimed to reclaim it from a crip perspective. As Chemers argues, "every disabled body in performance . . . enters into some kind of dialogue with the perceived history of the freak show" (25). It is precisely through critical analysis, recognizing the connection between disability and performance, that we can rehabilitate this tradition (ibid.).

THE FREAK SHOW AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN WARSAW

The iconic new building of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (designed by American architect Thomas Phifer) opened on 25 October 2024 with a three-week-long artistic program. As part of it, on 31 October, the museum hosted *The Freak Show*, created by artists Nadia Markiewicz,

Filip Pawlak, Daniel Kotowski, Babcia, and Agata Wąsik, and curated by Filip Pawlak, Łukasz Ronduda, and dramaturg Szymon Adamczak.

The artists participating in the performance are all well-established within the contemporary art scene, as well as in the queer art community or among artists with disabilities. One of them, Filip Pawlak, is an experienced performer who studied at the film school in Katowice and the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław, earned an MA in theatre arts from the Malmö Theatre Academy/Lund University, and is currently a PhD student in film and theatre at the University of Silesia in Katowice. He is an artist, a theatre producer, and an activist advocating for the rights of artists with disabilities. Since 2019, he has been involved in Europe Beyond Access, an EU project that connects and supports artists with disabilities.

The first act that Pawlak, impersonating a freak-show barker, introduced was the work of visual artist, performer, and curator Daniel Kotowski. Kotowski graduated from the Faculty of Interior Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and the Faculty of New Media Arts at the Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technology. He was a member of the Polish Group of Deaf Artists, founded in 2012. He is currently a doctoral student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk.

His performance was followed by Babcia's show, in which they appeared on stage dressed as a dancing doll, drawing on their experience as a drag artist, performer, and costume designer who derives inspiration from all types of horror media. This act, like much of Babcia's other works, is grounded in Poznań's grassroots queer art community.

Next, artist Agata Wąsik performed as Lady Picassa. Wąsik is a graduate of the Grażyna and Kiejstut Bacewicz Music University in Łódź, where she earned a degree in music therapy. She is a classically trained singer who uses various musical genres and styles in her performances. Wąsik has been on stage since 2012, when she appeared in the theatre performance *W Przechlapanem* [*In Screwedville*] directed by the late Rafał Urbacki[3] at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute in Warsaw. In *The Freak Show*, Wąsik sang Grace Jones's song "I've Seen that Face Before" to music inspired by Astor Piazzolla's "Libertango," composed in collaboration with artist Marcel Pieczonka. Her character's, Lady Picassa's, face was covered with geometric, colorful, cubist-style makeup, crafted in collaboration with makeup artist Aleksandra Adamska.

Finally, Nadia Markiewicz performed dressed as a rose, which, having undergone spontaneous genetic mutations, served as an analogy for congenital

[3] Rafał Urbacki (1984–2019), a cripqueer performer and choreographer, was one of the precursors of crip choreography in Poland. He has been recognized for bringing crip aesthetics and perspectives into Polish contemporary dance.

disability in the plant world. Markiewicz is a visual artist, a graduate of the Studio of Spatial Activities at the Faculty of Media Art of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw (2020). She also attended the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam (2010–11) and the University of Warsaw (2011–14), and is currently a PhD student at the Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków.



Fig. 1. *The Freak Show*. Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2024. Photo by Dominika Jaruga. Copyright by Madants sp. z o.o.

In terms of form, *The Freak Show* alluded to historical freak shows and local historical figures. At the beginning of the performance, Pawlak mentioned that the Staniewski Brothers Circus was located just a few minutes' walk from the newly opened museum building. Inspired by the genealogical traditions of Polish circus culture, *The Freak Show* sought to carve out its place in the history of Polish performance art by returning to its original location. The performance also evoked Stefan Bibrowski, a Polish artist who had hypertrichosis. Known as "Lionel the Lion-Faced Man," he became a popular performer on Coney Island. As Markiewicz explains,

> That was our way of revising the canon of great Polish people to include someone with an extraordinary body who worked in sideshows. We want to make the memory of these artists more prominent in our culture. Currently, they are exclusively viewed as victims, which is not irrelevant in many cases, but their agency and success are denied. So Bibrowski has become a kind of historic patron for us.

The Freak Show sought to challenge the historical perception of freak shows as lowbrow entertainments that display "otherness" and "abnormality" for the sake of spectacle. Hence, the featured artists took full control of their performances, and the ways in which their bodies were depicted, to prevent excessive emphasis on their atypicality. The aim was to challenge the common strategy used in historical freak shows to arouse the viewers' curiosity (Garland-Thomson 61).

As disability studies scholars David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder argue, it is precisely through "[p]erversely championing the terms of their own stigmatization [that] marginal peoples alarm the dominant culture with a canniness about their own subjugation. . . . Thus, the minority culture deflects the stigmatizing definition back on to the offenders by openly advertising them in public discourse" (35). This was achieved by the artists acknowledging the value of their "extraordinary" bodies, understood as "generative potential of disability, the world-making work of disability as a concept and cultural force" (Garland-Thomson xii). The bodies of the non-normative performers who presented their work at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw gave the freak show a new meaning by consciously avoiding sensationalism or accentuating otherness. They achieved this goal by creating individual parts of the show by themselves, departing from stereotypical freak-show representations, and taking responsibility for how they presented their bodies and what they wanted to communicate.

Referring to David Krasner's *Resistance, Parody, and Double-Consciousness* (1997), Chemers argues that African American performance in the years following the Civil War "enabled black actors to take control, at least partially, of the terms of their reception. In so doing, they were able to cater to the racist hegemony. [T]hese actors were capable of negotiating the tricky line between resistance and deviance" (133–34). Similarly, *The Freak Show* artists reappropriated the freak show as a genre and dismantled its oppressive practices. They liberated it from its history by drawing on their individual experiences. As Chemers argues,

> Disability may never be liberated from the history of the freak show, but the freak show can and must be liberated from its historical neglect, so that the freak, hitherto visible only as a victim of conscienceless managers and degenerate audiences, can be recognized as an active agent, even as an artist whose work shapes and is shaped by the same dynamic social forces governing any theatrical production. (9)

The Polish artists' acts presented in *The Freak Show* were conceptually layered and visually captivating commentaries that did not portray disability through the prism of self-pity, anger, or weakness, but rather

provided viewers with an opportunity to build a relationship with the stage personas through humor, music, dance, and visual metaphors, and, above all, to approach these personas' unique ways of being in the world from the artists' own perspectives.

COMFORT: CRIPPING AND QUEERING A STATE-FUNDED INSTITUTION

Before the performance began, crowds of people waited patiently outside the hall where it was about to start. As the museum guard did not allow anyone to peek behind the curtain, the audience became impatient and feared that there would not be enough space for everyone. The tension grew. *The Freak Show* began with the barker Pawlak's entrance on stage. Announcing the start of the performance, Pawlak said that people with disabilities would be given priority to enter first and watch the performance comfortably. He then put everyone at ease, joked around, and created a pleasant atmosphere to make the whole audience feel comfortable, encouraging them to applaud the performers.

In this way, Pawlak playfully engaged with common strategies that disabled people are expected to follow in everyday contexts. As Garland-Thomson explains, "every person with a visible disability knows intimately [that] managing, deflecting, resisting, or renouncing that stare is part of the daily business of life" (26). She adds that "disabled people must use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort. . . . Only then can each person emerge as multifaceted, whole" (14). Similarly, Chemers suggests that "part of the burden disabled persons have been made to assume" lies in their bearing "responsibility for the normate's discomfort," which results from the fact that their bodies are seen as "the source of the turmoil" (34). For the most part, *The Freak Show* conformed to the expectation that the performers should attend to the comfort of the "normate" audience, yet it did so to achieve a specific goal. As Markiewicz explains, "I know that disability is a topic many people would rather look away from, and my use of aesthetics associated with fun is meant to lure a viewer into it before they realize what it's all about. I am not upfront with it at first glance" (qtd. in Tomková 113). Similarly, the other performers created a safe space and a comfortable pace of the show only to increase the later shock effect and eventually share their personal stories, which they elaborated in the interviews I conducted, and their experiences of disability hidden behind the comfortable façade of humor, music, dance, and visual metaphors.

Postcolonial queer feminist theorist Sara Ahmed observes that when a person feels comfortable, they usually do not even notice it, taking this feeling for granted (*The Cultural Politics* 174). Pawlak's prioritizing of audience members with disabilities in the performance space can be seen as an attempt to make the normates aware of their privilege and somewhat balance access to comfort in the space. Ahmed explains that "some bodies can 'have' comfort, only as an effect of the work of others" (149). *The Freak Show* accentuated the fact that comfort and discomfort are often relational, in that the comfortable environment created in the museum "depend[ed] on the labour of [performers]" (ibid.).

The audience was also given permission by Pawlak to act in various non-standard ways, which was directly inspired by Coney Island's freak shows. As Markiewicz explains,

> I visited a show there twice and was amazed by the level of interaction that is encouraged from the audience members, which I think could also be interpreted as a form of accessibility. Strict theatre rules can be harsh on a viewer, and here they are encouraged to release emotions and move around.

This can be seen in parallel with the strategies used by self-identifying queer disabled artist Claire Cunningham, who, as Katarzyna Ojrzyńska, a disability and performance studies scholar, argues,

> opens her performances with a direct address to the spectators in which she invites them to behave in non-normative ways that are adjusted to their needs. They can leave the room and return whenever they wish to, they can change their seat, or lie down, and, if need be, they can make noises. (203)

Ojrzyńska offers a reading of Cunningham's practice in relation to Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetic" and explores various aspects of her strategies for building "care-ful relationality" in a performance space (204). A similar desire for relationality was evident in *The Freak Show*, which invited audience members to behave freely and be attentive to their needs. This can be perceived as an attempt to create an even more comfortable experience, particularly for non-normative spectators who find it difficult to adhere to theatre etiquette.

In general, crip and queer relational strategies offer an alternative to neoliberal individualism. The artists behind *The Freak Show* created an accessible space for free expression of emotions and movement, and for exchange between the audience and the performers. Pawlak played a pivotal role in this by structuring the performance, fostering a sense

of connection with the audience, and encouraging them to answer his questions out loud. He encouraged them to move around the space. His introductions also redefined the character of a typical barker in a freak show, as he did not misrepresent the performers to the audience and questioned the audience's excessive curiosity about the "freakishness" of the performers. For example, before Markiewicz's performance about mutated roses, Pawlak highlighted the beauty of diversity in the rose garden, while also mentioning Markiewicz's loss of her friend Carolyn, who died early as a result of a mutated gene (HTT). Pawlak focused more on the artist's personal relationship with her best friend Carolyn, which inspired the performance, than on the performer's physical qualities.

By accentuating the importance of comfort and relationality, *The Freak Show* also addressed the problem of the (in)accessibility of Polish art institutions. Research conducted in Kraków in 2024 revealed, for instance, that museums are still largely inaccessible to people with various disabilities, who account for 10% of all visitors. It showed that they are well prepared to welcome visitors with mobility impairments and seniors, but less so to welcome people who are visually impaired, d/Deaf, or hard of hearing (Kruczek et al.). To shed light on this issue, *The Freak Show* provided access and comfort to people with various types and degrees of disability. This was also achieved by providing additional access services. Any text spoken during the performance was translated into Polish Sign Language. Furthermore, *The Freak Show* featured whispered audio description for blind audience members. Babcia explains that they allowed blind audience members to touch and feel their costume and props after the performance. By offering alternative ways for bodies to access the performance space, *The Freak Show* made an important gesture that overturned the social structures of access, aiming to create a sense of comfort for people with disabilities—a goal that was achieved thanks to the artists' and interpreters' work.

Pawlak, who not only hosted the performance but also co-curated it with Ronduda, told me that they, as artists, recognized the museum staff's great effort in producing the performance and welcoming them to the institution. Although he notes that he and his colleagues worked under time pressure and were pushed to their limits, which is not in line with the accessible production methods they would have liked, the performers and producers felt that the museum personnel had done everything they could to accommodate them, even though the new museum building had only opened a week before the performance's premiere (Pawlak).

While the performance's inclusion in the museum's opening program can be seen as an inclusive gesture, it could also be considered merely symbolic. J. Logan Smilges argues that, even though certain places or institutions can be accessible, ableism can still make them challenging for

people with disabilities. Smilges problematizes "how too concerted a focus on individuals' access needs distracts from the messier, meaner, and more systemic ways that ableism operates in our world" (4). However, I believe that *The Freak Show* represents an important step towards transforming the institution through the artists' work. The performers provided valuable insights into the needs of disabled artists within the institutional context and, thanks to their efforts, the audience gained a deeper understanding of "institutions *as* formations," which can be transformed to embrace greater human diversity (Ahmed, *On Being Included* 173–74).

This allows us to consider the relationship between bodies and institutional spaces. To use Ahmed's turn of phrase, *The Freak Show* aimed to create "'a place at the table' in the hope that the table will not keep its place" (*The Promise of Happiness* 106). The focus should now be on the latter and on how the institution can be transformed as a result of this experience. The next section will further explore how the performance offered an opportunity to combat crip loneliness among the performers by fostering a sense of community during the production process.

INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCES

Kotowski's act began with him sitting silently on a wooden stool, dressed in a white tank top and white shorts, echoing the pose of Auguste Rodin's modernist sculpture *The Thinker*. After a few minutes, he began repeating the words "bla bla, bla bla, bla bla bla . . .," then got up and approached the audience. The artist explains: "Nowadays, every person not only has the right to believe in some truth, but also to create their own truth. At the same time, they are reduced to a freak-show spectacle, considered distrustful and abnormal." At the end of the evening, Kotowski returned in the role of an online streamer, while Pawlak filmed him. The image was projected onto a screen behind the artist, who repeated "bla bla bla . . .," now standing and gesturing "bla bla" in sign language. Finally, he took Pawlak's camera and started recording a live selfie video with the audience in the background, which was projected onto the screen.

Kotowski's goal was to comment on the crisis of today's intellectuals in the context of the rise of fake news and deep fakes in live Internet broadcasting, known as trash streaming (or patostreaming in Poland), in which a streamer performs and spreads shocking and often dangerous acts. His work encourages us to think about whom we take seriously, whose voice we trust and attach importance to, and why. The artist mocked contemporary political figures and online influencers who spread fake news, turning them into the main characters of his version of a contemporary freak show. This

interpretation of Kotowski's performance is based on the ideas he shared in the interview I conducted with him. In his previous works, he had already employed both the spoken phrase "bla bla bla" and its PSL equivalent as part of his artistic strategy to critically address the presence of sign language in the media and the social perception of that language and its users.[4] For instance, in his video *A Person Who Does Not Speak Is Not a Person* (2020), inspired by the iconic work by Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović (*An Artist Who Does Not Speak English Is Not An Artist*, 1992), Kotowski used a fake sign that he designed to resemble a word in sign language. Since performing this made-up gesture along with its verbal equivalent produces meaningless noise, it can be likened to challenging the place of the silent voice in public discourse and in the world in general. His piece at the *Freak Show* echoes this by challenging normative notions of communication.

In the following act, Babcia, dressed as a dancing doll and wearing rabbit make-up and a white floral lace dress, danced to "Why Do I Cry?"—a song by Margo Guryan. Babcia drank from a container labelled with a carrot sign. The scene darkened, the space was illuminated by red light, and the music became distorted, with images of white rabbits projected onto the screen, one of which was later presented after being skinned. When the artist fell to the ground, the light returned to white. Babcia pulled a red object resembling an intestine from under their clothes, from which they drew a gun and fired into the distance. The music started again, and the artist resumed their dance, while images of a happy white rabbit eating carrots were projected onto the back screen. Babcia underwent several surgeries during their childhood and later adolescence, which aimed to improve their life, as their parents and doctors often told them. Therefore, they adopted the character of a rabbit. (In Polish, "królik doświadczalny/experimental rabbit" [Eng. guinea pig] means a person on whom medical experiments are performed.)

Babcia made an important commentary on a society in which disability is perceived as an illness or a dysfunction that needs to be corrected and cured. This connects with Eunjung Kim's concept of "curative violence," "the exercise of force to erase differences for the putative betterment of the Other" (27). Explaining further that "[c]urative violence occurs when cure is what actually frames the presence of disability as a problem and ends up destroying the subject in the curative process," Kim, a gender and disabilities studies scholar, describes the perception of disability as an enemy, a concept that defines the body as the Other (ibid.). This idea resonates in Babcia's words:

[4] For a critical take on sign language, particularly, sign language interpretation, in contemporary mainstream media and culture, where it tends to be exoticized or ridiculed, see also Robinson.

> It sounds like I were angry about these experiences, but I'm not. I'm just a little concerned that social norms about the body put children and their parents in these situations. That they think it's necessary to be cut, altered, surgically changed to be safe in the world just because you look different.

Babcia's performance offers a valuable personal reflection on ways to appreciate physical differences, rather than suppressing or treating them—a mindset that can leave a person feeling like an outsider and lonely in a society that views disability as a problem:

> Since childhood, I knew that I "had to" undergo surgery, so I was constantly preparing for it. . . . My parents were very involved and caring. I always felt safe. Especially my mom, who was always with me. That was the visible part, the important part. But then there was something else, a hidden part that wasn't easily visible. I thought the surgery was necessary, and it was expected that I would undergo it. I felt like it was [my] destiny, and that's how it was. I didn't feel like I had a choice. The expectations became my own, although I feel like I inherited this emotional state. I am still grateful, the care was important, and I live well now, but I still remember the sword that hung over my head in my teenage years. There is a certain norm that really puts pressure on you when you have a body like mine.



Fig. 2. Babcia performing in *The Freak Show*. Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2024. Photo by Dominika Jaruga. Copyright by Madants sp. z o.o.

Babcia, as a conceptual drag performer, often creates horror- and gore-inspired performances addressing themes such as emotional pain, rejection, violence, and interpersonal relations: "I like to challenge the audience with ugliness and trauma; I think ugliness needs more space."

Babcia's act shows how *The Freak Show* created a shock effect and offered a space where the artists shared their personal stories and experiences of disability. This was frequently done indirectly as they often remained somewhat hidden behind the comfort of humor, music, dance, and visual metaphors. These metaphors were part of the performance's camp aesthetic, which is characterized by a love of "artifice and exaggeration," "Being-as-Playing-a-Role," and "the metaphor of life as a theatre" (Sontag 1, 9, 10). Camp can be understood as a style characterized by irony, exaggeration, anti-seriousness, and theatricality, and has often been associated with homosexuality. However, as Susan Sontag argues, even though "homosexuals have been its vanguard" (12), camp is not exclusively homosexual but, one might argue, queer in a broad meaning of the term. Judith Butler, for instance, sees queer as "a site of collective contestation" which should remain "never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage" (228). Its epicene qualities, anti-seriousness, exaggeration, and excruciation, rather than a focus on tragedy, could all be found in Babcia's act.

The connection between crip and camp aesthetics is crucial in Babcia's piece: "Drag is to me about being big, too much, camp, and over the top, so whatever topic I decide to portray, I want the performance to be big" (Babcia). Furthermore, Pawlak and Kotowski are openly gay and share experiences of being pathologized because of their queerness and d/Deafness or short arm. The idea of finding enjoyment in what might be termed "certain passionate failures" (Sontag 13), which is evident in *The Freak Show*, is also echoed in Jack Halberstam's conceptualization of *Queer Art of Failure,* in which he notes that "the darkness becomes a crucial part of a queer aesthetic" (96). Halberstam distinguishes between the camp that is a response to "the banality of straight culture and the repetitiveness and unimaginativeness of heteronormativity," and that which is a form of queer aesthetics drawing from failure, mess, impoliteness, resentment, and shock (110). Following this line of thinking, Kotowski's performance of meaningless noise can be interpreted as an example of the queer art of failure—grotesque and absurd, rather than deeply tragic—precisely because of his inability to make people fully hear him. Camp can thus help us redefine the aesthetics of the freak show through its anti-seriousness, theatricality, and rejection of tragedy, redefining lowbrow entertainment as high art and unlocking its critical potential.

The next artist, Agata Wąsik, performed as Lady Picassa. Her face, covered with colorful geometric makeup, alluded to the modernist cubist style of painting popularized by Picasso, which merges multiple perspectives on figures and objects and breaks them down into geometric shapes. Wąsik used this convention to emphasize her own face, shaped by Treacher Collins syndrome, which she describes as an "exhibition of [a] living painting." This strategy can be seen as reinterpreting modernist fragmentation as crip aesthetics. The approach appears to allude to disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers's conceptualization of disability aesthetics. His 2010 book theorizes the role of disability in modern art and argues that "the disabled body and mind [have been] playing significant roles in the evolution of modern aesthetics" (2). Siebers uses the example of Picasso's *Maya with a Doll* (1938) by referencing its description by philosopher Anita Silvers, who compares the painting "to the irregular features of a friend affected by osteogenesis imperfecta, a disfiguring bone disease, confessing that she finds the same irregular face beautiful in the painting and ugly on her friend" (85). As Siebers further notes, Silvers argues that "we must learn from art how to view disabled bodies and minds aesthetically, making the ideal of beauty more expansive and inclusive" (ibid.), which is crucial to his argument that disability is an integral part of modern aesthetics. In his book, he considers how modernist and contemporary artists and artworks challenge normative aesthetic assumptions. In a similar way, Wąsik used her own face to reinterpret modernist fragmentation as "crip aesthetics" and expand the standards of aesthetic beauty.

An important difference between *The Freak Show* and modernist works lies in the artists' positionality. Wąsik spoke from her personal perspective and experience. The works by Picasso and some other modernists, by contrast, often reflected their fascination with the "primitive," non-Western "other," from whom they appropriated elements for their art (Leighten). In a similar fashion, Polish critical art of the 1990s focused on the body and corporeality. This trend in art, represented by artists such as Artur Żmijewski, drew inspiration from people with disabilities, often using them instrumentally. Challenging such an approach, Markiewicz states: "My disappointment in how disability was represented in 90s art in Poland directly influenced my sense of urgency of showing this topic from within the experience. I wanted to add to this narrative what I felt was lacking—a subjective perspective, but also historical context" (qtd. in Tomková 116). Wąsik aimed to achieve a similar goal by using cubism to emphasize the aesthetics of her own face and reinterpret modernist aesthetics from her personal perspective and through her corporeality. In *The Freak Show*, the artists used their own experiences to offer a new, critical perspective on ableism

and body norms, thereby empowering audiences with "extraordinary" bodies. Making disability visible from a personal perspective was a key goal of the performance. In a dimly lit space, Wąsik sang the song "I've Seen That Face Before" to electronic music inspired by Astor Piazzolla's "Libertango," played by a DJ in the background. In her makeup, she delivered a poignant portrayal of crip aesthetics.

The piece by the final performer, Nadia Markiewicz, entitled "Ballad of the Withering Rose," was created a few months after her best friend Carolyn died of Juvenile Onset Huntington's disease. In Markiewicz's act, the audience was presented with the story of two characters: the moon (projected onto the screen in the background) and the rose (performed by the artist), whose bond served as a metaphor for Carolyn and Markiewicz's friendship. The artist recited her eponymous poem, which describes her relationship with Carolyn. Markiewicz explains: "I emailed botanical garden academic employees to ask about what could be considered an analogy to disability in the plant world. It turned out that these mutated roses, called sports, were quite the celebrities in botany, highly regarded and multiplied to form new species." A sport is a genetic mutation that makes a specific part of a plant different from the rest in terms of both genetics and appearance. In this case, some of the flowers have a different color and shape from others. These roses can be compared to "extraordinary" bodies, showcasing the generative potential of disability. While they can be described as "abnormal," they are highly valued in horticulture. Markiewicz's act thus provides an alternative perspective on human and more-than-human genetic otherness.

As the audience learned, roses smell strongest at night when the moon is shining; however, the moon changes shape and appears thinner in some phases, which served as a metaphor for Carolyn's impairment. The artist explains:

> At the end of the performance, the rose, after secreting a strong fragrance, starts losing its petals. I wanted to show the peak and the decay of my character as well. Embracing one's mortality and showing it in a poetic way are strongly influenced by the Gothic approach that I learned from Carolyn, whose acceptance of her own death stemmed from what I could describe as crip knowledge.

Through visual metaphors, Markiewicz's work spoke to the transience of life and the fragility of human existence, and showed how much we could all learn from crip experiences related to mortality and grief. Her performance was a tribute to deep crip friendship and the importance of community.



Fig. 3. Nadia Markiewicz dressed as a red rose in her act entitled "Ballad of the Withering Rose" in *The Freak Show*. Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2024. Photo by Dominika Jaruga. Copyright by Madants sp. z o.o.

AGAINST CRIP LONELINESS

The neoliberal narratives of happiness and loneliness deeply affect queer and disabled subjects. This mostly concerns "a neoliberal fantasy of perfection" that assumes a "capable, able-bodied" individual to be "happy, optimistic, and always concentrated on future economic and social success" (Carroll 243). Analogously addressing the structural pressures of success and positivity in a heteronormative society, Halberstam argues in favor of failure, which "provides the opportunity to use these negative a ects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (3). Carroll suggests that "the directives and regulations that determine health and happiness are driven and supported by scientific ideologies and a social body that punishes queer subjects for being lonely" (305). Such a perspective assumes that happy, healthy people do not feel lonely. Consequently, "[t]he loneliness label is used to isolate and mark the queer subject as questionable" (306). Carroll, therefore, problematizes the structural perception of relationships in Western society.

A similar idea can be found in Sara Ahmed's concept of the "unhappy queer," who is "judged to be unhappy" (*The Promise of Happiness* 93).

However, Ahmed proposes that "unhappiness offers a queer kinship" in which subjects share "the unhappy consequences of being the cause of social and familial unhappiness" (101–02). The same concerns disabled individuals. Feminist, queer, and disability theorist Alison Kafer discusses the structural isolation of disabled people and proposes that a "relational model of disability is intended to speak to this reality" (8) "as a potential site for collective reimagining" (9). In Kafer's model, disability is not categorized as an essential characteristic, but rather as a trait of individuals who are defined by society as such. Thus, many disability scholars, like Piepzna-Samarasinha, suggest that mutual aid and care webs could be a queer/crip strategy for combating isolation under ableist capitalism (41).

In light of these theories, I have identified two elements of *The Freak Show* that combat the loneliness and isolation experienced by disabled and queer individuals. Firstly, I believe it is important to consider the impact that the visibility of the artists' non-normative bodies had on disabled audience members. Whether this was successful is a matter of speculation at this point, since this study does not analyze audience responses; however, we can argue that this was the effect the artists intended to evoke in the audience. As Pawlak states, "The mere presence in public space of bodies of a different shape, fitness, non-normative appearance allows people similar to 'us' to have the spontaneous thought—'I'm like that too, I'm not the only one in the world (although maybe I often feel that way).'" Kotowski also explains: "The deaf community is strong and really needs . . . a place where they can meet and use their sign language. Examples include events or festivals organized for deaf people, and similar initiatives." Wąsik adds:

> I was born with a congenital syndrome (Treacher Collins syndrome) and when I was growing up, I didn't know many people with this syndrome and certainly didn't know people like me who made art, were on stage, were visible. I recently experienced how difficult, but also important, visibility is. . . . To see people who are different, non-normative, who show other possibilities, ways of self-realization. So if my presence in the arts, or just visibility, helps me come out of the shadows, then by all means it's worth it.

In a similar fashion, Markiewicz notes:

> I know that visibility does not always empower. But I do know that, growing up, if I had seen more people with a body like mine, it would have felt less lonely. In my practice, I am not hopeful for any type of direct action, but I am aware that once an image is produced, it has the ability to circulate. Maybe someone will see it and grow more accustomed to the fact that unusual bodies are among us. And maybe someone with an unusual body will feel less shame. (qtd. in Tomková 117)

The artists created an intimate atmosphere by sharing their experiences of disability on stage through visual metaphors. Their performances and the stories they shared raised important visibility issues and could empower audience members who identified as disabled.

Secondly, creating *The Freak Show* fostered friendships, intimacy, and a sense of belonging among the performers with "extraordinary" bodies. This could be compared to what Mia Mingus describes as "access intimacy," the "feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs." According to Mingus,

> Access intimacy is also the intimacy I feel with many other disabled and sick people who have an automatic understanding of access needs out of our shared similar lived experience of the many different ways ableism manifests in our lives. Together, we share a kind of access intimacy that is ground-level, with no need for explanations.

Markiewicz describes her experience with *The Freak Show* in a similar way:

> Disability is a very isolating experience. I never had much opportunity to interact with people with similar bodies to mine. Filip was the first person I met in real life that resembled me. The experiences we share are quite particular and were grounds for bonding and understanding, and this applies to all members of the group in one way or another. Our work sessions would turn into the exchange of ridiculous interactions with doctors. I felt a great sense of comfort in asking for assistance when I needed it.

In this way, the artists who created *The Freak Show* cultivated a sense of friendship and community, combatting the loneliness and isolation experienced by disabled and queer individuals.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the performance, with the audience's consent, Pawlak named the auditorium after Stefan Bibrowski. By returning to the site of the original circus and taking over the space within the state-funded contemporary art institution, *The Freak Show* claimed a place in the history of Polish performance art for crip artistic practices. Not only did the artists reappropriate the freak show as a genre, but they also countered the loneliness and isolation experienced by queer and disabled people. Firstly, they achieved this by making non-normative bodies visible within an art institution. This was an important step towards empowering non-normative artists and audience members. Secondly, the entire process

of creating the performance fostered friendships and "access intimacy" among the artists who created the show. *The Freak Show* combated their loneliness and created a "sense of crip space, a communal belonging, a deep *rightness*" (s. e. smith qtd. in Kafai 179) for queer and disabled presence and experiences, which comes from not having to justify one's existence. By collaborating on the project, the Polish artists developed a space where they could experience comfort, communal support, care, and recognition, inviting the audience to join them and share these feelings.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke UP, 2012. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822395324

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748691142

Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke UP, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392781

Babcia. Personal interview. 3 Feb. 2025 and 10 Jan. 2026.

Bogdan, Robert. *Freak Show. Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. 1988. U of Chicago P, 2014.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge, 1993.

Carroll, Melissa. *Lonely Affects and Queer Sexualities: A Politics of Loneliness in Contemporary Western Culture*. 2013. McMaster University, PhD thesis.

Chemers, Michael M. *Staging Stigma. A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Cryle, Peter, and Elizabeth Stephens. *Normality. A Critical Genealogy*. The U of Chicago P, 2017. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226484198.001.0001

Czarnecka, Dominika. "Consuming Masculinity and Race. Circus Bodies in Strength Shows and Wrestling Fights." *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica*, vol. 64, no. 1, 2019, pp. 111–35. https://doi.org/10.1556/022.2019.64.1.7

Demski, Dagnosław, and Dominika Czarnecka. "Introduction: From Western to Peripheral Voices." *Staged Otherness. Ethnic Shows in Central and Eastern Europe. 1850–1939*, Central European UP, 2021, pp. 1–41. https://doi.org/10.1515/9789633864401-002

"Freak, *Noun* (4a)." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2016, https://www-1oed-1com-17gye0s7j0154.han3.lib.uni.lodz.pl/dictionary/freak_n1?tab=meaning_and_use#3659294, accessed 29 Apr. 2026

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies. Figuring Physical*

Disability in American Culture and Literature. 1997. Columbia UP, 2017.
Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke UP, 2011. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11sn283
Herza, Filip. *Imaginace jinakosti: Pražské přehlídky lidských kuriozit v 19. a 20. Století*. Scritorium, 2020.
Kafai, Shayda. *Crip Kinship. Disability Justice and Art Activism of Sins Invalid*. Arsenal Pulp, 2021.
Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana UP, 2013. https://doi.org/10.2979/6841.0
Kim, Eunjung. *Curative Violence. Rehabiliting Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea*. Duke UP, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373513

Kotowski, Daniel. Personal interview. 24 Jan. 2025.
Kruczek, Zygmunt, et al. "Accessibility of Cultural Heritage Sites for People with Disabilities: A Case Study on Krakow Museums." *Sustainability*, vol. 16, no. 318, 2024, pp. 3–18. https://doi.org/10.3390/su16010318
Leighten, Patricia. "The White Peril and L'Art nègre: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. lxxii, no. 4, 1990, pp. 609–30. https://doi.org/10.2307/3045764
Markiewicz, Nadia. Personal interview. 24 Jan. and 19 Aug. 2025, and 10 Jan. 2026.
Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link." *Leaving Evidence*, 5 May 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/, accessed 24 May 2026.
Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis. Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. U of Michigan P, 2000. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11523
Ojrzyńska, Katarzyna. "Claire Cunningham's Care-ful Disability Aesthetic." *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, no. 183, 2024, pp. 183–205.
Pawlak, Filip. Personal interview. 26 Jan. and 26 Aug. 2025.
Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Arsenal Pulp, 2018.
Rampley, Matthew. "Decolonizing Central Europe: Czech Art and the Question of 'Colonial Innocence.'" *Visual Resources*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/01973762.2022.2087168
Robinson, Octavian. "Puppets, Memes, Jesters, and Benevolence Porn: The Spectacle of Access." *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2022, pp. 329–44. https://doi.org/10.4467/20843860PK.22.024.16613
Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Aesthetics*. The U of Michigan P, 2010. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.1134097
Smilges, J. Logan. *Crip Negativity*. U of Minnesota P, 2023. https://doi.

org/10.5749/9781452969602
Sontag, Susan. *Notes on "Camp."* 1961. Penguin, 2018.
The Freak Show. Directed by Łukasz Ronduda and Filip Pawlak, 31 Oct. 2024, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw.
Tomková, Denisa. *Empowering Aesthetics. Contemporary Art from Post-Socialist Central Europe*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350447264
Wąsik, Agata. Personal interview. 25 Jan. 2025.

Denisa Tomková is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague. She holds a PhD in Visual Culture from the University of Aberdeen, UK (2019). In 2023, Tomková (with Kvet Nguyen) curated the first group exhibition of Vietnamese diaspora art in Slovakia, *Nh: The Space Between One End and the Other*, at the Kunsthalle Bratislava. She also worked for the European Roma Institute for Art and Culture (ERIAC) in Berlin. Tomková is a member of the international "Ecologies of Care" group, which focuses on art and cultural production related to care and various interdependencies. She edited the anthology *Wandering Concepts/Putujúce koncepty* (Kunsthalle Bratislava, 2023) and is the author of the monograph *Empowering Aesthetics. Contemporary Art from Post-Socialist Central Europe* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025).
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6292-6187
denisa.tomkova@fhs.cuni.cz

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.18

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Monika Kwaśniewska-Mikuła
Jagiellonian University, Kraków

Crip-Queer Utopias in Theatre: Intimacy, Desire, and Disability

Abstract

This article examines the work of the Warsaw-based Theatre 21 (T21) through the framework of utopia as method, with particular emphasis on crip-queer intimacy and sexuality. It argues that theatre created by artists with intellectual disabilities can function not only as a site of social critique, but also as a space for exploring and performing alternative forms of desire, relationality, and erotic expression. Drawing on selected performances—*Szalona miłość* [*Crazy Love*] (2024), *Statek miłości* [*The Love Boat*] (2013), *Libido Romantico* (2022), and *Ciało w ciało z Marilyn* [*Body to Body with Marilyn*] (2021)—the article examines how collective artistic practices enable the articulation of intimate needs often excluded from dominant social frameworks. The analysis demonstrates that Theatre 21 simultaneously exposes ableist and heteronormative constraints, reconfigures embodied subjectivities, and stages crip-queer forms of intimacy that resist normative definitions. At the same time, it highlights the limitations imposed by legal and social structures regulating the sexuality of people with intellectual disabilities. The article argues that T21's transformative potential lies in its capacity to imagine and perform more inclusive, relational, and non-normative forms of intimacy.

Keywords: crip-queer intimacy, sexuality and disability, utopia as method, disability theatre, relationality, Theatre 21.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 28 Oct. 2025. Verified: 8 May 2026. Accepted: 31 May 2026.

INTRODUCTION

In Western culture, one can find numerous representations of theatre ensembles co-created by people with disabilities that function as communities or even as families of choice. Among the most widely recognised are two American screen productions: the cult film *Freaks* (1932) and the fourth season of the popular television series *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (2014). In both works, a freak show emerges as a space for the formation of friendships, solidarities, and romantic and erotic relationships. Circus communities thus create what might be termed a *freaktopia*—a term used by Stevi Costa in reference to *AHS: Freak Show*. Costa compares these communities to queer "chosen families," which stand in opposition to heteronormative, nuclear, middle-class family structures. As she observes, such chosen kinship networks contrast with blood-based kinship (76). In both *Freaks* and *AHS: Freak Show*, heterosexual relationships and cisgender characters coexist alongside queer people and relationships, while in the series, monogamy coexists with polyandry and the affirmation of sexual pleasure. Importantly, in both productions, the cast includes performers with disabilities, and in the case of *AHS: Freak Show*, accounts from the set suggest that bonds of friendship extended beyond representation into the sphere of production ("*American Horror Story: Freak Show*—Inside the Freak Show—Cast Interview").

However, both examples ultimately confine the theatrical activity of people with disabilities to the framework of the freak show—historical cultural spectacles in which non-normative bodies were displayed for the entertainment of sensation-seeking audiences. In such contexts, the space of representation and performance most often did not serve to empower performers or to express their identities, political demands, or desires. The community formed within these settings was, in turn, the result of limited opportunities to establish other forms of social bonds—familial, professional, or neighbourly. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the works discussed above. Ultimately, in both the film and the series, impulses associated with the vision of an alternative crip and queer reality give way to normative notions of happiness. Happiness is thus attainable only in the afterlife or by leaving behind the extended chosen family in favour of a monogamous, heteronormative one. The crip-queer community can exist only on the margins, where it remains vulnerable to violence.

An alternative to these cultural representations can be found in real theatre ensembles co-created by crip artists. Their work engages with the legacy of the freak show primarily through critical interrogation (for example, *Jak przestałem być idealny* [*How I Stopped Being Ideal*] by Theatre 21 or *Dschingis Khan* by Monster Truck and Theater Thikwa).

Some of these groups, however, seem to implement and further develop in their practice the utopian impulse present in the above-mentioned representations of freak shows—particularly by forming families of choice based on genuine, rather than circumstantial, bonds, as well as transgressing sexual taboos (both heteronormative and queer) and addressing the question of parenthood among people with disabilities. The Polish professional theatre company Theatre 21 exemplifies this trend. Their works showcase a kind of symbiosis that develops between representation, production processes, and community relations, enabling a more explicit articulation of utopian impulses than the film and television examples discussed above—impulses that point towards possible forms of community that embrace diversity.

Theatre 21 was founded in 2006. Its actors are people with Down syndrome and on the autism spectrum. Although they have no formal training in theatre, over time, they have become highly professional artists. They owe this largely to their first teacher and director, Justyna Sobczyk. Her unique working method, based on the agency and empowerment of all group members, is continued by the current leaders: Justyna Wielgus (choreographer and artistic director) and Justyna Lipko-Konieczka (dramaturg and programme director), who have been working at the theatre for many years (in collaboration with Justyna Sobczyk). From the outset of its long-standing practice, Theatre 21 (T21) has consistently prioritised establishing supportive relationships grounded in each member's subjectivity. In its performances, the company has explored issues that are important to the ensemble, including the still highly regulated domains of desire, love, and parenthood among people with disabilities. It has also been increasingly incorporating queer themes into its work. In doing so, T21 constructs a utopian vision of a diverse community which, although conceivable, remains difficult to implement outside the stage. This idealised vision is therefore repeatedly disrupted in their performances by the ableist and homophobic social and legal realities that the actors face.

In this article, I will analyse works by this company or featuring its members from the perspective of intimacy and sexuality. First, I will examine a documentary film, *Szalona miłość* [*Crazy Love*] (2024), directed by a long-time collaborator of T21—Martyna Peszko. The film presents the love between two members of the group and raises the question of their prospects for a marital relationship in Poland. I will then discuss three performances— *Statek miłości* [*The Love Boat*] (2013), *Libido Romantico* (2022) and *Ciało w ciało z Marilyn* [*Body to Body with Marilyn*] (2021)—to highlight the diverse and divergent dynamics of crip-queer intimacy presented in them. When analysing these works, I will examine strategies

for producing utopian impulses that stimulate the imagination for social change, while also considering the real and potential applicability of such visions. To this end, I will first outline relevant strands of the theory of utopian impulses and discuss the relationships between disability and utopia, as well as between disability and queerness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The methodological framework for my analysis of T21's work is grounded in the theory of utopian impulses. I draw on this concept while remaining mindful of its problematic aspects, particularly those identified by marginalised groups. Utopia has often been criticised for its unrealistic idealism, its disregard for human diversity, and its tendency—when implemented—to produce authoritarian systems (Levitas 7–11). As a construct historically shaped by white, able-bodied men, it has also excluded diversity and legitimised social hierarchies and discrimination (Vogler 591–92).

However, I align with the contemporary reappraisal of utopia by scholars such as Ernst Bloch, Fredric Jameson, and Ruth Levitas. This approach reframes utopia not as the blueprint for an ideal social order, but as a method for interpreting the dystopian present and imagining a desirable future. Such an interpretative and imaginative practice is inherently political (Jameson, "Utopia as Method" 42–43). It involves identifying, even in adverse conditions, latent potential that may be developed and that points towards possible transformation. In my view, this is precisely the work undertaken by many artists with disabilities. While acknowledging the constraints of their social reality, they seek to cultivate its unfulfilled potential for fostering more diverse and inclusive forms of communal life.

Similarly, in Ruth Levitas's account, the creation of theatre and alternative stage worlds can function as a form of "education of desire" (xvii). It enables alternative configurations of needs, desires, and satisfactions and helps us recognise what is missing from human existence (4–5). Levitas distinguishes three interrelated modes of utopia as method: archaeological, ontological, and architectural. The archaeological mode links utopia with sociology and involves diagnosing the unfulfilled needs and utopian impulses embedded within the dystopian present. It involves social criticism. The ontological mode addresses the relationship between social conditions and the ways of thinking and acting that arise from them (153), asking what kinds of people and societies we might wish to become (182–83). The architectural mode, in turn, concerns "the imagination of potential alternative scenarios for the future" and

their implications (153). These imagined scenarios must themselves be critically examined in archaeological terms, with attention to their omissions, contradictions, and political consequences. In my opinion, T21's work engages with all three modes. It offers a critical reflection on ableist norms, imaginaries, and systems (the archaeological mode). It constructs alternative forms of relationships both on and off stage (the architectural mode). It also demonstrates how changes in social frameworks may enable the flourishing, creativity, and well-being of people with disabilities (the ontological mode).

At the same time, such practices must confront not only real-world ableism but also the ableism embedded within the very concept of utopia. In his review article "Crip Utopia and the Future of Disability," Peter J. Mackey highlights the complex relationship between utopia and disability. He notes that the ableist ideal of a perfect, healthy body underpins a dystopian vision in which disability is framed as a tragedy and suffering to be eliminated through medical or technological means. The work of T21, by contrast, draws on alternative utopian visions of inclusive societies (e.g., Vic Finkelstein, Adolf Ratzka), which correspond to Levitas's architectural mode. It also draws on critical revisions of these visions (e.g., Tom Shakespeare, Paul Abberley), which may be situated within the archaeological mode.

Such an understanding of utopia also enables solidarity among marginalised groups. Their collective critique of exclusionary social imaginaries becomes a key force for emancipation. As Fredric Jameson argues, group politics take on a radical dimension when different marginalised groups recognise their shared conditions and strategic interrelationships ("Utopianism and Anti-Utopianism" 390). According to Gisli Vogler, utopia allows such groups to reject exclusionary social projects and to imagine alternative futures in which they occupy a central rather than marginal position (592). These imaginaries require political intervention, including changes to law and social practice (601–02). Artistic expression and collective practices—both in representation and production, as exemplified by Theatre 21—are particularly conducive to generating utopian impulses (Jameson, "Utopia as Method"; Levitas; Muñoz).

The gradual queering of romantic and erotic relations in the work of T21 can also be situated within this theoretical framework. Reflections on crip utopias are closely connected to queer theory and activism. José Esteban Muñoz conceptualises queerness as a utopian horizon that enables a break from the oppressive present and directs attention towards future possibilities. His work has become central for theorists of crip utopia, who increasingly combine queer and crip perspectives. This has

led to the development of concepts such as crip-queer perspectives, crip-queer erotic futures, and alternative political practices of relating, loving, and resisting normative structures. In this article, I seek to demonstrate that the performances of T21 take evident pleasure in deconstructing normative visions of happiness, exposing their oppressive character, while affirming that which remains unimaginable within "normative" society.

Emma Sheppard extends this approach by introducing the figure of the "crip killjoy," drawing on Sara Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy. The crip killjoy disrupts ableist norms of happiness by refusing to conform to the ideal of the "properly" regulated disabled subject. Instead, such figures actively challenge normative expectations through acts of refusal, disruption, and critical questioning. These acts may also serve as sources of pleasure and relief. The fusion of queer and crip perspectives is particularly productive for rethinking sexuality, intimacy, and desire. Crip-queer approaches challenge compulsory monogamy, heteronormativity, and dominant scripts centred on penetration and orgasm. They emphasise alternative temporalities, redefine pleasure, and prioritise communication, consent, and bodily autonomy. As Santinele Martino argues, creative adaptations and new forms of erotic practice should be understood not as compromises, but as valid and fulfilling expressions of desire. The recurring manifesto present in the performances of T21, as well as in Martyna Peszko's documentary about the theatre company, *Szalona miłość*, calling for the recognition of the need for intimacy, romantic relationships, and sexuality of people with intellectual disabilities, their right to fulfil their desire in these areas, and their right to parenthood, fundamentally disrupts dominant representations of such individuals as "eternal children" and challenges decades of more or less explicit eugenic thinking (see, for example, Piniewska). What, then, do stage representations of queer people with disabilities—who openly and unapologetically demand recognition of their love and desire—do to the normative social imagination?

By tracing the multiple entanglements between the lives and artistic practices of the artists of T21 and crip-queer utopia, I pay particular attention to the diversity of strategies mobilised by the group. I analyse Peszko's documentary from the perspective of the archaeological mode and the works of T21 as examples of the ontological and architectural modes. These works present a utopian vision in which a reconfiguration of social conditions enables both individual and collective flourishing (Levitas 153). I focus on how utopian impulses related to intimacy are produced, performed, and represented, while also considering their limitations and their potential to contribute to social change.

SZALONA MIŁOŚĆ [*CRAZY LOVE*] FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE ARCHEOLOGICAL MODE OF UTOPIA

As I have suggested, visions of theatre ensembles as micro-communities—within which, alongside artistic creativity, the intimate and romantic needs of people with disabilities are expressed and partially realised, and to which there are often few alternative social spaces—can be found in T21's work. The development of such impulses, both within and beyond artistic practice, takes place in dialogue with existing legal and social structures. It therefore becomes part of a broader process of critique and emancipation. In this sense, it can be analysed through the framework of the archaeological mode of utopia.

Theatre 21 functions both as a space for artistic expression and as a community grounded in friendship, emotional closeness, and mutual support. When its members speak publicly about the ensemble, they frequently emphasise the personal and intimate nature of the relationships that connect them (Kietlińska 56–63). They repeatedly describe themselves as a family, despite not being biologically related. As Piotr Swend states, "We create a family and a theatrical community" (qtd. in Kietlińska 58).[1] Similarly, Grzegorz Brandt notes, "We are a theatrical family," while Aleksander Orliński clarifies, "We support one another and trust one another. We believe in each other" (qtd. in Kwaśniewska). Bogna Kietlińska, who conducted research on the functioning of T21, grounded in both sociological and theatre studies perspectives, emphasises that working in the theatre has helped build relationships and overcome social isolation and loneliness not only for the actors, but also for their parents. To support this, she quotes a response from an anonymous survey conducted within the group: "[Theatre 21] has given me a new family: a theatrical family I can rely on, with whom, through the hours spent together, I build bonds—sometimes stronger than those with my biological family" (qtd. in Kietlińska 76). It therefore seems justified to suggest that Theatre 21 has become, for many of its members, a form of chosen family.

At the same time, as noted earlier, people with disabilities often have fewer opportunities for self-realisation than non-disabled individuals. Work in the theatre, however, also constitutes paid employment (Kietlińska 73), where actors, as employees, are not obliged to form deep relationships. In this sense, choice concerns the degree of engagement in the collective, which is more than simply a theatre group.

[1] All quotations from the texts by Bogna Kietlińska and Monika Kwaśniewska have been translated by the author of the article.

The ensemble has also become a space where long-term romantic relationships have been formed, as shown in *Szalona miłość* [*Crazy Love*]. The film tells the story of Magda Świątkowska and Michał Pęszyński (henceforward referred to as Magda and Michał—as they are presented in the film), two T21 actors who have been in a relationship for many years and who dream of getting married and having children. They met and got engaged in the theatre. In their performances, they speak openly about their desires and at times stage their imagined fulfilment. In the film, Magda and Michał's romantic partnership becomes a shared and celebrated experience. Michał proposes to Magda during a rehearsal, surrounded by their colleagues, and receives applause and encouragement. Later, Magda's friends from the theatre help her choose a wedding dress. These scenes reinforce the idea that T21 functions as a chosen family, with whom its members share their most private moments.

The actors' biological families, although initially anxious, respect the couple's privacy and support their relationship. When Magda visits Michał—who appears to live independently—they spend time together in an intimate atmosphere. The camera captures them lying on a bed, expressing affection, kissing, and, the following morning, measuring Magda's blood sugar (she has diabetes), preparing breakfast, and eating together. They also jointly decide on the destination for their honeymoon, which they begin planning before the wedding.

Magda and Michał are treated, both by their friends and their families, as adults who may require some support but still have the right to privacy and intimacy. Their artistic activity plays an important role in making this possible. Creating performances, receiving awards, travelling to festivals, leading workshops, and earning an income all contribute to strengthening their sense of agency and their parents' support for their independence.

What stands in the way of fulfilling their plans, however, is Polish law. At the end of *Szalona miłość* [*Crazy Love*], Magda and Michał visit a registry office to inquire about the procedure for marriage. The clerk, citing legal provisions that employ stigmatising language, explains that, as people with intellectual disabilities, they are "not an ordinary couple." Since it is uncertain whether they can care for children, they must obtain the court's consent to marry. It remains unclear whether they will pursue this path. What seems clear, however, is that despite the autonomy they have developed with the support of their community, they are still not fully recognised as capable of making decisions about their own lives and future. Such decisions may ultimately be made on their behalf—by the court, and, indirectly, by their parents.

"Happiness," accessible to many disabled people so long as they conform to normative expectations, once again proves unattainable for

people with intellectual disabilities. *Szalona miłość* [*Crazy Love*] thus highlights the particularly acute form of discrimination they face in matters of intimacy. As Santinele Martino observes, people with intellectual disabilities are often perceived as "perpetual children," which leads to their infantilisation and desexualisation (485).

At the same time, *Szalona miłość* [*Crazy Love*] points to the potential for intersectional alliances. When the clerk reads out the marriage law, the first and unquestioned principle becomes evident: in Poland, marriage is defined as a union between a woman and a man. Magda and Michał meet this requirement of heteronormativity, but as people with Down syndrome they are perceived as a girl and a boy, rather than as a woman and a man. This scene highlights the broader, intersectional dimension of discrimination rooted in Polish law—against people with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities and against homosexuals.

In recent years, struggles for the recognition of same-sex partnerships in Poland have unfolded alongside broader movements advocating for the rights and dignity of disabled people. As Peszko's film suggests, restrictions on marriage and parenthood—such as the ban on child adoption by same-sex couples—constitute shared challenges for these communities. The critical dimension of the utopian archaeological mode thus gains wider significance, revealing whose intimacies and sexualities are regulated, controlled, or restricted by the state.

THE ONTOLOGICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL MODES OF UTOPIA: THE THEATRICAL PRACTICE OF T21

The performances of T21 nourish the imagination of the alliance discussed above. For this to become possible, however, the theatre had to undergo a long process of development. This work was not only artistic, but also educational.

In Poland, people with intellectual disabilities cannot study at public theatre schools. For this reason, their work in the theatre had to begin with learning the basics of acting. Today, however, the ensemble, its collaborators, theatre critics, and audiences have no doubt that its members are professionals (see Kwaśniewska). Developing acting skills, followed by creating performances and the group's subsequent successes, has also been an empowering process for many participants. As their parents indicate in the previously cited survey, working in T21 has increased the actors' independence in everyday life, improved their communication skills (for example, Paweł Sakowski began to speak, while others improved

their articulation), and strengthened their ability to cooperate, their self-confidence, self-awareness, and sense of self-worth.

The growing recognition they have received in Polish theatre has also given them a sense of achievement. This has not only reinforced their pride but also their sense of responsibility and reliability. Consequently, the actors are now better equipped to express their needs, including those related to their own disability, while also resisting the ableism they encounter in everyday life (Kietlińska 75). Today, the actors not only create performances, but also run theatre workshops (also in public theatre schools) and speak publicly in the media, thus participating in public discussion on issues that concern them; some of them play musical instruments and give concerts, develop their physical skills by engaging in sports, and write texts for theatre. This aspect of T21's work closely aligns with the ontological mode of utopia, as it demonstrates how changes in the living conditions of people with disabilities unlock their potential to flourish. It shows how people with intellectual disabilities could function within society if they were provided with opportunities for comprehensive education and self-realisation.

This is the result of T21's working method, which has never been oriented towards implementing the director's overarching vision on the stage. The topic is always selected by the actors themselves, while the performance itself is largely devised; it is based on the actors' conversations with the directors and dramaturgs, as well as on their improvisation (see, for example, Kietlińska).

Over time, alongside issues such as independence, the themes of love and sexuality also began to emerge. By freeing the performers from social constraints and normative expectations, the architectural mode of utopia employed in T21's creative work allows the actors to perform a wide range of desires that resist patriarchal frameworks and cannot be easily categorised within narrow definitions of sexuality or intimacy. Heterosexual, homosexual, and transgender imaginaries intersect fluidly, without the need for rigid definitions or boundaries. The sexual identity of the actors/characters (the boundary between them seems very fluid) emerges and develops through individual expressions of desire, love, longing, and frustration.

One of the earliest performances to address romantic and intimate relationships—*Statek miłości* [*The Love Boat*] (2013)—presents scenes of seduction, closeness, and declarations of love across diverse gender configurations and scenarios. Alongside male–female interactions, there is also a scene between Anna Drózd and Maja Kowalczyk, who lie on a large, heart-shaped red cushion while planning a romantic dinner in New York. The pleasure of being together intertwines with the sensual pleasure

of eating. The food they imagine—carrots with peas and pizza—departs from stereotypical images of refined meals accompanying romantic rituals. Their shared fantasies culminate in a declaration of love, a dance, and a tight embrace.

The performance also reworks a range of cultural representations of attractiveness and romance. In several scenes, the actors wear masks depicting celebrated "beautiful" figures such as Marilyn Monroe or Elvis Presley. They recreate the iconic scene between Rose and Jack from *Titanic*, and they repeat, almost like an incantation, the word *l'amour*, drawing on the idea of French as the "language of love." Yet all these borrowed models, once transposed onto the actors' own bodies and modes of expression, are gradually transformed.

Instead of a pop song, Maja Kowalczyk's sensual dance is accompanied by Teresa Foks's non-verbal vocal performance. When Marta Stańczyk responds to the cue "l'amour" with "I won't talk about love, I don't speak French," Kowalczyk begins to ask her questions in an invented, unintelligible language, gently overcoming her resistance. Madonna's well-known song "Like a Virgin" is performed not by a woman, but by Piotr Swend, who does a partial striptease, while Kowalczyk films him on her phone, as if they were jointly creating a music video or an erotic film.

Towards the end, the entire ensemble joins in. All actors, regardless of gender, wear grass-like skirts, flower wreaths, and garlands. The choreography combines gender ambiguity with tropical holiday imagery and the aesthetics of the freak show, where ableism intertwines with colonial tropes. Immersed in red light and smoke, the group performs a collective dance to Foks's vocals, enacting its own ritual of love under the guidance of a young queer woman, played by Kowalczyk. The accompanying poetic declarations of love—both verbal and non-verbal—form a collective performance of tenderness and longing which, while remaining personal, also becomes a shared manifesto. Such reconfiguring of a familiar cultural topos subverts the heteronormative patriarchal order. It presents a vision that appears impossible in a world governed by ableist and homophobic social norms and legal frameworks, yet becomes possible within a space where these norms are temporarily suspended.

A similar trope can be found in the much later performance, *Libido Romantico* (2022). Its central theme is sexuality, which results in a more direct and explicit performance mode than in *Statek miłości* [*The Love Boat*]. The actors enter the stage in drag-inspired (tight and revealing) and animal-themed (antlered) costumes, and the performance includes scenes of romantic confessions and kisses in various constellations.

In one such scene, Piotr Sakowski, wearing a tight black dress with a plunging neckline, is caressed simultaneously by Maja Kowalczyk and

the "horned" Aleksander Orliński. Daniel Krajewski, dressed in leather trousers and a white fur coat worn over his bare torso, reads romantic poetry by Adam Mickiewicz, the central figure of Polish Romanticism. He then approaches Kowalczyk, signals that he wishes to take her place, embraces Sakowski, and begins kissing his chest. Soft jazz accompanies the scene, whose atmosphere remains calm and tender—in these interactions, there is no jealousy, aggression, shame, or violence.

The connections that emerge are fluid and unstable. Is Sakowski desired as a man, as a drag persona, or as a woman? Or perhaps desire here has no fixed object or direction at all, becoming instead an expression of intimacy shared within a close-knit community. Yet the expression of desire in *Libido Romantico* also has a painful dimension—it reveals unfulfilled longing and frustration. Aleksandra Skotarek cries out about her desire for a "normal man," thereby subverting the stereotype that a person with Down syndrome can only form a relationship with another person with an intellectual disability. She rejects this imposed scenario, as she desires different kinds of partners. At the same time, she recounts her experience of sexual abuse perpetrated by a boyfriend with an intellectual disability—introducing into the performance an important and still underrepresented theme: sexual violence against disabled women, which has received little attention within the #MeToo movement.

So far, Aleksandra has experienced only disappointment in relationships with non-disabled men, and she therefore declares that she will "drown herself in love." Maja Kowalczyk, writhing in unfulfilled desire, shouts: "Here, here, put it here! I want to make love like this!" She is joined by Daniel Krajewski, who, in an authoritative tone, instructs someone to sit on his lap and pull his hair. Magda Świątkowska, unable to fulfil her desire for motherhood, sinks into deep sadness.

These difficult emotions are partially sublimated within the space of the performance. On stage, Skotarek puts up a poster of a naked man; later, she wraps herself in a fabric shaped like a human heart, onto which an image of a muscular, wet male torso is projected. In contrast to patriarchal conventions, what serves as the object of desire here is the naked white male body. At the same time, in Skotarek's narrative, this imagined relationship is not objectifying but relational—the appropriation of dominant visual strategies transforms their meaning.

Krajewski and Kowalczyk begin to push and pull one another, rolling across the floor and tugging at each other's hair while repeating, "I like this." Eventually, they embrace. Their interaction resembles a form of BDSM grounded in mutual consent. Świątkowska, in turn, creates a magical garden, inviting her imagined children into it. She prepares her body for pregnancy and breastfeeding by rubbing it with herbs, and then—

dressed only in underwear, as both a mother and a pregnant woman—performs an erotic dance. In this way, she simultaneously transgresses the social prohibition on motherhood and the desexualisation of disabled and pregnant bodies.

This release, however, is not permanent. Waves of anger, despair, and resignation return, only to be sublimated again in the film projected at the back of the stage, where the actors, dressed in eccentric costumes, stroll through the centre of Warsaw, carrying a large, fabric, anatomically shaped heart as a banner of their rights. The crip-queer utopia they construct within the theatre thus extends its symbolic territory—although in practice it still remains largely confined to the theatrical space.

Throughout these scenes, the ensemble's response is one of complete understanding and acceptance. Neither orgiastic imagery, nor nudity, nor expressions of despair, nor consensual BDSM provoke discomfort or judgment. The group becomes a space where both pleasure and pain can be expressed and shared—without bias, rejection, or shame. The performative space created by Theatre 21 thus evokes possible future communities in which intimacy and sexuality are not subjected to social or moral regulation or categorisation. They are not even named—they simply exist, though, as Emma Sheppard suggests, not always in ways that can be described as "happy."

Alongside these collective explorations of intimacy and sexuality, Theatre 21 has also created more intimate, small-scale works devoted to these. An excellent example is the camera-based performance by Aleksandra Skotarek and Maja Kowalczyk, created during the pandemic—*Ciało w ciało z Marilyn* [*Body to Body with Marilyn*] (2021).

This work is a subtle in-depth exploration of intimate relations—between oneself and one's own body, between two young women, and between them and the icon of idealised femininity invoked in the title. Styled as Marilyn—wearing blonde wigs and the characteristic beauty mark above the lip—the performers, connected via their computer cameras, focus on their bodies, self-images, and identities. Their actions, directed both towards themselves and towards the audience, evoke associations with online sex work. These associations, combined with the reference to a cultural icon of femininity, sharply puncture dominant social stereotypes.

At the same time, Skotarek and Kowalczyk do not seem primarily concerned with producing a specific effect on the viewer; rather, their attention remains focused on themselves and on each other. Over the course of the hour-long performance, each of them lies on a bed, rolling in the sheets; sits in an armchair reading a book; assumes various poses in front of a mirror or the camera; caresses herself; makes faces; and performs unusual choreographies. These gestures evoke both performances of femininity—

often drawing on the repertoire associated with Marilyn Monroe—and movements reminiscent of animals such as rabbits, cats, or horses.

Initially focused mostly on themselves, the actresses gradually establish contact with one another. They repeatedly confess their love in different ways. Expressions of affection intertwine with personal disclosures. Skotarek once again speaks about her longing for a man, while Kowalczyk delivers a poetic text about an underwater journey towards fulfilment in love. Later—whether in an attempt to position herself within her friend's desire, or as a gesture of enacting her own yearning—she dresses as a man. A text appears on the screen referring to fascination with masculinity, followed by the phrase: "sometimes woman, sometimes man." It remains unclear whether these words refer to Kowalczyk's identity or to the direction of her desire. The performance relies on subtlety and ambiguity.

Utopian impulses from both the ontological and architectural domains are clearly intertwined here. *Ciało w ciało z Marilyn* [*Body to Body with Marilyn*] traces the subjectivation of the disabled female body, while simultaneously constructing multiple possible frameworks within which this process might occur. It affirms bonds between women and evokes what Adrienne Rich described as the "lesbian continuum" (11–48) This concept refers to a space in which lesbian existence is understood as one of the potential forms of women's desire, but which also encompasses a broad spectrum of intimate, supportive relationships between women—relationships that involve sharing desires and resources, and mutual support in resisting patriarchy, understood here as a form of violence against all forms of non-normativity. It is a space of friendship, partnership, and eroticism (Rich 11–48).

Although Rich's essay was published in 1980, such "lesbian spaces," which escape patriarchal prescriptions, remain rare within cultural representation. *Ciało w ciało z Marilyn* [*Body to Body with Marilyn*] creates one such space, incorporating within it women with intellectual disabilities. In doing so, it generates a powerful utopian impulse that evokes an inclusive, intersectional, crip-queer future—one in which sexuality and identity are understood as fluid and shifting performances. Different directions of desire and subject positions coexist simultaneously, beyond hierarchy and exclusion.

CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that Theatre 21 and the way its members present themselves align with the concept of a theatre ensemble composed of people with disabilities as a form of chosen family, within which disabled

individuals explore and fulfil their needs related to intimacy and sexuality. Their mode of operation turns theatre into a space for development, self-realisation, the formation of diverse relationships—including romantic ones—and the acquisition of new skills.

Their devised performances, in turn, create a space for the free exploration and expression of crip-queer utopias. The communities and realities that emerge within them bring together all three modes of utopia: archaeological, ontological, and architectural. As a result, the work of the ensemble reveals ableist and homophobic structures within social and political life that limit the possibilities for development and self-realisation among those who do not conform to patriarchal and ableist "norms."

This critical aspect of Theatre 21's work is enhanced by constructive and affirmative practices that test how the principles governing the social world need to be reconfigured to enable crip and queer individuals to flourish. The potential impact of T21 on the transformation of social relations and the collective imagination thus operates on multiple levels—from social critique to experimental practices of imagining desirable futures, and their application in everyday work.

Works Cited

Abberley, Paul. "Work, Utopia and Impairment." *Disability and Society: Emerging Issues and Insights*, edited by Len Barton, Longman, 1996, pp. 61–82. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315841984-5

American Horror Story: Freak Show. Directed by Ryan Murphy, performances by Jessica Lange, Sarah Paulson, and Kathy Bates, FX, 2014.

"*American Horror Story: Freak Show*—Inside the Freak Show—Cast Interview." *YouTube*, uploaded by AHSPL, 3 Oct. 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbCfL4Xfz6Q&list=PLGXaPVaCNjNAFV1PE_w_1ZZ3FzLGEDSfb, accessed 20 Sept. 2025.

Ciało w ciało z Marilyn [*Body to Body with Marilyn*]. Directed by Justyna Wielgus, performances by Maja Kowalczyk and Aleksandra Skotarek, Teatr 21, 2021.

Costa, Stevi. "American Horror Story: Capital, Counterculture, and the Freak." *European Journal of American Culture*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2019, pp. 71–82. https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.38.1.71_1

Dschingis Khan. Produced by and starring Sabrina Braemer, Jonny Chambilla, Manuel Gerst, Sahar Rahimi, Oliver Rincke, Mark Schroppel, and Ina Vera, dramaturgy by Marcel Bugiel, Monster Truck/Theater Thikwa, 2012.

Finkelstein, Vic. *Attitudes and Disabled People*. World Rehabilitation Fund, 1980.

Freaks. Director by Tod Browning, performances by Wallace Ford, Leila Hyams, and Olga Baclanova, MGM, 1932.

Jak przestałem być idealny [*How I Stopped Being Ideal*]. Directed by Justyna Lipko-Konieczna, Justyna Sobczyk, and Justyna Wielgus, performances by Grzegorz Brandt, Anna Drózd, Teresa Foks, Maja Kowalczyk, Mateusz Kownacki, Daniel Krajewski, Natalia Leszczyńska, Anna Łuczak, Aleksander Orliński, Filip Perkowski, Michał Pęszyński, Piotr Sakowski, Aleksandra Skotarek, Cela Sobolewska, Magdalena Świątkowska, Paulina Waszkiewicz, and Łukasz Wójcik, Teatr 21/ Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2021.

Jameson, Fredric. "Utopia as Method, or the Uses of the Future." *Utopia/ Dystopia. Conditions of Historical Possibility*, edited by Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash, Princeton UP, 2010, pp. 21–44. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400834952.21

Jameson, Fredric. "Utopianism and Anti-Utopianism." *The Jameson Reader*, edited by Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks, Blackwell, 2001, pp. 382–92.

Kietlińska, Bogna *Nie ma wolności bez samodzielności. Działanie Teatru 21 w perspektywie zmiany*. Fundacja Teatr 21, 2019.

Kwaśniewska, Monika. "Co to znaczy być lojalnym wobec siebie w teatrze?" Interview with Grzegorz Brandt, Maja Kowalczyk, Daniel Krajewski, Aleksander Orliński, Aleksandra Skotarek, Justyna Wielgus, Sebastian Pawlak, Martyna Peszko, and Helena Urbańska. *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, no. 175–76, 2023. *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, 2023, https://didaskalia.pl/pl/artykul/co-znaczy-byc-lojalnym-wobec-siebie-w-teatrze, accessed 20 Mar. 2026.

Levitas, Ruth. *Utopia as Method. The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Libido Romantico. Directed by Justyna Wielgus, performances by Maja Kowalczyk, Daniel Krajewski, Aleksander Orliński, Piotr Sakowski, Aleksandra Skotarek, Magdalena Świątkowska, and Michał Pęszyński, Teatr 21, 2022.

Mackey, Peter J. "Crip Utopia and the Future of Disability." *Critical Disability Discourses*, vol. 1, 2009, pp. 1–29. https://doi.org/10.25071/1918-6215.23383

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity. Sexual Cultures*. New York UP, 2009.

Piniewska, Anna. "O wartościowaniu życia, czyli polski dyskurs eugeniczny wobec osób z niepełnosprawnościami." *Teksty Drugie*, no 4, 2023, pp. 259–74. https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2023.4.14

Ratzka, Adolf. "Crip Utopia." *Independent Living Institute*, 1998, http://www.independentliving.org/docs4/ratzkacu.html, accessed 3 May 2026.

Rich, Adrienne, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2003, pp. 11–48. https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2003.0079

Santinele Martino, Alan. "Toward a 'Crip' Sociology of Fucking." *Sexualities*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2025, pp. 484–502. https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607251365765

Shakespeare, Tom. *Disability Rights and Wrongs*. Routledge, 2006. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203640098

Sheppard, Emma. "Necessary Pleasures of the Crip Killjoy." *Feminist Theory*, 24 Apr. 2025, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/14647001251334088, accessed 20 Mar. 2026. https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001251334088

Statek miłości [*The Love Boat*]. Directed by Justyna Sobczyk, performances by Grzegorz Brandt, Anna Drózd, Teresa Foks, Maja Kowalczyk, Daniel Krajewski, Aleksander Orliński, Michał Pęszyński, Aleksandra Skotarek, Marta Stańczyk, Piotr Swend, and Magdalena Świątkowska, Teatr 21, 2013.

Szalona miłość [*Crazy Love*]. Directed by Martyna Peszko, performances by Michał Peszyński and Magdalena Świątkowska, Szkoła Wajdy, 2024.

Vogler, Gisli. "Acting As If: The Utopian Political Thought and Actions of the US Disability Rights Movement." *Contemporary Political Theory*, no. 23, 2024, pp. 589–608. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-023-00675-9

Monika Kwaśniewska-Mikuła (PhD) is Assistant Professor at the Department of Theatre and Drama of the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, and the editor of the journal *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*. She is the author and co-editor of several books, including the latest *#MeToo na rzecz przyszłości. Projekty artystyczne o przemocy (seksualnej) w teatrze* [*#MeToo For Future. Artistic Projects About (Sexual) Violence in Theatre*] (Wydawnictwo UJ, 2025). Her current research interests revolve around contemporary performative acting, institutional critique, and disability studies.

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1913-4562

monika.kwasniewska@uj.edu.pl

GOTHIC/FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.19

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Sławomir Studniarz
University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn

Blighted Children of Bleak Houses: Character and Spatiality in "A Rose for Emily," *Psycho*, and *Red Dragon*

ABSTRACT

In my article I intend to argue that rather than achieving the assumed normalization of the dwelling subjects, the house, in the sense of both the physical structure and the familial bonds, in the three selected narratives, Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," Bloch's *Psycho*, and Harris's *Red Dragon*, leads to social estrangement and a severe mental aberration of the children that are raised in them. In different ways that will be examined in the article, the particular houses, marred by the highly dysfunctional, if not abusive, family relationships, in effect "blight" their children, Emily Grierson, Norman Bates, and Francis Dolarhyde, and facilitate their evolution into perverse homicidal maniacs. I also aim to explore resonances on the diegetic level between these narratives, that is, intended analogies on the plane of the fictional world, instances of implicit intertextuality called "quotations of structures." To further my argument, I make a crucial assumption that in each of these texts, the house with its internal complexity and its positioning with respect to the immediate surroundings constitutes what Jurij Lotman calls "a spatial *topos*," and reveals the personality of its inhabitant.

Keywords: diegetic resonances, intimate space, spatial arrangements, chronotope, serial killer novel.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 24 June 2025. Verified: 6 Jan. 2026. Accepted: 17 Mar. 2026.

In her 1991 monograph *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* Marilyn Chandler asserts "the centrality of the house in American cultural life and imagination," proposing to view it as "a unifying symbolic structure" (1), one that bears "a direct relationship or resemblance to the structure of [the dweller's] psyche and inner life" (10). Pursuing this line of inquiry, Samira Kawash in her more recent article "Haunted Houses, Sinking Ships: Race, Architecture, and Identity in *Beloved* and *Middle Passage*" (2001), states that "the house has held a signal place in the American cultural imaginary, providing an affective and symbolic locus for the virtues and desires through [which] the national subject is interpellated and normalized" (68). Accepting the premise of the house as an exteriorization and reflection of the dweller's mind and personality, in my article I argue that in the three selected narratives, William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," Robert Bloch's *Psycho*, and Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon*, the house, in the sense of both the physical structure and the familial bonds, leads to social estrangement and a severe mental aberration of the child that is raised in it. Taking issue with Kawash's claim of the house achieving the normalization of the dwelling subject, I contend that the mansions in these three stories significantly contribute to the protagonists' freakishness and their homicidal predilections. Far from being proper nurturing environments, these "bleak houses,"[1] marred by highly dysfunctional family relationships, in effect "blighted" their children, Emily Grierson, Norman Bates, and Francis Dolarhyde, and triggered their evolution into perverse murderous maniacs.

These houses stand as the opposite of what Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* considers "intimate space" (xxxviii), the designation that affirms the positive valorization of the house, as a shelter offering warmth and safety, fostering the proper growth of a young human being. As Bachelard puts it,

> [i]t is the human being's first world. Before he is "cast into the world," as claimed by certain hasty metaphysics, man is laid in the cradle of the house. . . . Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house. . . . It is as though in this material paradise, the human being were bathed in nourishment, as though he were gratified with all the essential benefits. (7)

The narratives that feature these three ominous locations belong to three distinct periods in American literary history: 1930s, the post-war era, and

[1] No references to Dickens's novel *Bleak House* are intended. The adjective "bleak" has been chosen for its sound, echoing the key epithet "blighted," qualifying the protagonists of the three examined narratives.

the late 20th century; however, the narrow bounds of the present article do not permit an exploration of the times in which these works were written, and of the possible impact of the social and cultural background on the three texts under examination. For similar reasons, the question of their relationship to the wider literary modes of the Gothic and of the Southern Gothic will not be discussed; this issue requires much more space and, more importantly, it would hardly contribute to the central argument advanced here. What is of crucial significance for the purposes of the present article, however, is that at a closer look, despite the intervening historical distance, the three selected narratives reveal close thematic links—most notably the deforming and stifling influence of the family nest on a young person growing up within its oppressive bounds. They share the distinctive pattern of an isolated gloomy dwelling paired with the dangerous transgressor rising within its walls. Furthermore, there are interesting resonances on the diegetic level, that is within the fictional worlds created in these narratives, between "A Rose for Emily" and *Psycho*, on the one hand, and between *Psycho* and *Red Dragon*, on the other. Such diegetic resonances, or intended analogies on the plane of the fictional world, may be profitably considered as instances of implicit intertextuality. In Polish literary studies they are known as "quotations of structures" (Głowiński 12, translation mine), as opposed to explicit "textual quotations" preserving verbal traces of the original text. Viewing these three narratives through such lenses brings to light hitherto unsuspected connections between the texts created over half a century, as well as suggesting, in the long-term perspective, the significance of Faulkner's Modernist short story as the prototype for the specific type of horror fiction in the late 20th century so spectacularly ushered in by *Red Dragon*.

To further my argument, I make a crucial assumption that in each of these narratives, the house with its internal complexity and its positioning with respect to the immediate surroundings constitutes what Jurij Lotman calls "a spatial *topos*." As the Russian scholar explains, "beyond the description of the things and objects which make up the environment of a text's personae, there arises a system of spatial relations, the structure of the *topos*" (231). In addition to "serving as the principle of organization and disposition of the personae within the artistic continuum," as Lotman states, "the structure of the *topos* emerges as the language for expressing other, non-spatial relations in the text" (232). Spatial arrangements, then, can be readily invested with a wide range of meanings, for instance social, cultural, ethical, psychological, spiritual, or ontological.

However, space and time in the literary work are deeply correlated as the aspects or coordinates of the fictional spatio-temporal continuum. In his seminal essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,"

Mikhail Bakhtin posits that every genre develops its own distinct spatio-temporal pattern, which he calls *chronotope*. As the Russian scholar explains, the term *chronotope*, meaning "time space," reflects "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). He further observes that "[i]n the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (84). Bakhtin persuasively argues that in addition to "functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space," chronotopes "are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel"—the chronotope is "the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (250).

In my article I intend to demonstrate how spatial arrangements, with the dwelling at the center, fulfill crucial functions in the examined narratives, the primary one being the characterization of the protagonists, the inhabitants of the house, and the secondary one, the illustration of the abusive relations within the family. Indeed, it is hard to separate these two dimensions, the living space and the human actors moving in it. Chandler rightly emphasizes that "[w]orks such as Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables* or Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* recall the double meaning of the word *house*—a structure and a family—a structure that absorbs and records and reveals the rise and fall of a family's fortunes as well as its moral degeneration" (11). But bearing in mind the inseparableness of the spatial and temporal dimensions in a literary text, I will also try to determine the chronotopes shaping "A Rose for Emily," *Psycho*, and *Red Dragon*.

In my discussion I follow the order in which the texts have been published, so as to attend to a possible diegetic interplay between the consecutive works, that is between "A Rose for Emily" and *Psycho*, and between *Psycho* and *Red Dragon*. The chronologically earliest, "A Rose for Emily," in its foregrounding of a forbidding family mansion, has as its literary antecedents at least two important texts: Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Dale Bailey in his monograph *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* makes a compelling case for the centrality of these two narratives to the tradition of American novels that "depict symbolically charged houses which bestride a gothic borderline, rarely crossing over from mere metaphor into outright depictions of the supernatural" (9). Bailey argues that "[m]ost obviously, and perhaps most significantly, both Poe and Hawthorne displace the supernatural focus of the text from the figure of the ghost—the revenant spirit of a human being—to the house" (21). According to the American scholar,

Hawthorne's romance "also foreshadows the development of the haunted house tale in at least two other significant ways," by dispensing "with much of the traditional gothic machinery," and more importantly still, by reducing "the traditional gothic castle to a house" (23). Bailey concludes that "Hawthorne, like Poe before him, helped to establish the flexibility of the haunted house not merely as a plot device but as a symbol with profound resonance for American writers" (23).

In *The House of the Seven Gables*, the eponymous residence resembles more a prison or a cemetery than a dwelling place. It is associated with the double crime of land theft and murder. According to Allan Lloyd-Smith, the house, "erected on a shameful rotting corpse, is a version of the Gothic haunted castle brought up to date"; furthermore, the narrator compares the central villain of the piece, Judge Pyncheon, to "a magnificent palace with a corpse rotting beneath" (51). With Homer Barron's skeleton ensconced in Emily's bedroom, Faulkner's story literalizes the metaphor from *The House of the Seven Gables* and builds on the contrast between the stately and honorable façade and the interior hiding a hideous, horrible secret. As Bailey forcefully puts it, "think of Miss Emily Grierson, entombed alive with her dead Yankee lover in a house that embodies a slowly withering southern culture" (9–10).

Faulkner's story also harks back to Poe's masterpiece "The Fall of the House of Usher." Both narratives dramatize the decline of a noble and once-prominent family that finally perishes—Roderick and Emily are the last descendants of distinguished local clans. They are both house-bound recluses, cut off from the social world. Furthermore, both stories feature the degradation and the collapse of the family mansion—in Poe's story the destruction of the family seat closes the action, whereas in "A Rose for Emily" the imminent demolition of the Grierson house emerges as an inevitable consequence of the historical process. More importantly, however, in both cases the ultimate erasure of the dwelling signals the end of the bloodline.

Even if the setting of Poe's story is definitely not American, the image of Usher's residence collapsing into the dark waters of the tarn, with its apocalyptic implications, seems to haunt much of subsequent Southern literature, as a potent vehicle for the collapse of the antebellum Southern social and cultural world. William Moss notes that "[f]ollowing this classic of the American Gothic, the ruin of the once-grand mansion, finally devoured by flame or sinking into flood, has become a pervasive image in Southern Gothic fiction" (177). Moss notices the adaptation of the story's final image, the remnants of the family mansion tumbling into the tarn, in the Southern fiction of the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, by writers as diverse as George Washington Cable,

Margaret Mitchell, and William Faulkner (178 passim). He recognizes the ruined mansion as a prominent feature of Faulkner's Gothicism but claims that "[o]nly in *Absalom, Absalom!*, however, does Faulkner fully exploit the Gothic effects of this motif, resuscitating the image in all its horror while imbuing it with a symbolic significance central to his larger theme" (183). Noel Polk, in turn, points out how pervasive the house imagery is in Faulkner's fiction; in Polk's account, it is

> a house-haunted landscape, a terrain marked by structures ranging from shotgun sharecropper shacks, ephemeral and poisonous as mushrooms, to antebellum mansions, both dilapidated (the Old Frenchman place) and pristine (Major de Spain's), whose permanence, whose economic hold over Yoknapatawpha, is as secure as their long deep roots in Mississippi's historical and cultural power structures. (25)

There is no doubt that in "A Rose for Emily," first published in 1930, the Grierson family house in Jefferson occupies a pivotal position. The building is like a fortress, jealously protecting the privacy of its owner; it is mysterious and inaccessible to the citizens of the town, much like its inhabitant, Emily. In fact, the house can be perceived as an externalization of the last of the Griersons. The unnamed narrator of the story offers the following description of the house:

> It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores. (Faulkner)[2]

It "had once been white," which is an allusion to Emily's lost innocence. It is set on what had once been the town's "most select street." The twice-repeated "once" emphasizes a contrast between the past and the present. Emily's house is now surrounded by garages and cotton gins. The former august neighborhood has been transformed into an industrial district. The advent of modernity, of technological progress, is rendered as an insidious invasion, through the choice of verbs denoting the action: "encroached and obliterated." The contrast between the old South, with its faded glory, and the new, changing South is captured

[2] All the quotations from "A Rose of Emily" come from the Vintage Digital (2013) edition of the *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*, which has unnumbered pages.

vividly in the few expressive details. The building stands "lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay" among industrial facilities, workshops and factories. This spatial arrangement makes visible Emily's refusal to accept the changes brought by technological advances, her fixation on the past. She appears to resist the impact of modernity. In the town community Emily is the only surviving representative of the old, dying-out aristocracy of the South, clinging to the dream of its former glory and in conflict with the new South, with its modern inventions and ideas. Her house is the only one that remains in the neighborhood, keeping its lonely watch. With the attribution of such features as "coquettish," it becomes clearly feminized, while the epithet "stubborn" refers to the prevailing mental feature of its owner.

The character of Emily is further illuminated by the interior of the house, where she admits the town deputation sent to discuss with her the sensitive issue of taxes. What is revealed to the eyes of these privileged visitors is a "dim hall from which a stairway mounted into still more shadow," which "smelled of dust and disuse—a close, dank smell." The darkened, dilapidated, and stuffy parlor into which they are led can hardly be considered a place of living. The family residence of the Griersons contradicts the idea of intimate space. It is an inversion of the archetypal house, which is associated with warmth, daily care, and the presence of persons close to one's heart. The dwelling is a cold, lifeless, lonely place that seems to hold sinister secrets. The macabre presence of the rotted corpse in the upstairs bedroom is hinted at in the description of Emily as she receives the delegates: "Her skeleton was small and spare. . . . She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue." The suggestion is that of a person long dead, a drowned woman or a living dead.

Emily, in her self-imposed confinement in the domestic space, estranged from her society, towers over the ordinary citizens of Jefferson like a deity. When the town attempts to deal with the unbearable stench coming from her house, Miss Emily, statue-like, watches from the upstairs window the men entrusted with the task of finding and neutralizing the source of the smell, "the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol." It is not surprising that her death creates an effect comparable to the fall of a monument. In the eyes of the community, she embodies the Old South. Lee Mitchell observes that "[l]ike the South itself, she has earned respect for the dignity with which she has faced adversity," and in the eyes of the successive generations, "her fostering of traditional cultural talents (teaching painting to young girls) as well as her antagonism to industrial modernization (refusing free postal delivery) have transformed her into a model of Confederate persistence" (256).

Her house has been a jealously guarded inner sanctum, and it is only after the funeral that its secret is exposed to public view. It is the final discovery made in the bedroom upstairs, "that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years" (Faulkner), which completes the process of revealing Emily's character through the space she inhabits. "The violence of breaking down the door" is commensurate with the maniacal persistence with which Emily had kept her secret out of reach of anyone's prying eyes. The interior of the room brings to mind at once a tomb and a bridal chamber. As Mitchell aptly points out, with its decorations unchanged for decades, Emily's bedroom recalls the chamber of Miss Havisham, whose "disappointed bridal hopes in *Great Expectations* lead to her self-immuring in an imminent pre-wedding moment, with clocks symbolically stopped at twenty to nine, wedding cake left on the table, and a bridal gown worn unchanged until her fiery death years later" (255).

In addition to exposing Emily's inner traits and her personality, spatial patterning in the story also illuminates the dysfunctional and deprivational atmosphere within the family, constituted solely by Emily and her father, the mother being conspicuously absent, completely erased from the narrative. The abusive relations between Emily and her father are especially vividly illustrated in what the narrator calls "a tableau": "Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door" (Faulkner). Significantly, her father stands in the foreground; he does not face his daughter—he turns his back to her. On the one hand, this attitude may suggest that he is protective, shielding young Emily from the perils of the world. On the other hand, he appears possessive, domineering, and overbearing, and the horsewhip may indicate a cruel streak in his character. The father comes between Emily and the society; he drives away all her young suitors, ruining her chances of establishing a normal relationship, fostering instead the daughter's emotional and psychological dependence on the parent figure.

The young Emily has much in common with other children of the dark houses of Faulkner's novels from that period, who, as Polk argues, "are prisoners in the dark house of family dysfunction, houses whose darkness is rooted in fear and loathing of the life processes of sex and death, in denial and repression of desire" (29). In such family circumstances, and denied access to young men of her age, Emily's desire has been twisted, and her thwarted sexuality confusingly projected on the tyrannical father, even on his dead body, strongly suggesting latent necrophiliac tendencies. Her morbid attachment is evinced by the fact that she refuses to accept his death. She clings desperately to the father's corpse for three days before letting him go and allowing him to be buried. Later in her adult life, Emily's

perverted sexual desire surfaces in her misguided efforts to keep Homer Barron, whether dead or alive, at her side, readily accepting his rotting corpse as her lifetime companion. However, procuring the permanent presence of the unruly fiancé in the intimate space of her bedroom, even in the form of the corpse, does not stem only from the necrophiliac streak in her character—sexual attraction to the dead is compounded with Emily's desperate loneliness, a factor of equal importance. Her alienation is highlighted by the expression on her face as that of a lighthouse-keeper: "a face the flesh of which was strained across the temples and about the eyesockets as you imagine a lighthouse-keeper's face ought to look" (Faulkner).

While in Faulkner's story the house externalizes the features of its single occupant, in Bloch's *Psycho* the straightforward relationship between the dwelling and the inhabitant becomes complicated by the fact that the dweller, Norman Bates, suffers from a multiple personality disorder. The psychiatrist examining Bates at the end of the novel offers the following diagnosis of his patient's mental condition: "There was *Norman,* the little boy who needed his mother and hated anything or anyone who came between him and her. Then, *Norma*, the mother, who could not be allowed to die. The third aspect might be called *Normal*—the adult Norman Bates, who had to go through the daily routine of living and conceal the existence of the other personalities from the world" (Bloch 122). In a crucial way, envisioning the protagonist's personality as fractured, alienated from itself, must count as an instance of Bloch's remarkable insight into the contemporary Western psyche. Steven Bruhm argues persuasively that "the twentieth century has so forcefully taken away from us that which we once thought constituted us—a coherent psyche, a social order to which we can pledge allegiance in good faith, a sense of justice in the universe—and that wrenching withdrawal, that traumatic experience, is vividly dramatized in the Gothic" (273).

I contend that each personage within Bates's split mind has its own spatial domain in the novel's diegesis. The bleak house on the top of the hill comes across as an extension of the mother personality within Norman Bates, while the motel situated at the foot of the hill and clearly visible from the house is the space of *Normal*. There, *Normal*, nominally Norman Bates, conducts his daily business and leads his entire social life, though limited to meeting his clients and subcontractors. Furthermore, the small room in the house on the top of the hill, Bates's bedroom since childhood, is a shelter of *Norman*, the little boy. Thus, the arrangement of the spatial details within the house, which is the domain of *Norma*, reveals the dysfunctional and morbid ties between Norman Bates and his mother—as a ghostly presence in Bates's disturbed and divided mind, *Norma* continues to exert her crippling influence on her son.

That the house is an extension of *Norma* is first and foremost demonstrated by the fact that its interior has not been altered for decades, left exactly as the mother furnished it. When setting her foot in the house, the first visitor in many years, Mary Crane is astonished at its quaint décor, struck with the impression that here time stopped a long time ago. According to Rebecca Janicker and the scholar she quotes, Benjamin Hervey, "the antiquation of the house," so striking in its old-fashioned furnishings, indicates the grip of the past on the present (129). However, I also wish to stress that unlike Faulkner's heroine, haughty, aloof, and a hermit by choice, Bates considers the outside world potentially threatening—only in the stable, familiar conditions within the house does he feel safe, and this, too, accounts for the absence of any modifications in its interiors. In this respect, in its dilapidated, outdated décor, Bates's residence strongly recalls the house of Emily Grierson, in the first and most obvious instance of diegetic interplay between the two narratives.

Not only the house but also the motel managed by Bates appears to be stuck in time, a relic of the past era; its progress was inhibited by the construction of the new highway, which subsequently diverted the traffic and drastically reduced the number of clients visiting the motel. The place has practically disappeared from the map and from the minds of the citizens of Fairvale. Similarly, Norman Bates, its proprietor, has been abandoned socially, almost forgotten. A striking diegetic resonance registers here between Emily's family house, on the one hand, and the Bates house and the motel, on the other—they emerge as anachronistic enclaves, bypassed by time and by modernity.

In the case of the Bates residence, since it represents the realm of *Norma*, the mother personality, its unchanging condition also indicates who is really in charge there. The house is the reflection of "Mother," who does not wish to upset the status quo: "The rocker rested in the corner, the ornaments stood on the dresser as they were always arranged. Nothing had changed in Mother's room; nothing ever changed" (Bloch 34). "Mother" controls Bates; she asserts her power over him by calling him "boy" or "son," thus bringing forth *Norman*, the little boy. This subordinate aspect of Bates's multiple personality has as its spatial extension Bates's bedroom, a tiny room occupied by him since childhood, "singularly small, singularly cramped, with a low cot more suitable for a little boy than a grown man" (112). The fact that the bed itself appears unfit for an adult indicates Bates's stunted emotional and psychological development, which the room itself indicates adequately.

However, there is one element in the furnishing of the room that reflects the adult Bates, *Normal*; it is the books on the shelves. His troubled mind, in social interactions masked by the façade of the "dull,

fat, commonplace face," is "all too vividly revealed" by "the incongruous contents" of his library (113). His eclectic reading attests to his wide-ranging interests, which include abnormal psychology, occultism, theosophy, cosmology, weird ancient rituals, and perverted sexuality. Among the bizarre volumes on the shelves in Bates's bedroom, Dennis Perry and Carl Sederholm notice the presence of "Erich Neumann's *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, a mythological and evolutionary extension of Carl Jung's analytical psychology, tracing the parallel archetypal stages of the development of the individual and collective consciousnesses," and describing "how the son's unconsciousness is dominated by the mother and makes her a powerful block to the son's ego development" (106). Thus, this seemingly inconspicuous book emerges as a vital clue to Bates's mental condition.

As the chain of events reconstructed in the novel's *denouement* shows, the roots of Bates's disorder go back to his adolescence, his growing up with the disturbed lonely mother, who came to hate all men after being deserted by her husband. However, it is the inexplicable incident of the mother taking on a lover and declaring that she is going to marry him that for the boy represents a clear act of betrayal, and that sets off Norman's mania. The unfolding scenario seems to point to the Oedipus complex, in which an unhealthy attachment of the boy to the mother leads to his eliminating the rival to her affection. However, it does not account for the boy's murder of the mother. Perry and Sederholm propose to interpret Norman's act of matricide in the terms of Neumann's theory of psychological development, whose central claim is that in order to complete the process of the emergence of masculinity, the subject must "differentiate himself from the mother and become an independent adult" (108). But the two critics argue that this psychological journey "is never begun for Norman on a psychological level; rather, he kills his mother and her lover, literally, thus forestalling further emotional development" (108).

The twisted path of the protagonist's development, which involves elimination of the parental figure, is in fact characteristic of much contemporary crime and horror fiction by many critics still designated as Gothic. According to Bruhm, such fiction "reveals the domestic scene in a world after Freud and the degree to which that domestic scene is predicated on loss"; thus, as Bruhm argues, it "registers the (Freudian) impossibility of familial harmony, an impossibility built into the domestic psyche as much as it is into domestic materiality" (264). Young Norman kills his mother but afterwards digs up and keeps her body in the house to create an illusion that she still lives—an illusion sustained through her preserved corpse. Norman's morbid dependence on his mother, his inability to live on his own, has led him not just to preserve her dead

body but, more importantly, also to "reanimate it" in a perverse way, by incorporating the mother figure into his mind, the latter process catalyzed by his forgery of the alleged suicide note left by his mother.

Norma's supervision of and domination over *Normal* is visualized by the position she is assigned at the window of her bedroom upstairs in "the big frame house on the hillside," overlooking the motel. Arbogast, a private investigator looking for Mary Crane, and finally hitting upon her trail at the motel, is drawn to the mysterious figure he glimpses in the window of the house on the hill: "I noticed [Bates's mother] sitting at the bedroom window giving me the once-over when I drove in" (Bloch 62). From her vantage point "Mother" scrutinizes everything that goes on below, which brings to mind the image of Emily, observing from the window at night the men delegated by the town to deal with the stench issuing from her house: "Miss Emily sat in it [the open window], the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol" (Faulkner). What in Faulkner's story is only a tantalizing hint at the lack of vitality in Emily becomes literalized in *Psycho*, where the figure of the mother is finally revealed to be her carefully preserved corpse.

In its essentials the mother's bedroom recalls the finally exposed view of the chamber occupied by Emily Grierson during her lifetime. It is for the first time described in detail by Lila, Mary's sister, who explores the house, searching for her missing sister. As the narrator reports, Lila "wasn't quite prepared to step bodily into another era," and "yet she found herself there, back in the world as it had been long before she was born" (Bloch 114). In the description of the room the emphasis is on its antiquity, which, like Emily's bridal chamber, seems to belong to a completely different epoch. What confirms the diegetic link between Norma's bedroom and Emily's chamber of horror, similarly immune to the passing of time, is the focal point—the bed with the pillow: Emily's "bore the faint yet unmistakable indentation made by a recent occupant," and Lila "could almost trace the outline of the body by the way the undersheet sagged, and there was a deep depression in the center of the pillow where the brown flecks were thickest" (115).

Yet, contrary to the tomb-like ambience pervading Emily's chamber, the mother's bedroom in *Psycho* conveys a distinct and eerie impression of being alive, in stark contrast to the rest of the house: "Downstairs were remnants of the past ravaged by decay, and upstairs all was shabbiness and neglect. But this room was composed, consistent, coherent; a vital, functioning entity complete unto itself" (115). This sense of the bedroom being animate comes from its apparently being inhabited by a living person. This particular impression is the result of Bates's efforts; he keeps the mother alive in his mind, and to strengthen the illusion, every day goes

through the usual ritual of dressing her, or rather her corpse, placing it at the window, and then putting it to sleep. In addition to maintaining the illusion of the room being occupied by a living person, the mummified body also serves as a dummy through which Bates projects *Norma*'s voice.

The three aspects of Bates's multiple personality coexist in a state of relative harmony, ensuring a semblance of a functional daily routine. But the arrival of a young attractive woman in the household disturbs the fragile balance. Inviting Mary to the house for supper proves a grave mistake on the part of Bates, a decision fatal in its consequences. It triggers *Norma*'s homicidal rage, and "she" decides to punish *Normal* for feeling sexual arousal. Clearly, her motive for slashing Mary is jealousy and misogyny. Bates's interpretation is more generous, as he justifies the murder committed by "Mother" as an act of motherly care: "She'd come to protect him from the bitches" (32). But it is *Normal* that must clean up her mess, erase the traces of her crimes, remove the bodies.

After the murder of Arbogast, Bates realizes that "Mother" is "psychotic, dangerously so" (81), and he must incapacitate her and take control. This requires displacing her from the position that affirms her power over *Normal*. Bates removes *Norma* from the bedroom window and locks her up in the fruit cellar. In his view, being located down in the basement will deprive the dominant *Norma* of agency and resolve, and it seems to work. Ironically, this is the place that fits "Mother," as the name punningly alludes to a "fruitcake," an insane person. *Norma* remains harmless and docile in the fruit cellar up to a point, until Lila discovers the presumed Mrs. Bates stashed in the improvised vault: "the gaunt, gray-haired old woman whose brown, wrinkled face grinned up at her in an obscene greeting" (117). However, it is "the fat, shapeless figure, half-concealed by the tight dress," flashing "the white, painted, simpering face," with "the garishly reddened lips," that identifies herself as *Norma Bates* (117)—it is Norman dressed up as his mother that greets Lila on behalf of the shriveled corpse. Ultimately, after Bates is locked up in an asylum for the criminally insane, *Norma* "swallows" the two subordinate personalities. As David Punter observes, "[t]he previous gaps in his fragmented personality are now closing as adult and son vanish into the psyche of the mother" (140). He emphasizes the significance of the place where this "resealing" of the psyche comes about, arguing that a mental hospital is "precisely the place where the original splitting occurred as a paradoxical effect of Bates's attempt to heal the gaps in his *outer* world by the double murder [of the mother and her lover]—a double itself replicated by the slaying of Mary and the detective" (141).

A similar power struggle within one fragmented personality can be observed in Thomas Harris's novel *Red Dragon*, published in 1981.

Moreover, the circumstances of the eponymous figure's aberrant psychological development, despite superficial variations, have much in common with Norman Bates's life story. As a child born with facial deformity, Dolarhyde was abandoned by his mother and spent the first five years of his life in an orphanage. Then he was taken in by his grandmother and transferred to her old house that served as a nursing home for elderly people. The huge house, situated on a farm north of St. Charles, Missouri, "stood at the end of a gravel drive that runs through an apple orchard," and with the nearest neighbor "being a half-mile away" (Harris 74), it appears quite remote. The house seems not only isolated, hiding its existence from the rest of the world, but forgotten as well. This peculiarity, this almost shadowy existence of the house, not only throws into focus the secrecy of its present owner and sole occupant but also parallels the peripheral location of the Bates house, with both dwellings similarly lost to the present time, immune to the prying eyes of the community, their privacy not violated by visitors for decades.

The quality of being cut off from the flow of time is matched by the conspicuous spatial detachment of the houses, and this throws into sharp focus the alienation of the dwellers from the social reality, and from the contemporary world, which is true not only for Norman Bates and Francis Dolarhyde but also for their literary antecedent, Emily Grierson. This peculiar fusion of the temporal and spatial features points to a distinctive chronotope that shapes the three examined narratives: *Psycho*, *Red Dragon*, and "A Rose for Emily." This chronotope bears a superficial similarity with what Bakhtin calls "the idyllic chronotope," in which "life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where one's children and their children will live" (225). "This little spatial world," Bakhtin further explains, "is limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world" (225). There is, however, one crucial difference—"the conjoining of human life with the life of nature, the unity of their rhythm" in the chronotope of the idyll (226) is entirely missing in the chronotope shaping *Psycho*, *Red Dragon*, and "A Rose for Emily." Thus, even though the protagonists' lives are enacted in the same isolated corner of the world that witnessed the lives of the previous generations, they are completely out of tune with the course of nature. This factor, combined with the oppressive and deforming influence of the family, produces the inversion of the idyllic chronotope, giving rise to something that might be called the uncanny *locus horridus*, a familiar place that is no longer safe and nurturing but menacing and crippling.

Indeed, the experience of growing up in Grandmother's residence proves in its effect deeply traumatic for the protagonist of the third narrative,

Red Dragon. Among the chief factors contributing to the damaging impact of the house is its forbidding darkness. The room where Dolarhyde grew up as a boy is described as "pitch dark with its blackout curtains against the Japanese" (Harris 203), at this time the chief enemy of the American nation. When he climbs the stairs at night returning to his bedroom from his visits to the toilet, he is overwhelmed by the house's gloom. It becomes clear that it is Grandmother who consigned him to this stygian murk, instilling fear and a sense of powerlessness in him, by denying him access to electric light, as she "had cut the cords off short so only she could reach them" (204). The figurative darkness of Faulkner's houses here becomes literal.

In the retrospective chapters unfolding the story of Dolarhyde's childhood and formative years, Grandmother emerges as a domineering castrating female figure, clearly a diegetic echo of Bates's emasculating and prudish mother. Grandmother threatened to cut off the boy's penis for peeing in the bed, humiliating the boy and planting in him the crippling fear of castration. She repeated her threat when she spied on him playing a game that involved showing private parts, his playmate being "the daughter of a share-cropper who lived three fields away" (208). In consequence, Dolarhyde spent much of his childhood, and then of his adult life, anticipating the dreaded loss of his penis:

> He waited for hours in his room, lying on the bed with his trousers off, clutching the bedspread and waiting for the scissors. . . . He waited through the routine of the days that followed, remembering many times a day in a rush of freezing dread. He would never cease from waiting. (209–10).

This sadistic mental torment, damaging Dolarhyde's sense of confidence and of self-worth, recalls the misguided instructional actions of Bates's mother, who made the young boy ashamed of his body and of sexuality, indoctrinating him with the notion that "handling himself," that is masturbation, is "a sin, for which he could burn in hell" (Bloch 29). Initially, young Norman had a healthy and accepting attitude to his corporeal self—he "liked to stand in front of the glass without any clothes on" (64). One time, however, "Mother caught him at it and hit him on the side of the head with the big silver-handled hairbrush," she "hit him hard, and it hurt," and said "that was a nasty thing to do, to look at yourself that way" (64). As a result of this and many other similar incidents, dominated by the puritanical mother, Bates finally became impotent, unlike Dolarhyde, who manages to establish a sexual relationship at least with one woman.

The two characters, however, share a strong attachment to their houses, even though these dwellings subvert Bachelard's notion of the

house as a safe space, a nurturing shelter. The experience of growing up in Grandmother's abusive household has branded Dolarhyde so deeply that he cannot sever the ties with the place, and he returns there as an adult man. It is apparent that neither the house nor its surroundings have changed through all these years: "His grandparents' clothes still hung in the closets, his grandmother's brushes were on her dresser with combings of her hair in them. Her teeth were in a glass on the bedside table. The water had long since evaporated. His grandmother had been dead for ten years" (Harris 74). As with the gloomy house overlooking the Bates motel and the house of the Griersons, its interiors make an impression of a museum, a mausoleum of the past. Grandmother's house is a scary, gloomy, lifeless place, and its decay is signaled to anyone approaching the house by the condition of the orchard, full of dead and twisted trees.

These "bleak houses," these two crippling and distortive domestic environments, engender in their "blighted children" an acute sense of physical and mental inadequacy. However, Dolarhyde and Bates vary in their responses to the perceived personal flaws, as well as in their strategies designed to cope with their impaired and unacceptable selves. The disparity is highlighted in their attitude to their own image. Bates has difficulty accepting his self-image; the reflection of his face in the mirror becomes in his eyes blurred and wavy. This is one effect of the punishment he received in the past for staring at himself naked in the mirror:

> All mirrors seemed to have wavy lines that hurt his eyes. . . . [H]e remembered how he used to enjoy looking in the mirror as a boy. He liked to stand in front of the glass without any clothes on. One time Mother caught him at it and hit him on the side of the head with the big silver-handled hairbrush. She hit him hard, and it hurt. Mother said that was a nasty thing to do, to look at yourself that way. . . . From then on it seemed he got a headache almost every time he looked in a mirror. (Bloch 64)

In contrast to Bates, who only gradually came to internalize his mother's negative view of his person, Dolarhyde as a child could not stand his own reflection, as he was born with a split palate and deformed upper lip. Later, as an adult, in addition to this early mirror-shyness, he also developed an aversion to being exposed to the gaze of others. He kept only one mirror in the house, a full-length mirror "mounted on the wall of Dolarhyde's attic gym beside his barbells and weight bench," in which "he could admire his body . . . comfortably because he always worked out in a mask" (Harris 223). Tony Williams, quoted by Philips Simpson, interprets Dolarhyde's mental problem as being "traumatically fixated in

the mirror stage," and his obsession with body-building, his strenuous physical exercise in front of the mirror, his face concealed behind a mask, is, in Williams's view, an effect of Dolarhyde's unwillingness "to undergo separation from the maternal order no matter how much it has traumatized him" (90). Even though this may be a correct diagnosis up to a point, being "traumatically fixated in the mirror-stage" does not account for Dolarhyde's metamorphosis, his project to reinvent himself as the eponymous Red Dragon.

While both Dolarhyde and Bates create a new persona for themselves, their transformations are dissimilar in nature. Bates chooses to live in the world of self-deception, which is his defense mechanism; he deludes himself and hides his flawed masculinity underneath feminine clothes and garish make-up, in effect, turning into a transvestite. Dolarhyde's metamorphosis follows a different course. He rejects his ordinary, shameful, and stigmatized self, and strives to overcome it by transforming into the mythical creature from William Blake's painting, Red Dragon, the emblem of potent masculinity, emanating sexual power. As Tony Magistrale observes,

> Blake's painting portrays "the Man-Dragon rampant over the prostrate pleading woman caught in a coil of his tail"; correspondingly, Dolarhyde's metamorphosis revolves around the accumulation of power at the expense of women. He appears to measure the level of his "becoming" by forcing women into the simultaneous roles of adoring spectators and sacrificial victims. (29)

Even though in both cases the transformation is compensatory, aimed to mask real or imagined "deficiencies," Dolarhyde, in contrast to Bates, enjoys watching his idealized self in the mirror, but for the impression to be perfect, he must cover his facial deformity with a mask.

As in *Psycho* and "A Rose for Emily," the patterning of the spatial domain in *Red Dragon* visualizes the protagonist's personality. As I argue, the figurative division of the house serves as an external marker of Dolarhyde's split mind. In the past, his grandmother performed the role of a harsh censor and retributive overseer in the household, as she often watched from the upstairs window, controlling all activities on the farm, and procuring swift punishment for the boy's offenses. Like *Norma* in *Psycho*, Mrs. Dolarhyde supervised everything that went on below, and it is not an accident that later the upstairs becomes the lair of Red Dragon, the realm of the dominant aspect of Dolarhyde's personality, the place from which it exercises its power over his mind and life. It is a shrine to Dolarhyde's cherished copy of Blake's painting *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman*

Clothed in Sun. The image is not just the incarnation of Dolarhyde's ideal masculine self to which he aspires but also, significantly, a great aid and incentive in his process of Becoming. The Dragon, Dolarhyde's alter ego, assigned to the upper part of Grandmother's house, emerges whenever Dolarhyde puts on his fancy kimono, conceals the face behind the mask, and wears the dentures.

The Dragon personality may be viewed as an extension of Dolarhyde's domineering and abusive grandmother. Like Bates, who preserved his mother's corpse and gave it a voice, Dolarhyde "resurrects" Grandmother as an element of his Dragon personality, adopting her tone of voice, hurling at the adult Dolarhyde the same verbal insults, repeatedly calling him "a disgusting and dirty boy," and scalding him in critical moments when sensing his weakness, hesitation, or doubt. In fact, Grandmother has been literally incorporated into the physical manifestation of Dolarhyde's new persona—as Red Dragon, he wears the exact replica of her dentures, which enables him to articulate speech sounds properly, to overcome the mortifying lisp. Thus, the dentures are necessary to achieve the self-image to which he aspires—a powerful flawless masculine creature that supplants the ridiculous, scared, lisping "cunt face," Dolarhyde's abused childhood persona associated with this nickname, used by other children in the orphanage to degrade him.

The dominance of Red Dragon seems assured and unchallenged, until Dolarhyde brings home Reba McClane, a woman he fancies, and with whom he feels safe because she is blind. But Dolarhyde is aware of the risk he has taken; he dreads the reaction of the fearful aspect of his doubled personality, of the Dragon, as Reba's presence might infuriate his alter ego. Having a female companion at home is a completely unfamiliar experience for him. As the narrator reports, "[t]o Dolarhyde the room seemed changed. She was the first voluntary company he ever had in the house" (Harris 257–58).

Dolarhyde is in the thrall of Red Dragon, which is evidenced by the fact that even with Reba present in the house, he cannot resist visiting the monster's "lair." But he is honestly concerned about Reba's safety, seriously afraid that the Dragon may hurt her, as the beast within him quickly realizes that Dolarhyde's affection for Reba might lead him to discard his powerful monstrous self, to abandon the grand project of Becoming. In fact, it is Reba's visit that brings to the surface the split in his mind; this sudden intensification of his mental fracture is triggered by the sense of intimacy the woman engenders in Dolarhyde. This "twoness," so deeply felt now, soon modulates into an open conflict deep within Dolarhyde, the conflict that in the narrative is rendered as a heated verbal quarrel, in which Red Dragon's utterances are capitalized throughout, a graphic sign of their weight and authority.

A similar dynamic, triggered by an attractive woman's disturbing presence, can also be detected in *Psycho*, possibly setting a diegetic pattern for *Red Dragon*. Bates, on the spur of the moment, invites Mary Crane to the house for supper; he is evidently sexually attracted to her. Mary's unwitting intrusion in *Norma*'s spatial domain clearly upsets the mother aspect of Bates's personality. "Mother" is jealous of the attention Norman lavishes on the girl, just as Red Dragon finds Dolarhyde's growing feelings for Reba intolerable. Nevertheless, whereas Bates fails to protect Mary from *Norma*'s vengeance, Dolarhyde devises an elaborate scheme meant to fool Red Dragon and save Reba.

When mapping out the discrepancies between Dolarhyde and Bates, one must not overlook one essential detail—the crime scene. Bates never ventures off the premises when he "dresses to kill," whereas Red Dragon searches for his prey in the world at large. Dolarhyde invades seemingly inviolate suburban residences of average, affluent American families. Consequently, the houses of the Jacobi family and the Leeds family are converted into a stage of Dolarhyde's Becoming, an arena where a spectacle of gruesome horror is enacted. It is the FBI investigator Will Graham who mentally reconstructs the macabre ritual, with the dead family members serving as both witnesses and sacrificial victims. The bodies are propped against the wall, their faces toward the room, so they can watch Dolarhyde's performance, and he can see his own reflection in their eyes. It is Hannibal Lecter, serving his life sentence in prison, who figures out the modus operandi of Red Dragon and its deeper significance: "He smashed the mirrors at the crime scene, not just to get the pieces he wanted. He doesn't just put the shards in place for the damage they cause. They are set so that he can see himself. In their eyes—" (Harris 66). As Harris's novel demonstrates through the excesses of the eponymous character, the house in the contemporary USA cannot be considered a shelter, a safe space for its inhabitants. No longer an impregnable fortress, it has been reimagined as a potential site for a spectacle of grotesque and gruesome violence.

It is worth noting that the elaborate design of the crime scene and the ornate trappings of the Red Dragon persona in Harris's novel point to the glamorization of the serial killer figure in many fictional treatments in recent decades. Commenting on the protagonist of *Red Dragon*, Lee Horsley perceives him as an exemplification of the serial killer *par excellence*, not only being "part damaged human being, part descendant of the supernatural and vampiric characters of gothic fiction," but also, much more importantly, "constructing a self-image around a romantic linkage of criminal acts with art and divinity" (140). An equally important aspect of the fictional serial killer's constitution is the semiotization of his deeds. Horsley speaks of the frequently employed trope wherein a series of gruesome murders is

envisioned as "the production of [the villain's] own narrative inscribed as a text on the body of the victim" (140). From the bodies of his victims the serial killer fashions a message, which, as Horsley argues, "works to implicate the detective who decodes it (and thereby the reader and the literary critic) in his own crimes and cultural attitudes" (141).

*

As the foregoing discussion has demonstrated, the three narratives show remarkable correspondences in their diegesis. The links are especially evident in the construction of the protagonists and in their spatial domains, which externalize the aspects and features of the dwellers' complex personalities. These ties, manifest in the storyworlds and their participants, are the strongest between the texts chronologically proximate—Bloch's *Psycho* echoes Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," written three decades earlier, while Harris's *Red Dragon*, published twenty-two years after *Psycho*, draws on the character concept and the narrative setting established by Bloch's novel. This is not to suggest, however, that there are no diegetic correspondences between "A Rose for Emily" and *Red Dragon*. Nevertheless, it is true that the influence of Faulkner's story on Harris's novel, and on the serial-killer fiction that eagerly followed its lead, can be most clearly seen through the mediating link of Bloch's *Psycho*.

These three texts also significantly contribute to what might be dubbed "a national counternarrative," a narrative whose origins lie with "The Fall of the House of Usher" and *The House of the Seven Gables*. This particular domestic fiction opposes the dominant national story and undermines the base around which American societal values and identity are constructed, encapsulated in the official dogma of a suburban utopia. The stories written in this vein debunk the myth of the house as a holy and inviolable shrine of domestic bliss, and focus on its subversion, offering the illicit and vigorous dramatization of a "nightmarish place." The pervasive presence of a doomed or crippling family mansion in the American literary landscape reveals a deeply embedded societal ambivalence, a recurring anxiety over the culturally entrenched disposition to perceive the house, to use Chandler's terms, as "an index not only of civilization and culture but of moral rectitude and integrity" (17).

Collectively, "A Rose for Emily," *Psycho*, and *Red Dragon* dismantle the concept of what Kawash calls "the suburban dream house as an object of desire and identity," and challenge the idea of a family nest fostering the formation of, to quote Kawash again, "the normalized American citizen-subject" (68)—a trustworthy, rational, civic-minded entity. Each of the

discussed characters, not only Emily Grierson, is a true child of "the dark house," victimized by a set of oppressive, deforming, and deprivational family circumstances. They all have been raised in the stifling and mausoleum-like ambience pervaded by denial of the body, loathing of erotic satisfaction, and stigmatization of desire. Blighted by their "bleak houses," these children turn, in their adult lives, into mentally disturbed, sexually perverted, and socially alienated criminals. As a result, their fictional life stories demonstrate a dramatic failure of the domestic environment, its incapacity to shape a subject embedded in the social network, its inability to forge a reliable unit in the communal chain.

Works Cited

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon, 1994.

Bailey, Dale. *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*. The U of Wisconsin P, 1999.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, U of Texas P, 1981.

Bloch, Robert. *Three Complete Novels: Psycho*, *Psycho II*, *Psycho III*. Wings, 1993.

Bruhm, Steven. "The Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It." *The Cambridge Introduction to Gothic Fiction*, edited by Jerrold E. Hogle, Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 259–76. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521791243.013

Chandler, Marilyn R. *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction*. U of California P, 1991. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520347632

Faulkner, William. *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*. Vintage Digital, 2013.

Głowiński, Michał. *Intertekstualność, groteska, parabola*. Universitas, 2000.

Harris, Thomas. *Red Dragon*. Dell, 1990.

Horsley, Lee. *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*. Oxford UP, 2005. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199283453.001.0001

Janicker, Rebecca. "'Better the House Than an Asylum': Gothic Strategies in Robert Bloch's *Psycho*." *The Man Who Collected Psychos. Critical Essays on Robert Bloch*, edited by Benjamin Szumskyj, McFarland, 2009, pp. 121–33.

Kawash, Samira. "Haunted Houses, Sinking Ships: Race, Architecture, and Identity in *Beloved* and *Middle Passage*." *The New Centennial Review*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2001, pp. 67–86. https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0065

Lloyd-Smith, Allan. *American Gothic. An Introduction*. Continuum, 2004.

Lotman, Jurij. *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. Translated by Gail Lenhoff and Ronald Vroom, U of Michigan P, 1977.

Magistrale, Tony. "Transmogrified Gothic: The Novels of Thomas Harris." *A Dark Night's Dreaming: Contemporary American Horror Fiction*, edited by Tony Magistrale and Michael A. Morrison, U of South Carolina P, 1996, pp. 27–41.

Mitchell, Lee. "William Faulkner 1897–1962." *The Columbia Companion to The Twentieth-Century American Short Story*, edited by Blanche H. Gelfant, Columbia UP, 2000, pp. 251–58. https://doi.org/10.7312/gelf11098-048

Moss, William. "The Fall of the House, from Poe to Percy: The Evolution of an Enduring Gothic Convention." *A Companion to American* Gothic, edited by Charles L. Crow, Wiley Blackwell, 2014, pp. 177–88. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118608395.ch14

Perry, Dennis, and Carl Sederholm. *Poe, "The House of Usher," and the American Gothic*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230620827

Polk, Noel. *Children of the Dark House: Text and Context in Faulkner*. UP of Mississippi, 1996.

Punter, David. *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body and the Law*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1998. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230377981

Simpson, Philip. *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer Through Contemporary American Film and Fiction*. Southern Illinois UP, 2000.

Sławomir Studniarz is Professor at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, where he gives lectures in American literature. He has published four monographs and more than a dozen articles and chapters on Edgar Allan Poe, including articles published in *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* and *Poe Studies*. He is also the author of numerous articles on other American novelists and poets. He has won the Javier Coy award for the best article published in *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* in 2019–20. In the years 2020–22, he served as a member-at-large of the Executive Board of the Poe Studies Association. In 2026, his article "Multimodality in 'The Bells': New Explorations in Poe's Symphonic Poem" won the 2025 James W. Gargano Award for the best article on Poe.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6851-3086

slawomir.studniarz@uwm.edu.pl

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.20

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Agnieszka Łowczanin
University of Lodz

"An elaborate skin show": Embodied Horrors in *The Substance*

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses *The Substance* (2024), a body horror film directed by Coralie Fargeat, to demonstrate how, through the use of Gothic aesthetics, it engages with contemporary debates about the cult of youth and beauty and the growing reliance on age-defying technologies. By staging the emergence of a posthuman body, the film exposes the oppressive beauty standards within a neoliberal, patriarchal culture and critiques the promise of self-improvement through biotechnological enhancement. The body is portrayed as an entangled assemblage whose interaction with the substance destabilises bodily integrity and, when read through the lens of new materialist theories of intra-action, reveals the dangers of technological intervention in human embodiment.

Keywords: *The Substance, posthumanism, new materialism, monstrosity, the Gothic, body horror.*

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 4 May 2026. Verified: 16 July 2026. Accepted: 20 July 2026.

An overhead shot of an egg into which a greenish substance is injected; however, the viewer never sees the person behind the procedure, only hands in black gloves. Within seconds, the substance takes effect, and the yolk splits into two identical halves. The camera remains fixed in the same position, now showing workers preparing a star for the film's actress protagonist, Elisabeth Sparkle, on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. The sequence culminates in the star's grand unveiling, accompanied by the sound of camera flashes and the cheers of the crowd: "We love you, Elisabeth!" As Elisabeth, fittingly dressed in a sparkling gown, spins for the cameras, still within the same frame, the film quickly contrasts her moment of triumph with the passage of time. Leaves, and then snow, cover the star; its surface cracks under countless footsteps; a homeless person pushing a cart walks across it; and finally a teenager splatters it with ketchup from a hamburger container. He tries to wipe it away with his shoe, but the fast-food stains remain on the star's surface.

THE SUBSTANCE

This is the opening of *The Substance* (2024), directed by Coralie Fargeat. The almost silent sequence foregrounds the film's underlying themes: the scientific manipulation of living matter and the lack of control over such interventions. The scientist's gloves are tellingly black, not the usual colour used in research institutes, as if suggesting the unnatural, if not illicit, black market nature of the procedure. The same static overhead camera position in the Walk of Fame sequence extends this theme to Hollywood, metonymy for the entertainment industry. The term *industry* is apt in this context, because it evokes the manufacture of stars, treated like any other usable and disposable commodity. The researcher, the workers who install the star, and even the actress, Elisabeth (Demi Moore), at the moment of her greatest glory, all remain faceless. Framed from the same overhead angle, her star on the Walk of Fame is paralleled visually with ketchup and hamburger which smear it in the final sequence of the opening section, suggesting a conflation of celebrity with fast food, both presented as commodities for mass consumption.

The Substance was seen as "2024's most divisive film" (Balanescu), described on the one hand as "a satirical body-horror and science fiction film" (Oscar and Fahd), a "gut-churningly visceral . . . feature," and "not the film to look to for realism" (Ide), while on the other as "a documentary . . . as far as emotional fidelity is concerned" (Heller-Nicholas). With its narrative focus on the cultural pressures particularly, though not exclusively, on women to preserve flawless bodies, the film applies the aesthetics of the

Gothic to depict the pains and consequences of adhering to societal and professional expectations and thus engages in the discussion on the limits and costs of the tyranny of appearance-based perfectionism. Because Elisabeth, the main character who resorts to age-reversal treatment, does so in order to retain her job in the highly competitive entertainment industry, *The Substance* is a commentary on the neoliberal capitalist work environment, on ageism, and the consequences of self-enhancement solutions to address it. However, Elisabeth's decision to undergo the procedure and its unintended consequences in the form of final bodily disintegration expose not only a culture that values youthfulness, surface perfection, and continuous self-optimisation but also a pharmaceutical black-market culture that is its commercial outgrowth. The drug/substance producers, with their research institutes, scientists responsible for testing, and the advancement of products, remain hidden from view in the Gothic undergrounds. From an ethical perspective, the process and consequences of applying the substance in order to retain one's job and an even more youthful body are monstrous. To visually depict this monstrosity and the side effects of interfering with the biology of the body—especially when the recommended procedures have not been rigorously applied and enhancement turns into deformation—the film adopts the aesthetics of body horror. But the cinematic visual body horror evokes the factual horror of both the entertainment and the pharmaceutical industries. The former is represented by the character of Harvey and an all-male group of aged shareholders, and the latter by the invisible pharmaceutical company that makes individuals dependent on its ongoing provisions, while avoiding accountability and offering no remedy when complications arise and the promise of beauty turns to decaying monstrosity. The patient—or rather the consumer, as there is no doctor at the other end of the DIY Ikea-style self-help aesthetic kit that Elisabeth orders—is left without assistance once the product has been purchased. In the event of an emergency, the helpline connects them only to a chatbot, which promptly ends the call.

The body, what can be done to it, and what it becomes as a consequence of these interventions is the site where all these issues converge and materialise on screen. The body is not only, naturally, central to the existence and wellbeing of Elisabeth; it is also at the centre of interest for the companies that use it for profit, the film studio which employs her, and the drug company which sells her the age-defying substance. Elisabeth falls into the trap of believing that her body is malleable *ad infinitum* and that, because it is hers, she can retain control over its transformations. When read through the new materialist theory of agential realism and the concept of intra-actions, the body is viewed not as a bounded entity but as an entangled assemblage shaped by its interactions with the autonomous

substance. The substance is seen as a force that exposes the risks inherent in biotechnological intervention into human matter. This intervention results in destabilising Elisabeth's bodily integrity and germinating an improved human form that gains agency and turns against herself/her breeder. *The Substance* thus raises questions about the boundaries of the Self and the borderlines between the human and the posthuman. How human is Sue (Margaret Qualley), and how posthuman as a consequence of giving unnatural birth does Elisabeth become? Of woman born, Sue looks and behaves like a human being, yet she is a product of the material intervention of the substance into Elisabeth's body. Its consequences are shown as fatal for both Sue and Elisabeth, the latter of whom orders and pays for the procedure. As in the case of Frankenstein's Creature, the monster that Elisabeth/Sue becomes at the end plays out the precarity of both scientific overreaching and the uncontrollable autonomy of the body thus created. At the same time, because the intellectual toil of creation is transferred to a highly advanced yet invisible pharmacological and biotechnological corporation, the film also exposes the transfer, and ultimately the evasion, of responsibility.

NEW MATERIALIST AND POSTHUMANIST APPROACH TO THE BODY THROUGH THE GOTHIC LENS

When the body is diseased or impaired, or when it begins to exhibit signs of ageing, when its muscles lose suppleness, or the skin becomes saggy and wrinkled, it reminds us of itself: the comfort of not having to remember it is eroded. The body becomes uncomfortably and often achingly present, and embodiment becomes a conscious and disquieting reality. In contrast, a healthy, ideal, preferably also younger body is one that "is scarcely experienced at all" (Shildrick 305). In such moments of aesthetic dissatisfaction with the visible alteration of the body resulting from ageing, as a way to enhance or maintain the social and professional status quo, many resort to available options to improve or completely alter the appearance: cosmetic surgery, the use of implants, transplants, injectables, enhancements, etc. Advances in cosmetic surgery and biotechnology have made it possible for the human body to become an ongoing lived process. Contemporary surgical procedures, reinforced by widely available anti-ageing and beauty products, make it possible to transform the body not only into an improved version but also into an achronological entity that resists the temporal markers associated with ageing and bodily decline.

However, such capacity to alter and rejuvenate the body raises fundamental ontological questions about the nature of being and the relationship between embodiment and subjectivity: if the body can be re-engineered, does it destabilise the traditional understanding of the continuity between body and self? Do medical interventions in the body result in the production of "new selves," or does the "self" remain unchanged in the modified version of the body? In new materialist theories, the body is understood as constantly shaped through relations with technologies and environments, and its agency emerges through such interactions rather than residing solely within the individual. The processes which take place in the human body, the substances injected into it, and the plastic surgeries that modify the body's appearance, all have transformative potential and are not mere physical interventions affecting the skin, the surface of the body. They not only influence how we perceive our bodies and how we are perceived by others, but also intervene into the essence of our "selves" and redefine our sense of who we are. Consequently, our identity, which is deeply entangled with our ever-changing, fluid bodies, is also open to change, also fluid and shifting, or, following Rosi Braidotti, nomadic.

Building on phenomenological approaches to embodiment, new materialist and posthumanist theories propose a new understanding of the body as one that emerges through its interactions with the material world. Three thinkers whose key ideas intersect are particularly important for understanding the representation of bodily transformation in *The Substance* through this lens. Firstly, Stacy Alaimo understands matter as dynamic and entangled with the environment. She sees the human body as interconnected with the material world, affected by other organisms, substances, chemicals, toxins, constantly exchanging matter with the environment through food, water, air, etc. The body is therefore a site of material interconnection rather than a bounded organism; it is not self-contained but trans-corporeal. By positioning the body as inseparable from the more-than-human, this perspective de-centres the human, and views it as influencing, but at the same time also dependent upon, the surrounding matter (Alaimo 2). Alaimo's emphasis on "the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world" provides the basis for ethical approaches that respond to the entanglement of human bodies and environmental processes, challenging the distinction between them (ibid.). Secondly, Rosi Braidotti develops the notion of nomadic subjectivity, defined by "mobility, changeability and transitory nature" (*Metamorphoses* 70). Braidotti understands the body as relational and "undergoing constant internal modifications" (99), and identity as a process of continuous becoming rather than a stable essence. Thirdly, Braidotti's approach resonates with Karen Barad's claim that

matter is not a fixed substance but "substance in its intra-active becoming," emerging through relations rather than preceding them (151). In this sense, chemical substances are not understood as passive objects acting on a pre-existing body but rather as agents that participate within material-discursive practices, generating their own trajectories and effects. As Barad argues, matter "comes to matter" through intra-actions, a key concept in her posthumanist ontology of agential realism. Also bodies are produced through material-discursive intra-actions so that the substance itself helps configure the transformations it induces: "All bodies, not merely 'human' bodies, come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity—its performativity" (152). Together, they form a posthumanist vision of embodiment as relational, processual, and more-than-human.

For Cary Wolfe, "posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore" (xv). Understanding the body through the lens of posthumanism is seeing it as a form that goes beyond traditional human characteristics, because, as indicated above, the boundaries between humans, technology, and nature blur. Posthumanism offers a perspective which de-centres and therefore de-exceptionalises the human position, redefines its role in relation to other forms of being and "works . . . towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 37). The posthuman body is thus no longer fully human, and if it takes a form that resembles the human, it often becomes the source of anxiety and fear. From an anthropocentric perspective, a posthuman body is the Other, fundamentally disrupting human understanding of the self and the ontology of being. In his analysis of posthuman bodies, Paul Sheenan identifies Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818/1831) as the novel "that provides the richest source for mythological posthumanism" and "establishes a paradigm for the posthuman body" (246). The novel envisages scientific intervention into the process of transformation, reliance on chemistry and other sciences of change developed in the 20th and 21st centuries, and introduces the Creature, the first in the procession of later monstrous bodies, "the outcome or offshoot of equally monstrous scientific agendas" (247). For Anya Heise-von der Lippe, "*Frankenstein* perfectly illustrates . . . human anxieties of becoming posthuman" (9).

These two standpoints, anthropocentric and posthuman, link the sources of anxiety embodied in the Creature on the one hand, in its origin, that is in the human mind and its uncheckable potential for scientific advancement and for creating economic environments geared at monetising it, and on the other, in the equally unpredictable potential for the ungovernable monstrosity of its product. As Fred Botting has noticed,

"[f]rom *Frankenstein* onwards scientific discovery is as much a threat as it is a promise" ("Aftergothic" 279). The future, therefore, appears to be far from shining bright, but is rather "anxiously perceived as another place of destruction and decay, as ruined as the Gothic past" (ibid.).

The posthuman approach to viewing matter and the human body as porous, unstable and unfixed is inherently Gothic in nature. Concern with the body, with what can be done to it and what it can become, and the depiction of abuses—especially to the female body—have been at the heart of the Gothic since its inception in the late 18th century. From fragmented body parts which instigate action and speak of the onset of political justice in the first Gothic text, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*; to the mangled body of mother superior, the abused body of Antonia, the emaciated Agnes, and the worm-ridden remains of her child in M. G. Lewis's *The Monk*; to Heathcliff's fantasy of the post-mortem dissolution of boundaries when his corpse would rot together with Catherine's in *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë; to the hideous doubles of Dorian Gray and Dr Jekyll in Victorian England, the Gothic has always been fascinated with monstrous, haunting, decaying, stitched, and hybrid bodies. The posthuman sheds new light on the body that has been at the heart of Gothic; the Gothic, in turn, helps contextualise it by means of its recognisable paraphernalia and thus serves "as an aesthetic framework to explore . . . posthuman tendencies" (Heise-von der Lippe 5).

However, it is also in the dark and transgressive sense, in bringing to the foreground the marginal, the perspectives of those othered by the normative system, that the intersection of posthumanism and the Gothic comes into play. As Heise-von der Lippe has noticed, "our posthuman predicament confronts us with the instability and ultimate unsustainability of our most basic ontological category—the human—and challenges the tenets of Enlightenment humanism in the process" (3). In this sense the construction and perception of monstrosity links the ontological interests of posthumanism and Gothicism, because "it is only in terms of a masterful position that otherness is linked in the form of monstrosity" (Botting, "Flight" 178).

Women have always been at the centre of the Gothic—as "damsels in distress" who often actually exhibit greater courage and resilience in freeing themselves from oppressive villains than the label implies, as well as stock characters of monstrous mothers, madwomen in the attic, cruel aunts, etc. Thus, Gothic fiction, fiction, and later many horror films—which can at least partly be seen as their outgrowth—have consistently registered and often anticipated social anxieties and transformations connected with femininity and the regulation of women's rights by institutional powers. Referring to early Gothic stories, Sue Chaplin, for example, drew attention

to their focus on "the experiences of women denied full judicial subjectivity and subjected to various forms of systematic exploitation, discipline and persecution" (204). The Gothic, which especially in its earlier phase was often accused of reproducing traditional gender roles, actually interrogated and often subverted them, and thus contributed to raising awareness of different forms of injustice. By foregrounding women's constrained positions, on the one hand, and staging their resistance and agency, on the other, it had advanced a proto-feminist agenda long before the term itself entered the lexicon. Many horror films inherit this trajectory, exposing the institutional and cultural systems that promote control. As Aldana Reyes has pointed out, women, as part of marginalised social groups together with queer people and ethnic minorities, have turned to body horror as a way to reveal biopolitical bias. Horror's focus on the body exposes how medical and social practices reduce women to biological essentialisms that persist: "Their bodies are more socially policed than men's and routinely dissected for 'flaws' by the media and tabloids: bodies are too thin, too big, too sagging, too artificial, too desperate to look youthful" (Aldana Reyes, *Contemporary* 50).

The Substance operates at the intersection of new materialist ontology and the Gothic tradition of representing monstrosity. However, while 19th and 20th Gothic narratives dramatise anxieties about the instability of the self by presenting the monstrous body as a deviation from normative humanity, in *The Substance* aesthetic monstrosity results from the compulsion to follow the expectations of normalised beauty standards perpetuated by the male gaze, which tyrannises the media industry, and from the resultant unpredictable agency of the substance purchased to meet them. Although in the film the attention is mainly on the ways in which the glamorisation of youth affects women, men are also shown to fall prey to "hegemonic standard[s]" and the "general homogeneity" of expected and accepted appearances (Dev).

FEMINIST BODY HORROR AND THE MONSTROUS-FEMININE

The body horror genre, first defined in cinema in the late 1980s, can be traced back to films which began to proliferate a decade earlier (Aldana Reyes, *Contemporary* 3). Feminist body horror films centre on women rendered monstrous, exposing their physiology and distorted bodies and marking them as other through non-normative forms. Such explicit depictions of female physiology—linked to reproduction and tabooed abject substances such as blood or bodily fluids, to birth and decay—

led Barbara Creed to formulate the notion of the monstrous-feminine: a cultural construction of femininity defined in relation to her body, sexuality, and reproductive functions. Based on Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, the monstrous-feminine was seen as fearsome and repulsive, because it destabilised patriarchal distinctions between inside and outside, self and other, and thus became a mirror of prejudices about the female body (Creed 1993, 1–15).

J. Halberstam's *Skin Shows* (1995) expanded Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine by constructing a much broader category of monstrosity, not restricted to the feminine, and treated it as "historically conditioned rather than a psychological universal" (6). Halberstam emphasised the visibility of monstrosity and demonstrated how the skin, the contour, the crust of the body, becomes a message board on which gender, sexual, and racial anxieties are inscribed, a barometer of social shifts, scientific developments, political tensions, etc. Monsters, in this analysis, "make strange the categories of beauty, humanity, and identity that we still cling to" (6) and are read as "economic form[s]" that condense various threats to "nation, capitalism, and the bourgeoisie in one body" (3). In their very nuanced analysis, especially of 19th-century monsters, Halberstam showed how skin "becomes a kind of metonym for the human; and its color, its pallor, its shape mean everything within a semiotic of monstrosity" (7). What is important for the analysis of monstrosity in *The Substance* is Halberstam's attention to the skin—"which is figured in Gothic as the ultimate boundary, the material that divides the inside from the outside" (ibid.)—as a boundary that is porous, subject to punctures, corruption, and collapse. *The Substance* speaks of an age when the skin is treated as a boundary that can be tightened, corrected, improved, filled with chemicals, and replaced. The film uses the "semiotic of monstrosity" to demonstrate that the skin, so far at least, remains a biological matter, perishable and ephemeral, with its own material life, even if it is regarded as disposable. Therefore, as Halberstam demonstrated, "[s]lowly but surely the outside becomes the inside and the hide no longer conceals or contains, it offers itself up as text, as body, as monster. The Gothic text, whether novel or film, plays out an elaborate skin show" (ibid.).

In her more recent discussions (2024), Creed has expanded her analysis of the monstrous-feminine to 21st-century horror films. The directors of these films have re-defined abjection as *radical abjection*, "to represent the monstrous-feminine from a feminist perspective" whereby all those elements that were abjected in classic horror films are "now embraced as a source of strength" (Creed 2024, xiv). In this way the monstrous-feminine of the last three decades "is no longer a patriarchal stereotype designed to invoke a horror of women's sexual desires and reproductive

nature" but rather uses "abjectification as . . . a weapon with which to undermine the masculine symbolic order and its phallocentric mores" (ibid.). Thanks to radical abjectification, the monstrous-feminine of the new millennium is no longer the objectified source of fear and derision but is given agency, uses her new form to "transgress boundaries, to weaponise her nonhuman identity, to defy the law" (189). She realises that her "so called abjection which patriarchal ideology attaches to her feminine, sexual and reproductive roles, is a myth, and turns these roles around in an act of defiance and revolt" (ibid.). Many of the recent films in Creed's analysis answer to the posthuman turn, and the monstrous-feminine either is or morphs into a posthuman or nonhuman form.

ELISABETH SPARKLE AND THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

Elisabeth Sparkle, the protagonist of *The Substance*, is a successful TV personality, who has for decades hosted live fitness programmes. The corridor of the studio which employs her is lined with posters from successive editions of her shows going back to the 1980s, giving testimony to changing fashions and beauty standards. Over the decades Elisabeth has managed to survive by adapting to the demands of the entertainment industry, a cultural metonym for the pursuit of youth and beauty. At fifty, with a star on the Walk of Fame and a perfectly sculpted body, she appears to have secured a stable position on a popular show. She embodies what feminists—especially those of the third wave—have fought for and embraced: empowerment, professional success, and celebration of her femininity.

However, the participation in beauty regimes which has been an essential part of her career is exactly what earlier feminists criticised as a double-edged sword. Practices perceived as empowering and based on the individual's choice to remain attractive are in fact seen as reproducing the very constraints that feminism challenges, and as reinscribing normative standards of femininity. Under the guise of self-improvement Elisabeth has encouraged thousands of her female viewers to subject themselves to daily exercise routines in order to achieve the desired standards of bodily perfection, in reality set for the satisfaction of the male gaze. However, since not all beauty standards can be achieved and not every imperfection eliminated through fitness discipline alone—not all women who sweat away in front of their TV screens to Elisabeth's movements can look like her—the pursuit of beauty triggers a domino effect and creates ever-expanding needs for more advanced beautification procedures. The control

and subordination of bodies in which Elisabeth participates are enacted not only through bodily regimes but also through cosmetic products and surgeries designed to meet aesthetic conformity to the standards that erase individuality and bodily differences. Men and women alike follow uniform aesthetic standards and model their bodies "under the gaze of others, in order to conform to social norms" (Alsop and Lennon 95). The women in Elisabeth's, and later Sue's, programmes are physically almost indistinguishable from one another, as though moulded from the same matrix, and this uniformity echoes the actual practices followed by aesthetic medicine. As Rachel Alsop and Kathleen Lennon observe in their study of aesthetic surgery and the expressive body, "desired bodies conform increasingly to a very narrow range of body types" (99). Many surgeons in the United States adhere to guidelines for facial symmetry from *Proportions of the Aesthetic Face*, a framework that encourages conformity to a standardised set of features (ibid.).

Therefore, deviation from normalised beauty standards, of which ageing is a stark example, has no place within the industry. On the day that Elisabeth turns fifty, she overhears a conversation between her boss, Harvey, and the programme's producer about plans to dismiss her: she learns that her "Jurassic fitness" is no longer desired. In the scenes that follow, as her physically repulsive, misogynistic boss toys with a flaccid shrimp—suggestive of his own inadequacies masked by bawdy jokes and crude arrogance dressed in a sequinned blazer—a close-up of his crumpled and sagging face heightens the grotesque and dark irony of the scene. Under the guise of "inevitable renewal," Elisabeth is forced to confront the industry's brutal ageism and rampant misogyny, and is officially dismissed over dinner marking her birthday.

The entertainment industry is presented as an impersonal, glaring, colour-saturated hologram of misogyny and superficiality, a hostile and shallow world. Yet Elisabeth cannot let it go. Devastated by the loss of her job, on the way home she loses control of her car and ends up in hospital, where a nurse gives her a contact for a black-market substance that promises to generate a younger version of herself. The hope of returning to the programme, to what she believes can once again be her usual Self immortalised on the Walk of Fame, is only possible if she regains the appearance of her younger self. It is important to stress that, despite its primary focus on women, the film offers a nuanced critique of the aesthetic standardisation of the body. Rather than presenting women alone as the targets of visual scrutiny and tyranny, it also positions men as objects of the gaze. The nurse who slips the phone number for the substance helpline into Elisabeth's pocket is male, suggesting that men, too, are subject to the discriminating gaze and its pressures.

The following scenes of her pursuit to obtain the mysterious substance rely very heavily on Gothic aesthetics: Elisabeth must travel to a dubious district and find the address at the end of an abandoned alleyway; in order to get to the package locker, she must bend down in a degrading gesture that seals her implicit consent to the procedure. The scene unfolds in a space unmistakably reminiscent of Gothic subterranea: she walks along a dim, murky corridor which opens into the intimidating and dehumanising whiteness of a laboratory-like room with parcel lockers, from where she retrieves the substance. The setting confirms the suspicion established in the film's opening scenes that there is something deeply disturbing about the company responsible for this product. Its illicit nature, suggested by the researcher's black gloves, parallels the murky obscurity of the corridor and is reinforced rather than mitigated by the façade of purity conveyed by the semiotics of the colour white. Moreover, if we are to read this scene through a Gothic lens, it operates as a reversal of its classic prototypes. Gothic heroines typically venture into dark, labyrinthine spaces to escape villainy and move forward toward moral refuge. Elisabeth does the opposite: she enters the shadowy black-market territory of her own volition to purchase a passport that will return her to the world of villainy ruled by moral degenerates like her boss, Harvey.

BIRTHING

Elisabeth initiates the procedure of infusing the substance into her body in the similarly sterile-looking setting of her immaculately white-tiled bathroom. The subsequent sequence of scenes elicits a visceral response through an insistent use of close-ups, which focus on her body, on the looming needle, and on her contorted face as the substance takes hold and she collapses with a thump. The editing intensifies the sense of the physical violation to which she subjects herself, and draws the viewer into an intimate proximity with her pain. As she lies half-conscious on the bathroom floor, disturbing movements can be noticed underneath the skin of her back, causing it to bulge and shift, looking like a foetus moving within a pregnant body. Her skin begins to split into a longitudinal fissure which resembles a magnified stretching of the vagina during childbirth. Yet, since the dilation is along the spine, Elisabeth appears to reproduce herself in a scene that clearly reworks the imagery of both birth and grotesque transformation. This ontological ambiguity renders the scene uncannily Gothic. Is the new body her child, or her child-like creation (as the physical rendering of the scene would suggest), or is it a new version of herself? Are they indeed one, as the information leaflet that came with the

serum informs: "You are one"? The maternal aspect of Elisabeth's body as the repository of an-Other entity is additionally subverted because birth takes place as if independently of its natural involvement, without any assisted physical exertion on her part. There was no pregnancy, no growth inside her, and, during the birth, no natural-sounding groans are heard, no rhythmic cramps or organic contortions are seen. Instead, Elisabeth's body is unnaturally twisted, convulsively thrown on the floor as if without her control, to be finally rendered a useless repository of a new life, an empty chrysalis shell out of which emerges a body as per order: younger and more beautiful.

Interpreted from a new materialist perspective, Elisabeth's body is not presented as an autonomous entity constituted once and for all, but rather as part of ongoing processes, sustained through and subject to constant change. The birth-scene can be analysed not only as a consequence of interactions between pre-existing entities—Elisabeth subjected to the transformation by the substance she ordered—but, to follow Karen Barad's concept, as intra-actions in which identity and agency emerge through the material entanglements of Elisabeth, the substance, biotechnology, and cultural discourses of beauty. For Barad, "matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing. . . . 'Matter' does not refer to an inherent, fixed property of abstract, independently existing objects; rather, 'matter' refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization" (151). The sequences of birth-transformation, of the splitting of Elisabeth's self, or her bodily mutation, can be read as moments in which her subjectivity is re-produced through entanglements with biotechnology and enabled by science, both at the service of celebrity culture founded on the hegemony of the gaze, and the pressures and potentials of neo-liberal capitalism. The film's visual language—the close-ups on the emergence of the double, the scenes of Elisabeth's collapse, and the subsequent scenes of decay—materialises these entanglements.

In Barad's discussion of agential realism "the fetus is not a preexisting object" but a phenomenon which "'includes' the apparatuses or phenomena out of which it is constituted: in particular, it includes the pregnant woman . . . as well as her 'surroundings' and her intra-actions with/in them" (217). In *The Substance* there is no pregnancy and therefore no foetus, but, similarly to Barad's understanding of the ontology of foetus, Sue is a phenomenon generated through intra-actions. She is given both agency and subjectivity. Yet, unlike a foetus, whose future development, health, and, especially, physical appearance are largely unpredictable, Sue emerges as a perfect body, the exact product Elisabeth ordered. She is a posthuman being, "the result of particular historically and culturally specific iterative

intra-actions of material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production" (ibid.), who emerges through the reconfiguration of Elisabeth's body in a process that makes, or exposes, her subjectivity as relational, contingent, and continually becoming.

To follow Braidotti's terminology, "becoming," rather than static "being," defines the nature of Elisabeth's nomadic subjectivity. After Deleuze, Braidotti defines "becoming" as "the immanent encounter between subjects, entities and forces which . . . exchange parts of each other in a creative and non-invidious manner," and nomadism as a form of subjectivity marked by "mobility, changeability and transitory nature" (*Metamorphoses* 68, 70). Elisabeth is an extreme example of a nomadic subject, trapped in a posthuman process of becoming, continually transformed by the substance she injected into her body and forever dependent on it. She and the substance become entangled; her body is a site of exchange in a process that destabilises her boundaries not only by producing Sue, a younger embodiment of herself, but also by affecting her own "original" body, as in any pregnancy, though in her case in unexpected and undesired ways. Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality can be applied to the material dimension of this transformation: the substance enters her body, actively participates in its reconfiguration, and Elisabeth emerges as a trans-corporeal and nomadic subject whose identity is continually reconstituted through her intra-action with the substance.

In an interview, Coralie Fargeat stressed the importance of the spine and of the continued interrelation between the two components of Elisabeth's self, the life-sustaining entanglement of the matter:

> The spinal cord is . . . our definition, it's our balance, it's our backbone. . . then you have to respect the balance [something Sue and Elisabeth fail to do, leading to their downfall] . . . the other [you, Sue] has to stitch your spine again and take care of it. But everything comes from the spine. [Sue] pulls the liquid [from Elisabeth's spine] to stabilise herself. I think the spine, in a very unconscious way, became this very important element.

For the viewer the possible horror of this scene lies not only in the visceral affective response resulting from the sight of the realistically presented unnatural childbirth, from the gore of the skin split along the spine, and the contorted, emptied maternal body rendered useless on the floor, but also from what appears to be Sue's emotional distancing of herself from, if not rejection of, Elisabeth, perceived as a mere vessel and feeder of her-new-self. Although *The Substance* is not an example of what Aldana Reyes has called "pregnant Horror films"—such as *Rosemary's Baby*

(Roman Polański, 1968) or *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979)—the horror of its birthing scene lies "in externalising (in the body of the mother) how something is wrong with what is inside it (generally, the womb)" (*Horror Film and Affect* 47). From the first scenes of her existence there are signs that there is something emotionally wrong with Sue's attitude to Elisabeth. These early signs of her emotional detachment from herself/her mother/her feeder, which will lead to a complete disregard for and erasure of the latter's autonomy, suggest that the relationship is exploitative rather than symbiotic.

GOTHIC MONSTROSITY OF THE PRECARIOUS SYMBIOSIS

Both the birthing scene and the later relationship between "the creature" and "the maker" resonate with the creation scene in *Frankenstein*. The all-male father-and-son pair is replaced by an all-female pairing of mother and "daughter." In both cases, the aesthetic aspect of creation comes to the centre. Although Victor selected the Creature's parts as "beautiful" (Shelley 49), once it is animated, "breathless horror and disgust filled [his] heart" (ibid.), and Victor's brusque "he was ugly then" (50) encapsulated his failed expectations. Aesthetic disappointment was one of the reasons why he rejected the Creature and abandoned the responsibilities of his upbringing and socialisation. In *The Substance*, the situation is reversed. Here, too, the parent/mother is absent, but for a different reason: Sue is not an awkward, socially inept, mute being. Instead, she is a perfectly formed, beautiful adult who from the start behaves as though she required neither care nor guidance. Yet, like the Creature, she is left to her own devices by the "mother," who, in the process, becomes dormant, and reduces herself to a defunct body.

By giving birth Elisabeth reproduces herself and administers her own social demise. She should now coexist interchangeably with her younger self, Sue, in a strict alternation regime, switching every seven days when one of them remains dormant, living the nightmare of a posthuman half-life (Yeo 199). However, Sue extends these interludes to enjoy the professional and intimate privileges of her youth. Elisabeth's "younger self is all about having a good time and, in the spirit of those in their early 20s, feels immortal" (Jayarajah 215), and begins to treat her older body as little more than an otherwise useless donor of the stabilising, life-sustaining fluid from her spinal cord. Initially objectified by Sue, Elisabeth's body is later othered and hidden from view as Sue breaks the alternation discipline and its ageing becomes increasingly disturbing. Gradually, Elisabeth turns

visually into a monstrous-feminine, a repository of reprehensible abjection, rejected by her beautified Self/child. Their relationship, intended as a cooperative and reciprocal symbiosis, turns into a precarious symbiosis, to end up as antagonistic rivalry, with Sue behaving towards Elisabeth as a ruthless parasitic life form.

In this sense, as previously stated, the film visually enacts the mechanism of "intra-actions" that materialise specific configurations of agency in entities which are constituted through relation with each other (Barad 141): Elisabeth's body intra-acts with the biotechnological substance which does not merely transform her but continues to intra-act with her via Sue. But Sue, Elisabeth's replicated body, resists her control, unexpectedly asserts her own agency, and prioritises her own wellbeing over Elisabeth's. By doing so, she accelerates her ageing, which is the very opposite of what she was created for. Once injected, the substance is active and possesses a generative force. Such uncontrolled agency of the matter is seen as transgressive, as it mutates beyond the beauty standards and eventually slides into monstrosity.

Viewed from the perspective of the Gothic tradition, the split of the Self can be read as a nod to the motif of doubling familiar from Victorian classics, which depicted "other-self-*in*-the-self" (Hogle 7) in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) by Robert Lewis Stevenson, and to a certain extent also in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) by Oscar Wilde. The re-envisioning of this motif within a posthumanist framework in *The Substance* does not involve departure from the framework of a moral allegory. Though not much is known about her inner life, Elisabeth is certainly guilty of being addicted to fame, or issuing Sue into the world and pretending she is real. Unlike Hyde or Dorian's portait, who are hideous manifestations of moral decay, Sue is not physically repulsive. Rather, like Hyde and Dorian, themselves products of the rotting hypocrisy of their era, she is depicted as a profitable outcome of material entanglements generated by capitalist technology. Therefore, the ethical evaluation does not reside solely with an individual. Similarly to these Victorian classics, *The Substance* is not about the main character, Elisabeth/Sue, but rather about the culture that propagates fantasies regarding youth and beauty, seen as guarantees of sales and profit, and about the market-driven potentialities to attain them. *The Substance* is a critique of the environment for which Elisabeth makes the sacrifice of resorting to black market substances to reproduce herself—of the world that demands such radical gestures.

In this sense, the film's moral focus shifts to modern villains of Gothic provenance, such as Harvey, representatives of the media industry, which contributes to the commodification of female bodies and demands their unending enhancement. Elisabeth, though not depicted as an active

advocate of feminist agendas, is visibly repulsed by her boss's behaviour at dinner when he dismisses her crudely while eyeing a scantily-dressed waitress three times his junior. His name, Harvey, is not accidental: the film is post-#MeToo so the reference to Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood producer accused of sexual abuse by women in the film industry, is clear. If the film holds affective power, it is largely because it is difficult to comprehend Elisabeth's relentless drive to retain her position within the toxic environment of an industry run by repulsive relics like Harvey.

The industry is monstrous especially in its treatment of ageing women, and demands tight skin exposure from them. Sue is presented in stark contrast to Elisabeth, with the bodily markers of grown-up femininity, yet deliberately flaunting girlish allure and naïveté. Angela McRobbie argues that "the qualities of girlishness" characterise the appearance and behaviour of young women because "[w]ithin the field of popular culture this becomes dominant, women must be young women" (24). Therefore, even though Sue is a grown-up woman in her early twenties, her appearance—pleated sports miniskirts, rouge make-up from a teenage palette, mannerisms such as childish lip-biting—makes her resemble an intimidated schoolgirl and builds an aura of Lolita-like attractiveness. Sue has been created to conform to patriarchal expectations that infantilise women by training them to value beauty and obedience so as to make them behave like children dependent on male approval.

Monstrosity breeds monstrosity and Sue turns out to be a villain in disguise. She performs various roles: a smiling, lip-biting, naïve country girl in front of her male bosses, a hyper-feminised and seductive fitness instructor in front of the cameras, and a cruel predator on Elisabeth's bone marrow at home. As Sue becomes addicted to enjoying the privileges of her youthful body, the visual composition of the exchange scenes increasingly relies on Gothic paraphernalia, for example, when she buries Elisabeth in a dark bathroom extension and walls off the sagging self she loathes and wants to forget. Confinement and darkness make it a sinisterly tomb-like territory with low-angle shots from Elisabeth's floor-level perspective, which portray Sue as a monstrosity towering over her body and fate.

In the end, the physical boundaries between the two dissolve as they merge into a grotesquely monstrous Elisasue, "Monstro Elisasue." Before this final transformation, when, still as Sue, she starts losing parts of her body—her nail, tooth, and ear—the dominant affect of these scenes is one of disbelief bordering on the grotesque. However, as the hideous transformation unfolds, having witnessed Elisabeth's gradual disintegration, her loss of agency, and the abuse she endured from Sue, one may feel sympathy for her as she prepares for the final show, applies makeup, and puts on her ballerina dress and earrings. Elisabeth transforms

into a site of body horror which, as Aldana Reyes has pointed out, involves a corporeal deformation which elicits visceral affective responses in the viewers. This engagement may produce "empathetic corporeality," in which the transformation of the body on screen results in a "transferability of pain," encouraging the viewer to emotionally identify with the victim and thus "fictionally partake of their vulnerability" ("Abjection" 393).

In its final scenes, *The Substance* "plays out an elaborate skin show," to borrow Halberstam's phrase. With or without the audience's possible affective engagement, the deformation of Monstro Elisasue is deeply unsettling, constructed from "images of abjection" of the body grotesquely turned inside out: her internal organs are displaced, exposed, pulsing and bubbling with physiological fluids and mucus. From the shapeless material mass that Elisabeth has become, a perfectly formed breast emerges as if fashioned following the idealised formulae pursued through aesthetic surgery. However, slick with slime and blood, and grotesquely attached to the body by what appears to be an umbilical cord, apart from its shape, it is far from desirable or conventionally beautiful. Instead, it illustrates how the body becomes fragmented in beautifying procedures, and is viewed as a composite of separate parts subject to improvement. The result is a disturbing juxtaposition of skin-deep culturally constructed ideals of femininity and the abject materiality of the flesh that is underneath.

At first, the sight of her shapeless mass which no longer resembles a human body evokes repulsion rather than fear. Yet, the final scenes on the stage, accompanied by nostalgic music, are meant to evoke compassion as she disintegrates further in front of the audience. They culminate in Elisabeth's faint plea for recognition and acceptance: "It's me, Elisabeth." In a moment of harsh rejection—which resembles the treatment of the Creature in *Frankenstein*—chaos erupts after a member of the audience shouts "Monster!," prompting a collective panic response that leads to a bloodbath. Unlike the Creature, Monstro Elisasue does not turn to vindictive monstrosity. Instead, she crawls to her star on the Walk of Fame, and, as she disintegrates completely, a close-up of her face is intercut with shots of adoring fans who call her beautiful and profess their adulation. This sequence subverts Creed's recent reformulation of the monstrous-feminine, as there is no attempt to undermine "the stability of the patriarchal symbolic order" (2024, 190). Monstro Elisasue may have enacted what Creed calls in her discussion of radical abjection, a "defiance and revolt," but she does not carry it out any further "to transgress boundaries, to weaponize her nonhuman identity, to defy the law" (189). Revolt against the culture that drove her to use the substance, or against the pharmaceutical industry and its responsibility-evading practices, does not take place. Quite the contrary, the end offers closure

as Elisabeth imagines she attains all she has wished for: the acceptance of her audience, even if unreal, even if only in the form of a fleeting memory, a dream, or hallucination.

CONCLUSION

By giving birth to her younger self, Elisabeth becomes a body brought into being only for the gaze and consumption of others. Before her birthday and dinner with her producer, Harvey, there is little to suggest that she is dissatisfied with herself. Yet after her dismissal, she internalises his gaze, which renders her relation to her own body inauthentic (Alsop and Lennon) and ultimately leads to her erasure. Elisabeth's end illustrates the destructive consequences of such an attitude to one's body. In their discussion of the empowering potential of expressive bodies after aesthetic surgeries, Alsop and Lennon argue that, for many, such interventions are attempts to improve the body in order to attain happiness. Yet, "while transformation of the self is sought, it is the body as object which is modified, and, on this account, this body is alienated from the self. Consequently, changes in the objectified body are not necessarily matched by the desired transformation of the self" (103). It is not only a surgery, an external transformation that is required, but "a body in social space . . . a modification of the embodied self's lived relations with others" (ibid.), which is precisely what Elisabeth seems to be incapable of achieving.

The film's numerous allusions to earlier productions and visual aesthetics articulate Elisabeth's anachronistic attitude toward the body. *The Substance* abounds in references to horror genre classics: the brightly coloured carpet in the TV studio evokes Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980); the final distortions of Elisabeth's body may recall David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980); there are echoes of *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986); and the climactic sequence clearly reworks and pays homage to the iconic bloodbath in *Carrie* (1976) (Bitel; Ferrier). I suggest that these intertextually rich references are there to convey the fact that, even though Elisabeth resorts to highly advanced biotechnological solutions, she is anchored in the past and prevents herself from looking forward beyond the environment which cancels her. She is often shown holding her childhood toy, a glass ball with a twinkling ballerina inside. It conveys the nostalgic side of her personality, which gravitates towards the past. The scenes of her aerobics class visually signal that she is frozen in the aesthetics and the attitudes of the previous decades: she is seen wearing an old-fashioned leotard and the same belt that features in one of the posters lining the corridor in the TV studio. She has stagnated, her show belongs

to the stylistics of the past millennium, reminiscent of the 1980s Jane Fonda aerobics revolution. Elisabeth metaphorically embodies a mode of thinking that is criticised as dangerously obsolete: her inability to free herself from the gaze of others and value herself on her own terms.

Elisabeth is a representative of a privileged social group. The "culturally specific intra-actions of material-discursive apparatuses" that Barad discusses (217) determine which bodies come to matter and under what conditions. Sue is produced through the intra-action of biotechnology and Hollywood beauty standards, which are not attainable to all. As a wealthy woman, Elisabeth can afford the substance, a fact which echoes Barad's comments that reproductive technologies have often been justified through the production of desirable bodies for the elites, particularly "white, affluent, highly educated women" (ibid.). In this sense, Sue emerges as a commodified embodiment of an ideal woman, a phenomenon constituted through material-discursive practices that privilege youth and beauty, and perpetuate economic privilege (much in the line and stylistics of the "Mar-a-Lago face" of Donald Trump's inner circle).

Like all other monsters, Monstro Elisasue comes "to manifest the effects of systems of domination and dehumanisation that create them" (Spooner and Botting 2). She is not only the result of Elisabeth's individual choice but emerges through the intra-action of Hollywood ageism, cultural ideals of femininity, biotechnology, and the beauty industry in neoliberal contexts. Yet, whatever drove Elisabeth to take such a step, and however much responsibility can be attributed to the environment that drove her to it, the film ultimately presents the age-defying procedure as a possible option. The resultant posthuman monstrosity makes the viewers consider how to "discursively construct our humanity in a world that no longer allows us to perceive ourselves as whole and wholly untouched by the effects of our own (bio)technological involvements" (Heise-von der Lippe 6). This is in no way a straightforward task, and, "[a]s the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty" (Alaimo 20). Moreover, much like *Frankenstein*, *The Substance* demonstrates that the creation of posthuman bodies does not absolve their "creators" of responsibility, nor does distributed agency eliminate accountability. Yet the film does not shift responsibility for monstrosity and its final disintegration onto either technology or the posthuman body itself but points to a shared ethical accountability. As Barad argues, "agency and accountability are tied together" (218). Therefore, acknowledging the agency of nonhuman or posthuman entities "does not lessen human accountability; on the contrary, it means that accountability requires that much more attentiveness to existing power asymmetries" (219).

Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana UP, 2010. https://doi.org/10.2979/6079.0

Aldana Reyes, Xavier. "Abjection and Body Horror." *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*, edited by Clive Bloom, Palgrave, 2020, pp. 393–410. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33136-8_24

Aldana Reyes, Xavier. *Contemporary Body Horror. Elements in the Gothic*. Cambridge UP, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009280976

Aldana Reyes, Xavier. *Horror Film and Affect. Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership*. Routledge, 2016. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315795850

Alsop, Ruth, and Kathleen Lennon. "Aesthetic Surgery and the Expressive Body." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2018, pp. 95–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700117734736

Balanescu, Miriam. "*The Substance*: Why This Gross-Out Body Horror about Hollywood Beauty Standards Is 2024's Most Divisive Film." *BBC Culture*, 21 Sept. 2024, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20240920-the-substance-the-gross-horror-thats-2024s-most-divisive-film, accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke UP, 2007. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12101zq

Bitel, Anton. "Body Horror and the Beauty Myth: 6 Influences and Intertexts for *The Substance*." *BFI*, 21 Sept. 2024, https://www.bfi.org.uk/lists/substance-coralie-fargeat-influences, accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

Botting, Fred. "Aftergothic: Consumption, Machines, and Black Holes." *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, edited by Jerrold E. Hogle, Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 277-300. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521791243.014

Botting, Fred. "Flight of the Heroine." *Postfeminist Gothic*, edited by Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 170–85. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230801301_13

Braidotti, Rosi. *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Polity, 2002.

Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity, 2013.

Chaplin, Sue. "Ann Radcliffe and Romantic-era Fiction." *Ann Radcliffe, Romanticism and the Gothic*, edited by Dale Townshend and Angela Wright, Cambridge UP, 2014, pp. 203–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139507448.016

Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Manchester UP, 1993.

Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis. Second Edition*. Routledge, 2024. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003006756

Dev, Sukhmani. "'Conservative Makeup': A Performance of Gender in the Right Wing." *Identity Hunters*, 9 Apr. 2025, https://identityhunters.org/2025/04/09/conservative-makeup-a-performance-of-gender-in-the-right-wing/, accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

Fargeat, Coralie. "Before Coralie Fargeat Had Characters or Story, She Wrote This One Scene That Gave Birth to *The Substance*." Interview by Chris O'Falt. *IndieWire*, 10 Feb. 2025, https://www.indiewire.com/features/interviews/the-substance-sue-spinal-birth-scene-explained-1235090068/, accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

Ferrier, Aimee. "From David Lynch to Stanley Kubrick: The Movies Referenced within *The Substance*." *Far Out Magazine*, 11 Dec. 2024, https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/movies-referenced-in-the-substance/, accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

Halberstam, J. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Duke UP, 1995.

Heise-von der Lippe, Anya. "Introduction: Post/human/Gothic." *Posthuman Gothic*, edited by Anya Heise-von der Lippe, U of Wales P, 2017, pp. 1–18. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.14491659.5

Heller-Nicholas, Alexandra. "*The Substance* Is a Documentary." *Film International*, 3 Sept. 2024, https://filmint.nu/coralie-fargeat-the-substance-is-a-documentary-alexandra-heller-nicholas/, accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

Hogle, Jerrold E. "Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture." *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, edited by Jerrold E. Hogle, Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521791243.001

Ide, Wendy. "*The Substance* Review—Demi Moore is Fearless in Visceral Feminist Body Horror." *The Guardian*, 22 Sept. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/sep/22/the-substance-review-demi-moore-is-fearless-in-visceral-female-body-horror-coralie-fargeat, accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

Jayarajah, Chrissy. "*The Substance* and the Pursuit of Perfection." *BJPsych Bulletin*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2025, p. 215. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjb.2025.13

McRobbie, Angela. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. Sage, 2009.

Oscar, Sara, and Cherine Fahd. "There Is No Future for Ageing Women: How *The Substance* Uses Body-horror in a Feminist Critique." *The Conversation*, 27 Sept. 2024, https://theconversation.com/there-is-

no-future-for-ageing-women-how-the-substance-uses-body-horror-in-a-feminist-critique-239729, accessed 19 Mar. 2026. https://doi.org/10.64628/AA.qqtuppy76

Sheenan, Paul. "Posthuman Bodies." *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, edited by David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, Cambridge UP, 2015, pp. 245–60. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781107256668.017

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. Aerie, 1988.

Shildrick, Margrit. "The Self's Clean and Proper Body." *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey A. Weinstock, U of Minnesota P, 2020, pp. 303–29. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvtv937f.20

Spooner, Catherine, and Fred Botting. "Introduction: Monstrous Media/Spectral Subjects." *Monstrous Media/spectral Subjects: Imaging Gothic From the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, edited by Fred Botting and Catherine Spooner, Manchester UP, 2015, pp. 1–11. https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719089770.003.0001

The Substance. Directed by Coralie Fargeat, performances by Demi Moore and Margaret Qualley, Working Title Films, 2024.

Wolfe, Cary. *What is Posthumanism?* U of Minnesota P, 2010. https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452922751

Yeo, Dennis. "Being Virtual: The True (Posthu)man Show," *Posthuman Gothic*, edited by Anya Heise-von der Lippe, U of Wales P, 2017, pp. 199–214. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.14491659.16

Agnieszka Łowczanin is Associate Professor in the Department of British Literature and Culture at the University of Lodz, Poland. Her academic interests focus on the politics, poetics, and paradoxes of the Gothic. She has co-edited two volumes of essays, *All that Gothic* (2014) and *Gothic Peregrinations* (2019), and authored a monograph, *A Dark Transfusion: The Polish Literary Response to Early English Gothic. Anna Mostowska Reads Ann Radcliffe* (2018). Her current project is a co-edited collection on Polish Gothic for the University of Wales Press.

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6994-4593

agnieszka.lowczanin@uni.lodz.pl

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.21

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Anja Mrak
University of Ljubljana

Magical Realism and a Feminist Narrative Technique: Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*

Abstract

This essay examines magical realism as a narratological strategy within feminist literary theory. It argues that the critical potential of magical realism lies not only in its themes but in formal techniques that destabilise naturalised ideological structures. Three key strategies are identified—literalisation, excentric focalisation, and "third time"—showing how they expose the contingency of gender identities, heteronormativity, and historical authority. Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* is analysed as a case study of feminist uses of magical realism. The essay demonstrates that the novel materialises metaphor, privileges marginal perspectives, and disrupts linear temporality to recast ideological constructs of gender and sexuality. Attention is given to the displaced phallic signifier, gender performativity, and the parody of heroic masculinity. The essay concludes that magical realism is not inherently subversive; its critical force resides in the formal possibilities it opens for reconfiguring social norms. *The Passion* exemplifies how magical realist form can serve as a feminist narratological repertoire, creating spaces of ambiguity, plurality, and resistance to universalising claims.

Keywords: magical realism, feminism, narratology, Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: The author acknowledges the financial support of the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P6-0239). **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 1 July 2025. Verified: 22 Mar. 2026. Accepted: 23 Mar. 2026.

MAGICAL REALISM: DEFINITIONS, CRITERIA, AND FEMINIST REFRAMING

Magical realism has long occupied a prominent position in literary scholarship, most frequently discussed in relation to Latin American and postcolonial contexts. Canonical readings have framed it as a narrative mode through which writers from cultural, political, and geographic margins articulate alternative epistemologies and contest dominant aesthetic regimes. This critical lineage was symbolically reinforced by the 1982 Nobel Prize awarded to Gabriel García Márquez, whose *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is often positioned as the paradigmatic magical realist text. Yet despite its subsequent global circulation, the theoretical vocabulary of magical realism has remained largely anchored in postcolonial paradigms. Far less attention has been paid to how its narrative strategies can be mobilised within feminist literary projects, particularly in European contexts.

This essay argues that magical realism offers a productive narratological framework for feminist writing, not merely at the level of thematic representation but through formal strategies that render ideological structures perceptible and open to interrogation. Feminist literature has long confronted structures of marginalisation, patriarchal discourse, and heteronormative regulation, with questions of bodily autonomy, gendered subjectivity, and symbolic exclusion central to its critical project. What remains comparatively undertheorised, however, is the narratological dimension through which these political concerns are formally embedded in literary texts. While feminist criticism has extensively addressed representational questions, less attention has been paid to how narrative form itself participates in the production, destabilisation, or reconfiguration of ideological norms. At this juncture, magical realism proves especially generative: at its intersection with feminist writing, specific textual mechanisms emerge through which binary thinking is unsettled and the construction of the feminine as the Other—defined in opposition to a universalised masculine subject—is revealed as contingent rather than natural. By enabling critique to operate through narrative logic, structure, and epistemological organisation rather than theme alone, magical realism furnishes feminist writing with formal tools for interrogating naturalised systems of power.

Magical realism is best understood as the copresence of two ontological codes—a realist code and a naturalised supernatural code—held in nonhierarchical tension. Unlike the fantastic, which thematises hesitation and demands a choice between rational and supernatural explanations (Todorov), magical realism integrates the magical as an unproblematic fact for both narrator and focaliser, resolving the logical

antinomy through authorial reticence (Chanady 12). As Wendy B. Faris observes, magical realism introduces "an irreducible element that is unexplainable according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated by modern, post-enlightenment empiricism" (102). The supernatural is narrated with the same epistemic weight as the realistic, producing a fictional world in which contradictory systems of meaning coexist without hierarchical resolution.

Amaryll Beatrice Chanady's structuralist model identifies three defining criteria: the coexistence of two codes of reality, the resolution of the logical antinomy, and narratorial reticence (23–25). These mechanisms ensure that the supernatural is naturalised within the fictional world, presented not as rupture or hallucination but as ordinary fact. Stephen Slemon similarly emphasises that the contradictory systems at work in magical realist texts "never manage to arrange themselves into any kind of hierarchy," foregrounding their dialogic interaction (410). Together, these accounts establish magical realism as a narrative mode that resists epistemological closure and privileges simultaneity over exclusion.

While these frameworks remain foundational for defining magical realism, their emphasis on descriptive criteria does not fully account for the broader ideological work the mode may perform. They clarify how the supernatural is integrated into realist narrative structures, yet they remain largely silent on how such integration may be mobilised to interrogate dominant systems of meaning. In this sense, they explain the mechanics of magical realism without fully engaging its critical potential as a narratological strategy.

Kenneth S. Reeds addresses part of this limitation by arguing that Chanady's criteria require expansion. He observes that the presence of the neofantastic[1] alone is insufficient for a text to be classified as magical realism: whereas the neofantastic employs naturalised magic to explore the relationship between fiction and nature, magical realism deploys it to "recast history" (130). Reeds's intervention thus shifts the focus from structural description toward historiographic function, foregrounding the mode's capacity to intervene in dominant narratives of the past.

Building on this historiographic expansion, the present essay extends the scope of magical realism further by situating it within feminist narratology. While Reeds does not address gender or sexuality explicitly,

[1] Reeds adheres to Todorov's definition of the fantastic, which requires some reservation on the part of the reader when faced with a supernatural event within a realistic narrative (82). Unlike 19th-century fantastic fiction, where "the magical event occurs outside an otherwise realistic narration and, having not been incorporated in a verisimilar way, it can only be explained as a marvellous addition to the real world" (Reeds 13), the neofantastic naturalises the supernatural.

his emphasis on recasting history opens a conceptual space for examining how magical realist strategies may also be mobilised to recast ideological constructs governing gender, sexuality, and authority. For this reason, I propose the term "recasting of ideological constructs" to describe texts that deploy magical realism not only to challenge historical narratives but also to expose and destabilise normative frameworks of social power. This reframing positions magical realism as a narratological repertoire whose critical force lies in its capacity to destabilise epistemological hierarchies and reveal the constructedness of social norms—an effect that proves especially generative for feminist literary practice.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES OF MAGICAL REALISM

Jeanette Winterson's work occupies a distinctive position in late 20th-century British fiction and has attracted extensive theoretical attention from feminist, lesbian-feminist, queer-theoretical, and postmodernist perspectives (see Makinen; Andermahr; Onega; Front; Seaboyer). Within these paradigms, Winterson's *The Passion* has been read as experimental romance, metafictional historiography, psychoanalytic allegory, or mythic rewriting, with sustained attention devoted to its interrogation of gender binaries, heteronormative desire, and historical authority. Yet the recurrent presence of the fantastic and magical has been consistently absorbed into these interpretive frameworks as symbol, metaphor, or stylistic excess. The critical tendency has thus been to privilege thematic and ideological analysis over sustained formal theorisation, implicitly treating the fantastic as secondary to postmodern play or feminist content rather than as a structuring principle of narrative organisation.

The most sustained engagement with magical realism in *The Passion* remains Barbara Klonowska's discussion in *Contaminations: Magic Realism in Contemporary British Fiction* (see also Lodge; Edelson). In this account, *The Passion* is cautiously positioned as a hybrid or metaphorical variant rather than as a paradigmatic instance of magical realism. Anchored in a recognisably realistic framework yet punctuated by fantastic elements, the novel is read as deploying what are described as "exaggerated metaphors with which we usually describe such phenomena as love, passion or desire" (Klonowska 237). The magical thus appears quantitatively limited but structurally consequential: not ornamental, but constitutive in its capacity to produce defamiliarisation and unsettle epistemic certainty without fully reconfiguring the narrative's ontological ground. Ultimately, the fantastic is located in language itself, since in "*The Passion*, the 'magical' has its source in speech" (237). While this interpretation productively

foregrounds the linguistic and defamiliarising dimensions of Winterson's narrative, it construes the magical primarily as metaphorical deviation rather than as a structuring narratological logic—a limitation that motivates the alternative formal framework developed here. Before turning to a close reading of the novel, this section outlines three narratological techniques that are central—though not exclusive—to magical realism and particularly productive for feminist literary projects: literalisation, the use of an excentric focaliser, and the temporal structure known as "third time." These techniques do not merely embellish the narrative surface. Rather, they function as mechanisms through which ideological structures are rendered visible, destabilised, and reconfigured. By manipulating language, perspective, and temporality, magical realist texts create conditions under which dominant categories—such as gender, sexuality, and historical authority—can be examined as contingent constructs rather than naturalised givens.

Literalisation involves a movement from abstraction to material presence, whereby metaphorical, psychological, or affective states acquire physical form within the narrative world. Rather than treating language as a transparent medium that merely reflects reality, this strategy foregrounds the materiality of signification itself. Literalisation probes the fundamental laws governing figurative language and challenges the conventional distinction between literal and metaphorical meaning. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive theory of metaphor, critical accounts of magical realism conceptualise literalisation as a strategy that challenges the Western hierarchy privileging literal meaning over figurative expression (Hegerfeldt 236). As Anne C. Hegerfeldt observes, this strategy "close[s] the gap between the word and the world" (261–62), enabling magical realist texts to expose the ideological investments concealed within claims of linguistic and epistemological transparency and to position metaphor not as ornament but as a structuring principle of reality itself. Within feminist writing, this strategy proves particularly generative, as it enables abstract structures of power, such as gender norms, desire, or symbolic authority, to be rendered materially legible.

The second defining technique of magical realism is its distinctive handling of narrative perspective through what Hegerfeldt terms the excentric focaliser, adopting Linda Hutcheon's terminology. Hegerfeldt highlights the importance of focalisation in magical realist texts, noting that such narratives frequently privilege marginal or socially excluded perspectives (118). These focalisers may include women, children, racialised or sexualised subjects, or figures positioned outside dominant epistemological frameworks. Importantly, the excentric focaliser does not simply reverse the hierarchy between centre and margin. Rather, this

narrative position exposes the epistemological logic that produces such hierarchies in the first place.

Through excentric focalisation, dominant narratives are rendered contingent rather than universal. Constructs of Otherness are revealed as discursive effects rather than ontological facts, and claims to neutrality or objectivity are destabilised. The excentric focaliser thus opens a space for alternative modes of knowledge and self-articulation, allowing subjects traditionally positioned as marginal to function as epistemic agents. In feminist magical realist writing, this technique enables a critique of patriarchal authority that operates through narrative positioning rather than explicit opposition.

The third narratological technique central to magical realism is its distinctive temporal structure. Magical realist texts frequently resist linear, teleological models of historical time, replacing them with what Brenda Cooper terms "third time." This hybrid temporal mode allows linear, cyclical, mythical, and subjective temporalities to coexist within the same narrative space (Cooper 32–33, 75, 137–38, 145–46). Time is no longer presented as a neutral backdrop or progressive continuum but emerges as a construct that is fragmented, relative, and susceptible to manipulation. This temporal instability does not signal a withdrawal from history or political engagement. On the contrary, it facilitates a critical reengagement with the mechanisms through which history is selected, narrated, and authorised. By disrupting causal progression and chronological certainty, magical realist temporality exposes historical narratives as products of perspective and power rather than as transparent records of events.

Taken together, these three narratological techniques—literalisation, excentric focalisation, and "third time"—enable feminist writers to integrate formal experimentation with political critique. Magical realism thus constructs a narrative environment in which ideological assumptions can be examined at the level of structure rather than merely contested at the level of representation. Against this theoretical backdrop, *The Passion* emerges not merely as an illustrative example but as a text that calls for renewed critical attention.

This essay intervenes in existing scholarship by developing a magical realist narratological framework for reading *The Passion*. While the novel has frequently been interpreted as lyrical historical metafiction, a postmodern romance, or a text replete with mythological and religious symbolism, such approaches often treat its magical elements as isolated motifs or metaphors. In contrast, this study argues that magical realism in *The Passion* operates as a systematic narrative mode structured through three interrelated techniques: literalisation (the embodied materialisation of metaphor in figures such as the webbed feet and the detachable heart),

excentric focalisation (via the marginal epistemic positions of Henri and Villanelle), and composite temporality (through the disruption of linear Napoleonic history by cyclical, mythical, and affective time).

Taken together, these formal strategies do not simply embellish the narrative but function as epistemological strategies. They suspend hierarchical distinctions between the real and magical, destabilise the normative regimes of knowledge and desire, and expose the contingency of patriarchal authority. By foregrounding narrative form as the primary site of political and conceptual work, this article reframes *The Passion* as a feminist magical realist text. Methodologically, it integrates close narratological analysis with feminist epistemology to show how the narrative form itself becomes a means of probing ideological assumptions. In doing so, the article advances a theoretical model that understands magical realism not as a culturally bounded aesthetic category, but as a set of feminist narrative resources capable of sustaining multiplicity without closure and reconfiguring relations between history and subjectivity. As such, it contributes a new framework to Winterson scholarship and positions the magical as central, rather than peripheral, to her narrative practice.

READING *THE PASSION*: POLYSEMY AND MYTH

The Passion resembles a lyrical novel, a quality signalled by the naming of its protagonist, Villanelle—a name that also refers to a French poetic form. The poem's two refrains correspond to the novel's dual narrative perspective, with Villanelle and Henri alternating as excentric focalisers, each tested in their respective quests to uncover the source of their passion. The title is polysemous, evoking both desire and the Christian tradition of Christ's Passion, intertwining metaphors of (un)requited love with religious symbolism while situating them beyond heteronormative constraints.

Winterson's narrative mechanisms align with magical realist structures, including ontological duality, literalisation, and composite temporality. Villanelle and Henri function as excentric focalisers, striving to transcend the ideological and social frameworks into which they are embedded. Neofantastic elements, such as miraculous occurrences and symbolic distortions, open alternative possibilities for self-actualisation outside traditional confessional or societal norms. The narrative challenges constructs of femininity, masculinity, and sexual orientation. Archetypal motifs, including the love triangle and the pursuit of the beloved, are structurally doubled: narrative voices exchange positionalities, and relationships extend beyond heterosexual norms to include homosexual connections.

This structural duality is intensified by intertwining individual love stories with the historical backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15). Napoleon is depicted ambivalently—as an object of blind adoration and simultaneously a caricature of vanity who "greedily devours poultry"—reflecting the destructive potential of authority and unrealised aspirations. Beyond its historical framework, the novel draws on mythology and courtly love, including the quest for the Holy Grail. Alternating perspectives and spatial fragmentation construct a diverse narrative world, while the open ending subverts traditional love-adventure narratives.

Winterson opens the novel with a quotation from *Medea*, which, as Susana Onega notes, prefigures the parallel quests of Henri and Villanelle, each driven by a destructive desire to possess something unique—Jason seeks the Golden Fleece, Medea his love (56). Beyond the quest motif, the quotation resonates with a deeper theme: the female figure who, through extreme actions, challenges heteronormative conceptions of family and the assumption that women exist solely as mothers. Medea's act of filicide disrupts roles presented as natural and self-evident within patriarchal society. Building on this foundation, Winterson frames her lyrical novel as a critical exploration of rigid patterns of femininity and masculinity, signalling from the outset her central theme: the transgression of traditional gender roles.

THE DISLOCATED PHALLUS AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF GENDER

The central neofantastic element[2] in the narrative is the webbing on Villanelle's feet, traditionally reserved for the male offspring of Venetian boatmen: "There never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen" (Winterson 51). By assigning this apparently masculine trait to a female body, Winterson foregrounds the constructed nature of sexual difference. The midwife's attempt to "castrate" the newborn Villanelle by cutting the connecting skin between her toes (52) reveals an effort to preserve the symbolic order, while the indestructible webbing resists this intervention. Villanelle's stepfather, by contrast, relies on the inviolability of gender norms—"it won't be the feet he'll be interested in" (52)—exposing how social roles are naturalised independently of the

[2] Throughout the novel, various neo-fantastic elements are interspersed, such as: Henri's roommate possessing extraordinary vision, allowing him to see more than thirty kilometres away; an icicle with a golden chain that does not melt for several months, even in the heat of the Venetian summer; a tapestry capable of binding a person to it; memories of one's own birth; and walking on water.

material body. A bodily feature understood as "naturally" male becomes symbolically potent when transposed onto a female body. Winterson uses this displacement to explore the discursive gendering of bodies and the instability of the categories "masculine" and "feminine." As Chloë Taylor Merleau notes, Villanelle becomes "a female with a male body part of mythic status, a sort of displaced phallus," which renders her gender ambivalent or hybrid (98).

Judith Butler's critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis provides the theoretical support for this interpretation. She challenges the notion of the phallus as "the privileged bodily signifier," contending that it can be appropriated and recirculated without an intrinsic connection to the penis (qtd. in Salih 84). Defining the phallus as "the phantasmatic rewriting of an organ or body part," Butler makes clear that no single bodily organ is its necessary signifier (*Bodies* 81). On this basis, the conceptual separation of phallus and penis exposes the arbitrariness of the symbolic patriarchal order, in which the phallus nevertheless uses the penis as its "naturalized instrument and sign" (*Gender Trouble* 135). By destabilising the phallus/penis dyad, Butler uncovers the masculinist and heterosexist privilege embedded in phallic symbolism and demonstrates that gendered meanings are discursively produced rather than naturally given.

Winterson's relocation of the phallic signifier to Villanelle's webbed feet parodically demonstrates how any arbitrarily selected body part may become the bearer of socially constructed power. Transforming the female body highlights that the categories of masculinity and femininity, typically taken as biological givens, are ideological and political. The fact that Villanelle's "phallic" sign remains hidden by footwear while she is still barred from becoming a boatwoman (Winterson 53) underscores that gendered social position is grounded not in visibility of the body, but in normative discourse. The novel thus interrogates how the phallocentric symbolic order legitimises the supposedly "natural" binary division of the sexes.

The setting of Venice further reinforces this challenge. As a mutable city "where things change" (Winterson 113), Venice symbolises fluidity and the instability of classification. As a city of masks, it foregrounds disguise and cross-dressing, exposing the illusion of an original core of sexual identity (Burcar 56). Gender becomes performative play: "trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant facepaste" (Winterson 54). In line with Butler's theory of performativity, gender emerges as a repeated practice that must be constantly maintained within a heterosexual matrix, and is therefore fragile and nonessential.

Biblical allusions intensify this critique: "That I cross-dress? So did Our Lord, so do the priests" (Winterson 72). Masculinity and femininity

are shown to be historically variable and relational rather than natural categories. As Burcar observes, once restrictive representations imposed by patriarchy are dismantled, gender can be enacted in multiple ways and combinations (58). Through disguise and relational mobility, as will become evident below, Villanelle refuses rigid gender norms and exposes the authoritarian character of idealised gender roles. Combined with the displaced phallus, these strategies reveal the instability of gender categories and the unattainability of normative gender.

SUBVERSION OF HETERONORMATIVITY AND EXCENTRIC FOCALISATION

The heteronormative matrix is revealed as phantasmagoric: it sustains the appearance of reality on the surface while, at a deeper level, it is subject to upheaval and subversion. This corresponds to the logic of magical realism outlined earlier: the apparent stability of social reality coexists with its simultaneous destabilisation, and both remain in unresolved tension rather than being hierarchically ordered. The naturalisation of heteronormativity—echoing the refrain structure of the villanelle—turns back on itself through the two relationships into which Villanelle enters. In the first case, Winterson reworks the traditional heterosexual love story by integrating a relationship between two women into a love triangle. Disguised as a man, Villanelle falls in love with a married woman whom she names the Queen of Spades, and, while still in disguise, begins a romantic relationship. At this point, heterosexuality functions as a mask, an external appearance that does not correspond to the reality of the narrative subjects: "'She thought I was a young man. I was not . . . What was it about me that interested her?'" (Winterson 65–66).

The moment of unmasking operates as a literalisation of gender performance. When Villanelle reveals her sex, the supposed shock fails to materialise—"'I'm a woman,' I said. . . . She smiled. 'I know'" (71). The revelation does not produce rupture, hesitation, or explanatory framing; instead, it is fully integrated into the novel's ontology. In terms of magical realist theory, the "contradiction" between biological sex and social gender is not resolved but naturalised in the narrative world, functioning analogously to the coexistence of two ontological codes. The heteronormative matrix, which legitimises only heterosexual desire, is therefore exposed as a construct rather than a given. This is precisely what the essay previously termed the recasting of ideological constructs: magical realist strategies render visible the artificiality of gender norms by integrating transgressive desire as ordinary narrative fact rather than as deviance.

A mirrored structure develops in Villanelle's relationship with the cook, who is gradually revealed as a paradigmatic representative of hegemonic masculinity. The cook embodies dominant Western masculine ideals associated with possession, profit, and instrumental rationality. He is a war profiteer, accumulating wealth by supplying meat and horses to the French army. His character is not merely thematically masculine but also functions as an ideological construct that the narrative exposes and ironises. Villanelle attracts him through her boyish appearance, and when he discovers she is a woman, he is satisfied rather than destabilised. Heterosexuality is thus performed, not assumed; it requires continual confirmation and is heavily dependent on outward signs.

Winterson stages here what feminist magical realism achieves at the level of excentric focalisation. The narrative perspective of Henri and Villanelle—figures positioned outside dominant masculine orders—renders the cook's masculinity contingent rather than natural. The patriarchal subject is not neutral but becomes an object of focalisation, exposed to critique. When Villanelle ultimately marries the cook after recognising the impossibility of her relationship with the Queen of Spades, the heteronormative matrix appears restored on the surface. However, it is simultaneously undermined from within: even the "central" representative of patriarchal order enacts gender norms only superficially. As Villanelle notes, "He has promised to keep me in luxury . . . provided I go on dressing as a young man in the comfort of our own home" (Winterson 63). Publicly, the couple performs normative heterosexuality; privately, the matrix fractures. Masculinity becomes dependent on props, costume, and repetition, aligning with Butler's understanding of gender as performative action rather than ontological essence.

Winterson humorously extends the heterosexual couple into a triad—"Just the three of us. Him, me and my codpiece" (96)—which again literalises metaphor. The codpiece is not merely symbolic of phallic authority but becomes a third member of the relationship. This literalisation exposes the artificiality of phallocentric power structures and demonstrates how magical realist narratology transforms ideological metaphors into material presences. Yet despite these cracks in heteronormativity, complete subversion does not occur. Power relations remain intact; Villanelle's agency toward the cook is limited, and relations of domination persist. Winterson therefore stages both the exposure and partial reassertion of the heteronormative matrix, aligning with magical realism's refusal of full ideological closure. Contradictory systems coexist without resolving into a new stable order—precisely the "nonhierarchical tension" theorised earlier.

Heteronormativity is constructed through a complex interweaving of social norms that regulate the enactment of individual identity

by defining "correct" and desirable patterns of behaviour linked to established constructs of femininity and masculinity. Subversion can occur only through action outside these prescribed frameworks, for, as Butler notes, "If gender is not tied to sex, either causally or expressively, then gender is a kind of action that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of sex" (*Gender Trouble* 143). Winterson, through Henri and Villanelle, interrogates rigid gender roles and foregrounds actions that escape confinement within prescribed categories. In the first part of Henri's narrative, we follow his blind and uncompromising devotion to Napoleon and his imperial ambitions, which, with each new battle and fallen comrade, push him toward a personal examination of the object of his desire. By situating much of the action against the backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars, Winterson engages with a domain traditionally regarded as exclusively masculine and thus strongly gendered, parodying both the concept of war itself and the cultural memory of warfare.

The parody of Henri as a conventional war hero is staged from the outset: contrary to his desire to become a military drummer, he is assigned the role of a cook's assistant. As one of the more significant functions in battle, the drummer's role symbolises order and rhythm, introducing measured cadence into the aggression and chaos of combat, whereas the world of the kitchen represents a subordinate and domestic space in contrast to the battlefield. Similarly, on the battlefield, Henri operates in a function diametrically opposed to that of others—while others kill, he saves: "He [Henri] told me, on the way home from Moscow, that he had been in the army eight years without so much as wounding another man. Eight years of battle and the worst he'd done was to kill more chickens than he could count" (Winterson 147). Winterson here parodies the masculinist association between war and agency by presenting a protagonist whose proximity to violence does not culminate in heroic action. Henri's masculinity is defined not by conquest but by endurance, obedience, and unexamined devotion—particularly to Napoleon.

From the timelessness of the war in which they are caught, where the present is constant and the future becomes unreachable (Winterson 86), Henri decides to desert, and Villanelle joins him. Their meeting establishes a new love triangle—or an analogous love quadrangle. Henri redirects his passion for Napoleon toward Villanelle, who is already caught between her husband and her unrequited love for the Queen of Spades. From the Moscow winter, they journey back to Venice. Their odyssey represents not only a geographical return but also a symbolic trajectory toward self-realisation and the reclamation of desire. From the outset, Villanelle assumes initiative, signalling a displacement of traditional gender roles. As

Burcar observes, albeit in the context of children's literature, adventure narratives often reinforce phallocentric gender patterns, where the female character "is the one who is marginalized and functions as a lack, upon whose shoulders it is only possible to construct the heroic image of a self-sufficient and autonomously acting" male character (87). In contrast, Villanelle assumes decisive authority: without her linguistic knowledge, navigational skills, and strategic acumen, neither she nor Henri, together with Henri's fellow deserter, would have survived the journey. Winterson thus foregrounds the female protagonist as an active, capable agent, subverting conventional adventure-hero paradigms.

Archetypal adventure narratives also posit the heroine as a reward: alongside treasure or secret knowledge, the hero encounters the woman, who is either rescued and integrated into the narrative conclusion or waits passively for his return. Her powerlessness contrasts with the male hero's courage and ingenuity, legitimising his claim over both the treasure and her person. Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, underscores this dynamic: "The motif of the difficult task as prerequisite to the bridal bed has spun the heroic deeds of all time and all the world" (318). Winterson's subversion, however, reconfigures the gendered economy of heroism: Villanelle is neither passive nor supplementary; she actively shapes the course of the adventure and the outcomes of desire, undermining the traditional symbolic alignment of male heroism with mastery and female marginality. Through this strategy, the novel stages a critique of heteronormative and phallocentric structures embedded in classical adventure narratives, aligning with Butler's understanding of gender as performative and socially constructed.

RECASTING DESIRE, LITERALISATION OF THE HEART, AND THE REFUSAL OF CLOSURE

Villanelle and Henri ultimately arrive in Villanelle's native Venice, which again places Henri in a dependent position, as he does not continue his journey to his birthplace in France. The mythological return to the point of origin therefore fails to conform to traditional gendered schemata: it is not the male hero who returns home and claims his reward but Villanelle who directs the narrative trajectory. By consciously choosing to step outside the heteronormative matrix, she mobilises precisely the kind of recasting of ideological constructs central to the magical realist logic outlined above. In the idiom of courtly love, she asks Henri to perform a quest and reclaim her lost heart, taken by the Queen of Spades. Winterson here rewrites two medieval motifs: the quest for the Holy Grail and the topos

of heart consumption. Crucially, the loss of the heart is not metaphorical but literalised,[3] moving from abstraction into material presence—Henri places his hand on her chest and "[can] feel nothing" (Winterson 116). Literalisation, a central magical realist technique, renders desire and emotional dispossession physically legible, collapsing the hierarchy between figurative and literal meaning.

In the subsequent quest, Henri searches through the Queen of Spades' house until he finds the heart preserved in glass. He completes the heroic task, but the logic of patriarchal romance is subverted: the recovered heart does not function as a reward for the male protagonist. Instead, Villanelle consumes her own heart, a grotesque and cannibalistic act through which she reclaims control over her emotional life—her heart is both literally and figuratively returned to herself. The feminine subject is not positioned as prize, but as agent who reclaims sovereignty over desire. This scene exemplifies how magical realism enables feminist narration not only thematically but formally: literalisation exposes emotional dependence as a structure of power and reconfigures it.

The *Odyssey* allusion further reinforces this subversion. Henri discovers an unfinished tapestry depicting Villanelle; finishing it would imprison her within a fixed narrative of love and possession, just as Penelope's tapestry is tied to marriage. By refusing closure, Winterson disrupts the teleological drive of the romance plot. Here the temporality of the novel approaches what has earlier been defined as "third time": mythic, cyclical, and subjective temporalities coexist, undermining linear progression toward marriage or resolution. Time becomes a field in which patriarchal narrative expectations are suspended rather than fulfilled.

The transformation of conventional adventure romance reaches a climax in the novel's final episodes, where the metaphor of the heart resurfaces, but now shifts from the neofantastic to crude material realism. Villanelle is discovered by her aggressive former husband, and a violent chain of events ensues in which Henri kills a man for the first time, performing the act he had successfully avoided throughout his entire military service. The scene evokes a final combat with a monster:

> I remember he [the cook] leaned forward when she spat and tried to kiss her. I remember his mouth opening and coming towards her, his hands loosed from the boat side, his body bent. His hand scraped her breast. His mouth. His mouth is the clearest image I have. A pale pink mouth,

[3] The motif of the heart also appears among soldiers on the front. Henri describes how, in order to survive in war, one must necessarily renounce the heart, asserting, "When I say I lived with heartless men, I use the word correctly" (Winterson 83).

> a cavern of flesh and then his tongue, just visible like a worm from its hole. . . . I had the knife in my hand and I thrust it at his side. As he rolled I thrust it in his belly. (Winterson 127–28)

For the first time Henri acts decisively and uncompromisingly: "'You said he had no heart, Villanelle, let's see.' . . . I cut a triangle. . . . He had a heart" (128). This confrontation contrasts sharply with Villanelle's earlier magical realist literalisation of her own lost heart, highlighting the tension between symbolic and material registers. The cook's body becomes the site where moral and emotional significations are tested: "His heart was blue. Did you know hearts are blue? Not red at all. A blue stone in a red forest" (138). Whereas Villanelle's stolen heart materialised desire and autonomy in a magical realist mode, the cook's "heartlessness" is revealed as ideological rather than anatomical. The physical presence of his heart paradoxically underscores his ethical absence, marking a return from the fantastical to the crudely real while maintaining the coexistence of contradictory meanings. This juxtaposition exemplifies the nonhierarchical tension characteristic of magical realism, where literal and figurative realities intersect without collapsing into a single, resolved truth.

Although the scene recalls phallocentric narrative models—hero rescues woman from monster—the reward structure collapses. Henri avoids execution but is confined to the psychiatric hospital on San Servolo. The asylum functions as a space of suspended time, another instance of "third time": linear social time gives way to stasis, hallucination, and repetition. Henri retreats into an internalised version of the heteronormative matrix, sustaining imagined roles for himself and Villanelle. When she announces her pregnancy, he is unable to reconcile desire with the impossibility of normative closure and momentarily mirrors the violent cook: "He was silent and when we made love he put his hands to my throat and slowly pushed his tongue out of his mouth like a pink worm. . . . 'I'm your husband,' and he came leaning towards me, his eyes round and glassy and his tongue so pink" (Winterson 148). The pink worm imagery foregrounds not only phallic symbolism but also Henri's recognition of his proximity to the violent masculine Other. As Seaboyer argues, it is the collapse of this boundary that returns to haunt him (503).

Henri ultimately refuses the heroic role offered to him when Villanelle proposes escape: "Was she mad? I'd have to kill again. I couldn't do that, not even for her" (Winterson 152). This decision not to kill again and his subsequent life within the asylum expose the limits of his subversion: he cannot step fully outside the ideological frame he recognises as constraining. The adoption of the nameless bird—"I won't give it a name. I'm not Adam" (156)—marks a symbolic rejection of patriarchal acts of naming and

creation, where naming entails possession and asymmetry. By refusing to name, Henri breaks with the patriarchal lineage embodied by Adam as the first man of the heteronormative matrix. Yet this insight remains confined within the institution. In Foucauldian terms, critique is contained within the category of madness, marginalised from the social order it interrogates.

Winterson therefore resists both romantic idealism and total renewal. The novel dismantles the narrative logic of reward, marriage, and heterosexual closure, yet it refuses to posit a new stable order in its place. Instead, it writes ambiguity into its conclusion. The open ending and the refusal of marriage as narrative telos split open the tyranny of the romance plot, producing a politics of multiplicity and indeterminacy (Diamond 114). The final sentence—"I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (Winterson 160)—returns us to authorial reticence. It foregrounds the constructedness of narrative while simultaneously invoking belief, holding scepticism and trust in unresolved tension. As throughout the novel, magical realism here operates not as decorative fantasy but as a narratological strategy through which gender norms, desire, and historical authority are exposed as contingent rather than natural.

CONCLUSION

A feminist narratological approach reveals that the novel's critical force resides not solely in theme but in narrative form. The copresence of magical and mundane establishes conditions under which epistemological hierarchies can be suspended. Literalisation materialises abstraction, exposing the arbitrariness of symbolic authority; excentric focalisation privileges marginal perspectives without romanticising them; and composite temporality disrupts teleological models of history, war, and desire. Together, these strategies demonstrate that gender norms and social roles are discursive products rather than natural givens.

Through this lens, *The Passion* shows how magical realism can serve as a narratological repertoire for feminist writing in European contexts. Villanelle's displaced phallic signifier, the mutable space of Venice, the parody of heroic masculinity, and the refusal of conventional romantic closure collectively destabilise notions of what is rational, natural, or universal. Importantly, Winterson does not propose a replacement system; instead, she enacts ambiguity, multiplicity, and incompleteness as critical values.

Magical realism is not intrinsically subversive; its power lies in the formal possibilities it affords: to naturalise contradiction and to destabilise narrative hierarchies without imposing new totalities. By enabling a recasting of structures governing gender, sexuality, and authority, *The*

Passion exemplifies how magical realist form facilitates feminist critique, operating simultaneously at the levels of narrative structure, embodiment, and epistemology. While this analysis focuses on a single text, it points to broader possibilities for comparative work on feminist magical realism beyond its traditional postcolonial frame.

Works Cited

Andermahr, Sonya. *Jeanette Winterson*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-11352-8

Burcar, Lilijana. *Novi val nedolžnosti v otroški literaturi. Kaj sporočata Harry Potter in Lyra Srebrousta?* Sophia, 2007.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge, 1993.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New World Library, 2008.

Chanady, Amaryll Beatrice. *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy*. Garland, 1985.

Cooper, Brenda. *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*. Routledge, 1998.

Diamond, Fleur. "The Mark of Desire: Rewriting the Romance and Lesbian-Feminist Textual Strategies." *Crossing Boundaries: Thinking Through Literature*, edited by Julie Scanlon and Amy Waste, Sheffield Academic P, 2001, pp. 112–20.

Edelson, Maria. "It May or May Not Be True. It Does Not Matter": (Magic) Realism and Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*." *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Litteraria Anglica*, no. 7, 2007, pp. 19–33.

Faris, Wendy B. "The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism." *Janus Head*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2002, pp. 101–19. https://doi.org/10.5840/jh20025225

Front, Sonia. *Transgressing Boundaries in Jeanette Winterson's Fiction*. Peter Lang, 2009. https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-653-00515-8

Hegerfeldt, Anne C. *Lies that Tell the Truth. Magic Realism Seen through Contemporary Fiction from Britain*. Rodopi, 2005. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401202831

Klonowska, Barbara. *Contaminations: Magic Realism in Contemporary British Fiction*. Maria Curie-Skłodowska UP, 2006.

Lodge, David. "Outrageous Things." *The New York Review of Books*, 29 Sept. 1988, pp. 25–26.

Makinen, Merja. *The Novels of Jeanette Winterson*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-80259-9

Onega, Susana. *Jeanette Winterson*. Manchester UP, 2006. https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719068386.001.0001

Reeds, Kenneth S. *What is Magical Realism? An Explanation of a Literary Style*. The Edwin Mellen P, 2013.

Salih, Sara. *Judith Butler*. Routledge, 2002. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203118641

Seaboyer, Judith. "Second Death in Venice: Romanticism and the Compulsion to Repeat in Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1997, pp. 483–509. https://doi.org/10.2307/1208976

Slemon, Stephen. "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse." *Magical Realism*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Duke UP, 1995, pp. 407–26. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw5w1.24

Taylor Merleau, Chloë. "Postmodern Ethics and the Expression of Differends in the Novels of Jeanette Winterson." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 26, no. 3/4, 2003, pp. 84–102. https://doi.org/10.2979/JML.2003.26.3-4.84

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Translated by Richard Howard, Cornell UP, 1973.

Winterson, Jeanette. *The Passion*. Penguin, 1988.

Anja Mrak works at the Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. She completed a PhD in literary studies, focusing on magical realism and feminist narrative techniques. Her research is mainly in feminist literary theory, gender studies, narratology, and contemporary feminist literature.
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1461-2211
anja.mrak@ff.uni-lj.si

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.22

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Mai Phuc Thinh
Duy Tan University, Vietnam

"I Wait by the Door Like I'm Just a Kid": Feminist Return in *Jane Eyre* and Taylor Swift's "tolerate it"

ABSTRACT

This article conceptualises feminist return as an affective structure that spans both 19th-century fiction and contemporary popular music. Focusing on Chapters 37–38 of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Taylor Swift's "tolerate it" (2020), the analysis explores how women navigate unequal attachments, negotiate recognition, and perform emotional labour within asymmetrical relationships. Rather than reading return as narrative closure or nostalgic repetition, the article approaches it through Sara Ahmed's account of affective orientations and Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism. These frameworks illuminate how emotions circulate across bodies and histories, shaping gestures of longing, waiting, overperformance, and the desire for reciprocity. In *Jane Eyre*, return operates as a feminist reconfiguration of relational life: Jane re-enters the scene of attachment with economic autonomy and affective agency, enabling a recalibration of intimacy grounded in mutual recognition. By contrast, Swift's lyric persona remains suspended within an affective impasse—performing meticulous care at a dinner table that becomes a theatre of misrecognition. Her return is cyclical rather than transformative, structured by diminishment, emotional overperformance, and a longing that is neither noticed nor reciprocated. Reading the two texts together highlights both historical continuities and divergences in women's emotional labour. Victorian scripts of endurance persist in contemporary intimacy, yet the possibility of feminist return emerges only when emotional labour is acknowledged and reciprocated. The comparison reveals how affective economies organise belonging and exclusion across time, and how feminist agency becomes thinkable when women refuse the conditions under which they are merely tolerated.

Keywords: feminist return, affect theory, emotional labour, *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, Taylor Swift, "tolerate it."

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 5 June 2025. Verified: 24 Mar. 2026. Accepted: 31 Mar. 2026.

INTRODUCTION

In many narratives of love and intimacy, women do not simply leave unequal attachments; they also return to them under altered emotional conditions. The concept of feminist return is understood here not simply as a movement back to an earlier attachment, but as a specifically gendered re-entry into a scene of intimacy, injury, or subordination under altered conditions of legibility, agency, and self-knowledge. Feminist return occurs when a subject revisits a prior structure of feeling and either reconfigures it on more reciprocal terms or exposes it as structurally unrecoverable. Rather than treating return as temporal nostalgia or narrative repetition, this article frames it through the circulatory logics of affect. Sara Ahmed's account of affective economies demonstrates how emotions acquire value as they circulate among bodies, objects, and histories, "sticking" to particular figures and shaping orientations toward them (11). Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism further clarifies why such returns persist even when attachments wound the subject: optimism draws one back to the object because it promises a cluster of potentialities even as the desired object threatens the subject's well-being. Read together, Ahmed and Berlant allow return to be understood as an affective structure through which scenes of longing, misrecognition, and suspended hope are revisited, tested, and, at times, transformed.

This framework illuminates unexpected affinities between *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Taylor Swift's "tolerate it" (2020). Though separated by more than a century, both texts centre on emotional labour, uneven recognition, and the ache of desiring reciprocity in relationships marked by hierarchy. *Jane Eyre* stages a 19th-century negotiation of love structured by gendered obligation, affective endurance, and self-respect, while "tolerate it" renders a contemporary version of the same dynamic: a woman who performs meticulous care before a partner who receives, but does not return, the gesture. Swift has explained that the song "tolerate it" was inspired by Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. In an interview with Apple Music discussing the songwriting process behind *evermore*, Swift notes that while reading the novel she was struck by the dynamic in which the husband merely "tolerates" his wife despite her attempts to please him, a tension that ultimately inspired the song's central emotional premise. However, this article invokes *Rebecca* only as contextual background; the analysis itself focuses on the affective dialogue between *Jane Eyre* and "tolerate it." As a foundational text in the Gothic tradition of female confinement, misrecognition, and emotional endurance, Brontë's novel provides the conceptual anchor for theorising feminist return. The analysis therefore focuses on *Jane Eyre* and Swift's song as dialogic articulations of women's affective negotiations across historical conditions.

While scholarship on *Jane Eyre* has examined its feminist, religious, and psychological dimensions, and recent cultural criticism has positioned Swift within contemporary debates on authorship, affect, and celebrity femininity, the present article offers a focused comparative account of these works through the shared affective structure of feminist return. To address possible concerns about an "arbitrary pairing," this article argues that the relationship between the two texts is not grounded in aesthetic similarity but in their shared affective architecture: both dramatise how women sustain, resist, and reinterpret emotional attachment when recognition fails. Accordingly, the article asks: how does *Jane Eyre* model a feminist return that reconfigures relational power? How does "tolerate it" represent a suspended or failed return, shaped by contemporary affective economies? And what does reading these works together reveal about the evolution of women's emotional labour—from Victorian moral endurance to 21st-century negotiations of visibility, exhaustion, and intimate disappointment? Through Ahmed and Berlant, this study conceptualises return as an affective method for thinking about how women navigate unequal attachments, and how those attachments become scenes of both injury and knowledge.

This comparison does not assume formal or historical equivalence between the two works. *Jane Eyre* is a Victorian novel, while "tolerate it" is a contemporary popular song; their differences in genre, narrative scale, and historical conditions remain significant. The present article therefore adopts a deliberately narrow focus on affect, rather than attempting a full account of form or historical context. It isolates the problem of female emotional labour, asymmetrical attachment, and recognition across the two texts, while bracketing other questions that would arise in a broader cross-period and cross-genre comparison.

AFFECTIVE ATTACHMENTS, FEMINIST RETURNS

This article approaches return as an affective structure rather than a narrative device, drawing on Sara Ahmed's theorisation of affective economies and Lauren Berlant's account of cruel optimism. For Ahmed, emotions do not reside in individuals but circulate across bodies and histories, shaping how subjects come to "take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others" (1). Return therefore marks a movement back into those accumulated impressions—what emotions "stick" (11), which scripts orient us toward certain attachments (12), and how prior affective investments continue to organise desire. Berlant sharpens this picture by arguing that "all attachments are optimistic" because the subject leans toward a cluster of

promises that remain partially unrealised (24). Return becomes a repetition of inhabiting a scene whose promise is continually deferred, yet necessary for maintaining hope. In both *Jane Eyre* and "tolerate it," return describes a pattern of coming back—emotionally, imaginatively, domestically—to a relational scene where recognition is longed for but inconsistently granted. Here, recognition refers less to formal social validation than to affective legibility: being responded to as a feeling subject whose care, presence, and desire register within relational life.

Within these returns, emotional labour emerges as the condition that sustains attachment. The term emotional labour is used here not in a narrowly sociological sense, but to describe the gendered work of sustaining intimacy, managing feeling, and making relational life habitable. It refers to the often invisible efforts through which women organise care, attention, and emotional stability within unequal attachments. Ahmed reminds us that emotions attach subjects to the very conditions of their subordination (12), producing gendered expectations in which women become the affective caretakers of relational life. In this framework, the emotional overperformance visible in both texts—Jane's careful management of Rochester's needs, Swift's speaker's choreographed attentiveness at the dinner table—reflects the labour of maintaining proximity within an asymmetrical structure. Berlant's account of the instability of reciprocity (27) helps illuminate why such labour persists even when reciprocity falters: the fantasy of recognition remains powerful precisely because it cannot be fully realised. Subjects therefore "make affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments" (25), suspending their own needs in order to preserve the promise of mutuality. This framework allows us to read both heroines not as passive sufferers but as agents negotiating the emotional economies that shape their conditions of belonging.

Rather than pairing *Jane Eyre* and "tolerate it" through plot or character equivalence, this article pairs them through shared affective formations—longing, waiting, overperformance, asymmetrical recognition, and the desire for mutuality. Ahmed's account of relational "towardness" (8) explains the persistent reaching exhibited by both Jane and Swift's speaker; their emotional orientation is a pulling-forward toward a loved object that does not fully return their gesture. Waiting in both texts reflects what Ahmed elsewhere describes as investment that deepens precisely when return is withheld (131). Meanwhile, Berlant's notion of cruel optimism illuminates how this overperformance becomes a strategy of staying attached to a relational scene that both enables and erodes one's thriving (24–28). Across Brontë's 19th-century narrative and Swift's contemporary song, attachment becomes a labour of sustaining hope within an impasse—a present that "has weight" and suspends resolution

(Berlant 29). By grounding the analysis in these affective structures, the article illuminates how both texts render intimate life as a site of emotional endurance, hopeful repetition, and the fragile pursuit of reciprocity.

METHODOLOGY: FEMINIST AFFECTIVE PAIRING

The textual corpus comprises a deliberately delimited pair of affective sites: Chapters 37–38 of *Jane Eyre* and Taylor Swift's "tolerate it." The final chapters of Brontë's novel stage the moment of return, recognition, and relational recalibration, producing a dense emotional archive where gestures, pauses, and shifting power dynamics become narratively charged. These scenes illuminate how Victorian affective scripts frame feminine endurance as moral virtue. Swift's "tolerate it," treated as a narrative monologue rather than as a purely musical object, aligns with Sloan's demonstration that Swift's songwriting constitutes coherent narrative craft (11–26). Reading the lyrics as a voiced scene of emotional labour allows the two texts—despite distance in genre and period—to be placed under the same analytic lens.

This study employs a feminist affective close-reading method grounded in Ahmed's conceptualization of emotions as circulating across surfaces and bodies (10–11) and her analysis of love as a form of "towardness" sustained even when unreturned (124), producing ambivalence, dependency, and vulnerability (124–25). Ahmed's argument that waiting intensifies attachment further clarifies the dynamics of endurance central to both texts (131). Berlant's theorization of "cruel optimism," in which attachments to normative objects threaten flourishing (49) yet remain sustained through fantasy (49–50), provides an additional interpretive frame; her account of how subjects remain attached even in conditions that wear them out (28–29) helps illuminate the differing modes of emotional persistence enacted by Jane and by Swift's lyric speaker. Rather than analysing the entirety of *Jane Eyre*, the study focuses on Chapters 37–38 because they concentrate the novel's climactic scene of return and recognition, offering a high-density affective threshold where relational power, vulnerability, and reciprocity are renegotiated. The analysis attends to micro-emotions, silences, bodily orientations, tonal shifts, and affective residues that signal how each text stages negotiations of recognition, longing, and self-preservation. McNutt's analysis of Swift's paratextual authorship supports treating her lyric persona as a culturally shaped, gendered narrative subject (72–91).

The logic of pairing *Jane Eyre* with "tolerate it" is grounded in the continuity and transformation of affective scripts that structure feminine

relational labour rather than in aesthetic resemblance. Victorian emotional economies that valorise women's endurance circulate into contemporary pop culture, where emotional over-investment is reframed as authenticity or devotion. This study does not propose that Swift rewrites Brontë; instead, it traces how long-standing structures of attachment—what Berlant terms cruel optimism—continue to shape women's affective negotiations across historical contexts. Reading the two works together reveals how the cultural politics of emotional labour migrate from 19th-century fiction to 21st-century popular music, showing both continuity and reconfiguration in how women navigate asymmetrical care and desire for recognition.

THE AFFECTIVE SCENE OF RETURN IN *JANE EYRE*

Jane's return to Ferndean unfolds as an affective crossing that combines risk, longing, and the suspended breath of recognition. Ferndean is not merely a setting but an emotional landscape: "a desolate spot" buried in the woods (Brontë 517), a site of isolation that mirrors Rochester's internal ruin. Jane reaches it "just ere dark . . . cold gale, and continued small penetrating rain" (517), a meteorological register that amplifies the precarity of return. The thickness of the timber—"you could see nothing of it, so thick and dark grew the timber" (517)—positions her arrival not as triumphant but as tentative movement into uncertainty, almost a misstep: "I thought I had taken a wrong direction and lost my way" (517). This geography of obscurity materialises the unresolved attachments she carries: love not yet secure, desire not yet reciprocated, fear not yet resolved. When the door opens and Rochester emerges—"a man without a hat" (518)—recognition becomes an affective jolt, a bodily interruption: "I stayed my step, almost my breath" (518). The moment is not romantic completion but painful intensity—"rapture . . . kept well in check by pain" (518)—capturing Ahmed's sense that emotions circulate between bodies, binding and unbinding at once. The return is thus an affective threshold: Jane comes back not to reclaim a promised future but to risk the possibility of it.

The force of recognition deepens when Jane confronts Rochester's suffering. His "strong and stalwart contour" remains (518), but the transformation is written on his face—"desperate and brooding" (518)—and in the animal metaphors that signal wounded dignity: "some wronged and fettered wild beast," "the caged eagle . . . whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished" (518). Rochester's blindness creates a condition of radical vulnerability: "all to him was void darkness" (518), and he reaches out futilely to "gain an idea of what lay around him" but meets

"vacancy still" (518). Recognition, here, is not only about knowing Jane—it is about being known and felt again in a world that has turned opaque. When he demands, "'Who is this? Who is this?'" (520) and finally pleads, "'be perceptible to the touch or I cannot live!'" (521), affect becomes survival. His despair turns into trembling recognition when he touches her fingers—"'Her very fingers!'" (521)—and the reunion erupts with the intensities of living presence: "'In truth?—in the flesh? My living Jane?'" (521). Yet immediacy does not erase suffering: he fears she is a dream—"'I always woke and found it an empty mockery'" (521). Recognition thus functions as affective healing, a reconstitution of relational life after ruin. The sightless Rochester sees through touch, and Jane's voice, described as "'all the melody on earth . . . concentrated in my Jane's tongue'" (528), becomes the medium through which he re-enters the world. The mutual recognition is not simply romantic but reparative—an act that repairs the broken attachments that once forced them apart.

In the intensities of return, Jane becomes an affective labourer—one who gives, attends, and heals—but crucially not at the cost of erasing herself. When Rochester laments, "'I am no better than the old lightning-struck chestnut-tree'" (535), Jane responds with counter-affect: "'You are no ruin . . . plants will grow about your roots'" (535). She offers emotional repair without submitting to self-sacrifice. Her affective labour is chosen, not imposed. This agency is anchored in her earlier declaration: "'No, sir! I am an independent woman now . . . I am my own mistress'" (522). Her inheritance grants her not only economic autonomy but relational equality. When she commits to staying—"'I will be your neighbour . . . your companion . . . to be eyes and hands to you'" (523)—it is a voluntary redistribution of care, not a subordinate role. Rochester fears she will feel "fatherly feelings" toward him (523) or descend into the position of a nurse, but Jane rejects this asymmetry. By the time we reach Chapter 38, her self-possession becomes the basis of partnership: "I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine" (543). This scene gestures toward a more reciprocal form of intimacy, though it remains shaped by the novel's Victorian domestic horizon. Their marriage is imagined as more reciprocal than the asymmetrical relations Jane rejects elsewhere, even if it does not entirely escape hierarchy—"We talk . . . all day long . . . all my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me" (543). Jane's affective labour therefore becomes a model of feminist agency: care as choice, not compliance; love as reciprocity, not duty.

Jane's return ultimately stages a feminist reconfiguration of relational life. She comes back not as the governess who once fled Thornfield in poverty and moral anguish, but as a woman who can say "Reader, I married him" (541)—a line as famous for its reversal of the male narrative gaze

as for its quiet assertion of authorship. Jane does not return merely to be tolerated; she returns under altered conditions of agency, recognition, and self-possession. Her earlier refusal of St. John—"'He is . . . cold as an iceberg.' . . . 'He wanted to marry me only because he thought I should make a suitable missionary's wife'" (534)—defines the boundaries of her feminist autonomy: she will not enter a marriage predicated on duty or utilitarian affection. With Rochester, by contrast, the return produces a relationship in which difference, disability, and gendered expectations are renegotiated under altered conditions of dependence. She becomes "his vision . . . his right hand" (543), a formulation that suggests a more reciprocal intimacy, even if that reciprocity remains marked by asymmetry. Rochester does not demand the sacrifice of self that St. John assumed; instead, he learns "tempered judgment with mercy" (544), accepting love not as domination but as grace. As they build a life where "perfect concord is the result" (543), the novel gestures toward a feminist alternative to Victorian marriage norms rather than resolving them completely. Jane's return thus rewrites the terms of belonging: not absorption into a husband's identity, not ascetic denial of desire, but a relational structure built on equality, chosen care, and emotional truth. It is the culmination of a trajectory in which she refuses every space where she is merely accommodated—every version of being "tolerated"—and claims instead a home shaped through mutual recognition, ethical intimacy, and shared becoming.

"TOLERATE IT": A FAILED OR SUSPENDED FEMINIST RETURN

The dominant affect in "tolerate it" is diminishment—the slow erosion of the self under the weight of asymmetrical attachment. The narrator's confession, "I wait by the door like I'm just a kid," crystallises the regression that love demands of her. This is not innocence but self-infantilisation, a deliberate shrinking of adult agency in hopes of eliciting attention. Affect here functions as a disciplinary force: to be loved, she must become smaller, quieter, easier. The repeated refrain "I sit and watch you" deepens this power imbalance, as her position shifts from partner to observer, from subject to spectator. She watches him "reading with your head low," "breathing with your eyes closed," absorbing him while he barely registers her presence. The emotional economy of the song reveals a subject who learns to calibrate herself downward—less need, less volume, less demand—in the desperate belief that smallness might be rewarded with affection. Yet even this conforming labour does not yield reciprocity; all she receives is toleration, a condition that can be read as

the cruel underside of recognition: being allowed to exist, but not being welcomed or desired. The narrator's self-diminishment is thus not a flaw but a strategy—an affective survival mechanism in a relationship that offers no secure ground for belonging.

If diminishment marks the narrator's internal state, emotional overperformance marks her external labour. "Use my best colors for your portrait" announces the gendered creative labour she pours into the relationship—she offers aesthetic devotion, imaginative attention, and expressive care that is neither reciprocated nor even acknowledged. The lyric "lay the table with the fancy shit" further captures this pattern of emotional overperformance, transforming a mundane act of domestic preparation into a ritual of affective display. Her performance is exhaustive: she greets him "with a battle hero's welcome," takes his "indiscretions . . . in good fun," and "polish[es] plates until they gleam and glisten." These gestures belong to what affect theorists identify as overperformance—the excessive giving meant to compensate for a partner who gives almost nothing in return. Her selfhood becomes a medium for his comfort; her emotional range narrows to anticipation, correction, silence, and readiness. This overperformance is also a rehearsal of gendered expectations: she choreographs devotion in the hope that love might be returned to her. But instead of celebration, she receives toleration, which transforms her emotional offerings into invisible labour. The song becomes a study in the exhaustion of affective overinvestment: the more she pours into the relationship, the more she disappears.

In the world of "tolerate it," the dinner table becomes the site of an elaborate affective theatre—a material space where invisible labour is staged, performed, and dismissed. The practice of "lay[ing] the table with the fancy shit" is not mundane housekeeping but a form of choreography: plates polished "until they gleam and glisten," colours chosen, gestures arranged, all for an audience of one who refuses to look. The table thus marks the paradox of her devotion: she creates beauty for someone who denies her emotional visibility. Sitting across from him, "watch[ing] you tolerate it," she is both performer and witness to her own diminishing value. The table is where relational asymmetry becomes undeniable—where he eats, reads, and occupies space without registering her existence, while she enacts a ritual of care that becomes increasingly spectral. Her emotional offerings accumulate like props: the portrait colours, the polished plates, and the hearts she draws "in the byline." Each object attests to her desire to be chosen, but each is met with indifference. The table becomes a microcosm of the relationship's emotional architecture: she builds worlds—"I made you my temple, my mural, my sky"—while he consumes without acknowledgment. The lack of recognition transforms the table into an affective void, a place

where effort disappears and intimacy dissipates. In affect-theoretical terms, recognition functions as the mechanism through which emotional labour becomes socially legible; as Sara Ahmed suggests, emotions are relational, taking shape through orientations toward objects and through responses to others (8–10). The dinner table scene thus operates as the inverse of the Ferndean encounter in *Jane Eyre*. Whereas Jane's return culminates in reciprocal recognition that reconstitutes relational life, Swift's narrator experiences suffering without recognition, performing care in a space that gradually erases her presence.

Misrecognition structures the emotional core of the song. The narrator does not suffer because she is unseen, but because she is seen incorrectly—perceived, acknowledged, but not valued. The refrain "If it's all in my head tell me now" expresses the desire not merely for love but for interpretive clarity: she needs confirmation that the pain she feels is real, that his indifference is not a misreading. Yet the emotional cues are unmistakable: "You assume I'm fine," she says, emphasising not absence of perception but failure of understanding. This is not invisibility but distorted visibility, a condition in which she is present but reduced to an accessory. Even her devotion becomes misread: she is "begging for footnotes in the story of your life," forced to inhabit the margins while he writes the main narrative. Her question—"Where's that man who'd throw blankets over my barbed wire?"—reveals the cruel temporal misalignment: recognition once existed but has since decayed, leaving her suspended in the ache of relational memory. The song's emotional tension arises from this unstable recognition: he sees her labour, but only enough to tolerate it; he sees her presence, but not enough to respond. In affect theory terms, she is caught in a circuit where recognition is withheld, partial, or strategically delayed, creating a state of emotional depletion that she cannot exit without breaking the structure of the relationship itself.

Unlike *Jane Eyre*'s return to Ferndean—where recognition, reciprocity, and feminist agency emerge from mutual suffering—the narrator of "tolerate it" returns every night to the same scene of diminishment without structural transformation. She comes back to the table, to the doorway, to the role of observer, repeating gestures that neither shift the emotional landscape nor destabilise the relational hierarchy. This cyclical return reflects what Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism: the attachment to a situation that obstructs one's flourishing. The narrator clings to the hope that her love "should be celebrated," even as she acknowledges that he merely tolerates it. Her imagined departure—"What would you do if I . . . break free and leave us in ruins?"—stays hypothetical; the possibility of escape remains suspended, never actualized. Unlike Jane, who refuses to be tolerated by St. John and re-enters Rochester's life only when mutual

recognition is possible, Swift's narrator continues to inhabit a relationship that is emotionally asymmetrical and structurally unrepaired. Her return is not yet feminist in the reconfigurative sense developed here, because it demands self-erasure rather than autonomy and reinforces rather than renegotiates hierarchy; it sustains emotional labour without reciprocation. She ends as she begins: "I sit and watch you," a line that encapsulates the stuckness of affective circulation in a relationship where love becomes a diminishing resource. If Jane's return is an ethical realignment toward mutual becoming, the narrator of "tolerate it" remains trapped in a loop where affect binds but does not liberate. Her return is not a reclamation but a suspension—an affective holding pattern with no transformative horizon.

COMPARING THE TWO AFFECTIVE STRUCTURES

Both *Jane Eyre* and "tolerate it" are anchored in heterosexual relational dynamics structured by unequal emotional labour, even though they emerge from radically different historical contexts. Jane's attachment to Rochester is shaped by 19th-century constraints around class, gender, and propriety; Swift's narrator, by contrast, can be read as condensing a postfeminist emotional economy in which women's affective labour remains undervalued. In both, longing is not passive but labouring: a process of watching, interpreting, waiting, and offering oneself in the hope of recognition. Jane's vigilance—her "restless search of my heart" (Brontë 257)—echoes Swift's refrain of sitting, watching, and noticing "everything you do or don't do." This shared structure of anticipation reflects the gendered burdens of relational care staged across both texts. Both texts dramatize the psychic taxation of such labour: Jane worries she "must keep in good health" to deserve love (Brontë 274), while Swift's narrator fears she has "got it wrong somehow." Their emotional vulnerability, shaped by hopes for reciprocity, marks a continuity in women's desire for legible recognition from male partners—a desire Weeks argues remains central to modern intimate life (8–12). Despite their different epochs, both narratives expose the unevenness of heterosexual love as a field where women's yearning becomes both the engine and the burden of relational life.

Yet the divergence between the two is sharp. Jane returns to Rochester only after she secures financial autonomy and moral clarity, producing what Owsley characterises as the ability "to negotiate the terms of the relationship" enabled by inheritance and Rochester's altered physical condition (63). Her return is not a recoil into dependence but a self-determined re-entering of partnership on more reciprocal, though still historically and ethically constrained, terms. Swift's narrator, by contrast,

returns each night to the site of diminishment—"I sit and watch you"—not because she is empowered, but because she is stuck in what Berlant theorises as "an impasse," a present that cannot move forward yet cannot be left (21–23). Where Jane's emotional labour leads to reciprocity, Swift's collapses into invisibility; her offerings—"best colors," the polished plates, the laid table—fail to register. Jane's selfhood grows through inquiry and moral reasoning, aligning with Jung's reading of her as a female detective whose "curiosity leads her to realize her own selfhood" (21); Swift's narrator, conversely, is caught in a cycle of self-erasure, making the partner "my temple, my mural, my sky" while receiving only tolerance in return. Ioannou's analysis of female beauty and artistic agency in *Jane Eyre* underscores how Jane's artistry (e.g., her watercolours) becomes a means of expressing desire and judgment (327–31). Swift's narrator also engages in artistic labour—"use my best colors"—but unlike Jane, her creativity is not recognized as such; it becomes domestic affective service rather than self-expression. Sloan's discussion of Swift's lyric precision highlights how the song's formal repetition enacts emotional exhaustion (17–22), reinforcing the contrast with Brontë's narrative arc, where emotional work leads toward liberation rather than depletion.

Comparing the two texts shows a durable continuity in the affective burdens placed on women across centuries, even as conditions for empowerment shift. Victorian realism exposes the constraints that force Jane to navigate love through self-discipline, moral reasoning, and cautious autonomy. Even so, the novel ultimately imagines a feminist possibility: a rebalanced partnership where recognition becomes mutual, echoing Gao's reading of Jane as a woman who "gradually becomes feminist" by insisting on equality and moral agency (926). In contrast, Swift's modern pop narrative figures a feminist moment in which women ostensibly possess autonomy yet remain emotionally overextended in intimate life. Her narrator's diminishment speaks to the contradictions McNutt identifies in Swift's broader star-text: feminist gestures limited by structural conditions that never fully shift (72–91). Swift's portrayal of a woman "begging for footnotes in the story of your life" resonates with Smialek's argument that Swift's work exposes tensions between agency, gender, and cultural expectations (104–12). Whereas Brontë's novel imagines an exit from asymmetry, Swift's song exposes the emotional residue of partnerships that never become balanced—situating her narrator in the suspension of Berlant's impasse rather than a feminist return.

These affective structures reveal how feminist feeling does not progress linearly from oppression to liberation. Instead, it oscillates across eras: Brontë writes toward a hoped-for equilibrium, while Swift writes from within contemporary exhaustion. In the terms developed

here, feminist refusal begins when a subject ceases to absorb the demands of others as the price of attachment; Jane enacts such a refusal when she leaves Thornfield, but Swift's narrator has not yet reached that threshold. The comparison thus illuminates the complexity of feminist affect across time: empowerment emerges when emotional labour is recognised and reciprocated, whereas diminishment takes hold when such labour becomes invisible. The distance between Jane and Swift's narrator marks not a simple historical trajectory but the uneven, affective terrain through which women continue to navigate intimate life.

CONCLUSION: RETURNING DOES NOT EQUAL BELONGING

The comparative reading of *Jane Eyre* and "tolerate it" reveals how feminist affect remains structured by the tension between desire, recognition, and emotional labour across radically different cultural forms. Both texts illuminate how attachments—romantic or domestic—shape the subject through what Ahmed calls the "press" of impressions that form the surfaces of bodies (6). Yet the two narratives diverge sharply in how they imagine the possibility of transformation. Jane's earlier departure from Thornfield can be read as a refusal of structures that negate her subjecthood, making her later return legible as a re-entry on altered terms. Swift's narrator, by contrast, inhabits what Berlant describes as an "impasse," a suspended present in which the subject remains bound to the promises of a scene that wears her out (28–29). Where Brontë offers a model for negotiating equality—enabled by Jane's financial agency and affective autonomy—Swift exposes an attachment that erodes the self even as it is desperately maintained.

These findings speak directly to the durability of what Berlant names "cruel optimism": the condition of remaining attached to what threatens one's thriving (24). Swift's narrator exemplifies this affective structure—waiting "like I'm just a kid," and offering her "best colors" for his portrait—continually bargaining for recognition. The fear structuring her attachment lies less in losing the beloved than in losing the very capacity to remain hopeful. Jane, however, refuses this trajectory; her insistence on being "my own mistress" reorients her attachments toward relational reciprocity and mutual recognition. This contrast suggests that feminist affect is historically mutable: Victorian realism narrates the possibility of rebalancing emotional labour, whereas contemporary pop surfaces the exhaustion of emotional giving that yields no structural change. Such exhaustion aligns with Jackson's critique of "basic," depoliticised feminisms that circulate affect without transforming conditions (1078).

Finally, the cultural stakes of these attachments extend beyond individual narratives. As Fogarty and Arnold note, Swift's work embodies the contradictions of contemporary popular feminism—simultaneously offering visibility and revealing the limits of celebrity as feminist pedagogy (3–4). Placing Swift beside Brontë thus clarifies a broader feminist insight: emotional labour, recognition, and attachment are never merely personal but culturally organised, mediated, and historically reproduced. If, as Ahmed argues, emotions are "world making" (12), then these texts show two different worlds: one where feminist agency is wrested from systems of constraint, and another where affective endurance becomes a quiet survival strategy amid asymmetrical love. The task of feminist criticism, then, is not simply to diagnose these structures but to imagine modes of relation that do not require diminishment as their price.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP, 2014.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394716

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Edited by Michael Mason, Penguin Classics, 1996.

Fogarty, Meghan, and George Arnold. "Are You Ready for It? Re-evaluating Taylor Swift." *Contemporary Music Review*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2021.1976586

Gao, Haiyan. "Reflection on Feminism in *Jane Eyre*." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 3, no. 6, 2013, pp. 926–31. https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.3.6.926-931

Ioannou, Maria. "'A Brilliancy of Their Own': Female Art, Beauty and Sexuality in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*." *Brontë Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2018, pp. 323–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/14748932.2018.1502993

Jackson, Sue. "A Very Basic View of Feminism: Feminist Girls and Meanings of (Celebrity) Feminism." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 21, no. 7, 2021, pp. 1072–90. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1762236

Jung, Sandro. "Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the Female Detective and the 'Crime' of Female Selfhood." *Brontë Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2007, pp. 21–30. https://doi.org/10.1179/147489307x157897

McNutt, Myles. "From 'Mine' to 'Ours': Gendered Hierarchies of Authorship and the Limits of Taylor Swift's Paratextual Feminism." *Communication, Culture & Critique*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2020, pp. 72–91. https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz042

Owsley, Lauren. "Charlotte Brontë's Circumvention of Patriarchy: Gender, Labour and Financial Agency in *Jane Eyre*." *Brontë Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2013, pp. 54–65. https://doi.org/10.1179/147489321 2Z.00000000052

Sloan, Nate. "Taylor Swift and the Work of Songwriting." *Contemporary Music Review*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2021, pp. 11–26. https://doi.org/10.1080 /07494467.2021.1945226

Smialek, Eric. "Who Needs to Calm Down? Taylor Swift and Rainbow Capitalism." *Contemporary Music Review*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2021, pp. 99–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2021.1956270

Swift, Taylor. "Taylor Swift's Songwriting Process on *evermore*." *YouTube*, uploaded by Apple Music, 16 Dec. 2020, www.youtube.com/ watch?v=CQacWbsLbS4, accessed 20 Mar. 2025.

Swift, Taylor. "tolerate it." *evermore*, Republic Records, 2020.

Weeks, Jeffrey. *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life*. Routledge, 2007. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203956809

Mai Phuc Thinh is a researcher at the Center for Global Studies, Duy Tan University, Vietnam. His work explores the affective dimensions of transnational education, feminist theory, and the politics of recognition. Drawing on affect theory, literary analysis, and qualitative methodologies, he examines how emotions circulate within cultural narratives and academic structures. His recent research engages with queer pedagogies, feminist aesthetics, and the emotional labour of knowledge production in both historical and contemporary texts. He has published on topics including intercultural mobility, decolonial critique, and feminist return in global education and literature.

https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4246-6410

maiphucthinh@duytan.edu.vn

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.23

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Marta Goszczyńska
University of Lodz

Of Birds, Men, and Carrier Bags: Sympoietic Relationality in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*

ABSTRACT

Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi* (2020) has been interpreted through a wide constellation of literary, philosophical, and visual influences, ranging from C. S. Lewis, Jorge Luis Borges, and Owen Barfield to Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Giovanni Battista Piranesi. This article examines the novel in relation to contemporary critical posthumanism and multispecies thought, arguing that it develops a non-dualistic relational ethics grounded in attentiveness, care, and coexistence. Through its protagonist's everyday acts of maintenance and his inclusive ways of living, the novel engages with the concepts of sympoiesis, response-ability, and ongoingness as theorised by Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). At the same time, its sustained focus on containers, repair, and non-heroic storytelling resonates with Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986), an essay central to the conceptual framework Haraway develops. Reading *Piranesi* through this paired perspective foregrounds its investment in multispecies coexistence, sympoietic collaboration, and ethical kin-making. In doing so, the article positions the novel as a distinctive experiment in relational world-making, offering an alternative to mastery-oriented, heroic models of knowledge within contemporary literary imaginaries.

Keywords: *Susanna Clarke, Piranesi, critical posthumanism, sympoiesis, multispecies worlding, relational ethics.*

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 5 May 2026. Verified: 8 July 2026. Accepted: 8 July 2026.

INTRODUCTION

Shortly after the publication of her long-awaited second novel, *Piranesi* (2020), Susanna Clarke discussed its sources in an interview with *Hindustan Times*. She linked the novel's genesis to her struggles with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, which resulted in a prolonged period of confinement and social isolation. She also described the vast, mysterious realm in which the story unfolds as inspired both by Charn, the crumbling city of C. S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* (1955), and by the labyrinthine spaces of Jorge Luis Borges's short fiction, particularly "The House of Asterion" and "The Library of Babel." She further invoked the philosophical background informing the protagonist's worldview, citing Owen Barfield's notion of "original participation," a model of premodern consciousness in which humans and nature exist in a relation of deep reciprocity.

Subsequent critics have pursued several of these interpretative avenues. Both Bartłomiej Błaszkiewicz and Julie M. Dugger focus on the affinities between *Piranesi* and the work of C. S. Lewis: the former examines the idea of the secondary world and the motif of fairy abduction, while the latter explores how Lewis and Clarke draw on Plato's Allegory of the Cave to investigate the relationship between real and imagined worlds. Joy Marie Clarkson analyses how *Piranesi* engages with Owen Barfield's theory of the evolution of consciousness, arguing that the text ultimately cautions against the re-enchantment envisioned in his concept of final participation. Meanwhile, Andra-Iulia Ursa shows how Clarke's experience of illness has informed the novel's themes of isolation and entrapment, and traces the emergence of interpretations—many originating beyond academia—that read the narrative through the lens of psychological conditions, including dissociative identity disorder, long COVID, and schizophrenia.

A different strand of criticism approaches Piranesi through theoretical frameworks concerned with mind, reality, narrative, and the human relationship with the world. For instance, Marco Caracciolo analyses the novel through the lens of cognitive narratology, focusing on the impact of the House on the protagonist's consciousness (163–69). Similarly, Merja Polvinen, in her "enactively informed interpretation," reads *Piranesi* as a self-conscious work of speculative fiction and "an allegory of a mind trapped in a fiction" (336). Drawing on rhetorical narratology, Jonas Kellermann examines Clarke's use of ambiguity as a strategy for constructing story worlds in both *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* and *Piranesi*. Finally, Katarzyna Myśliwiec offers an ecocritical reading of the novel, arguing that it promotes a child-like, animistic perspective that could transform modern environmental ethics and overcome human alienation from nature (107).

This remarkable diversity of critical responses may be attributed, at least in part, to the novel's generic hybridity. Despite its relatively modest length—especially when compared to the thousand-page *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*—*Piranesi* combines elements of adventure fiction, detective fiction, philosophical meditation, mystery, quest narrative, and the thriller (cf. Sender; Kellermann 190). Its primary affiliation, however, is with speculative fiction (Błaszkiewicz 129), an inherently porous category that blends the familiar and the fantastic while drawing on narrative traditions ranging from ancient myth and medieval romance to fairy tale and Gothic fiction. This generic openness helps explain why, beyond the intertextual echoes discussed above, critics have variously identified the protagonist with figures as diverse as Faustus (Błaszkiewicz 113), Rousseau's "noble savage" (Myśliwiec 119), and even the biblical Adam (Myśliwiec 122–23). Likewise, the novel's setting, while indebted to Lewis's secondary worlds, Borges's labyrinths, and the architectural spaces of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Imaginary Prisons*, also invites comparison with such settings as Tolkien's Moria or the mythological Underworld, through which Orpheus descends in search of Eurydice. While all these references function as distinct sources, they can also be seen as manifestations of a broader tendency in speculative fiction, which mobilises motifs and narrative patterns with long cultural histories. Like the labyrinthine House at its centre, then, the novel abounds in intertextual echoes and offers multiple interpretative pathways.

The critical approaches surveyed above attest to the richness of the novel's interpretative possibilities. Many of these readings place *Piranesi* in dialogue with earlier traditions, illuminating Clarke's creative reworking of inherited motifs, ideas, and narrative patterns. The present article complements these perspectives by examining how the novel resonates with some of the key intellectual and ethical questions of the present. More specifically, it brings *Piranesi* into conversation with critical posthumanism and multispecies thought. Building on Myśliwiec's ecocritical reading, I argue that Clarke's novel develops a relational ethics grounded in practices of attention, care, and coexistence. To make this case, I begin with Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986) and Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016),[1] drawing on their respective accounts of non-heroic storytelling and sympoietic worlding to establish the article's principal theoretical framework. I then examine the protagonist's relations with the dead, birds, and other inhabitants of the House. The subsequent sections turn to the novel's recurring containers and the House itself as sites of relational worlding before placing Clarke's

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Donna Haraway will be to *Staying with the Trouble*.

vision in dialogue with Owen Barfield's concept of "original participation." Finally, I consider the figure of the Other and the protagonist's return to the world beyond the House in order to show how *Piranesi* ultimately contrasts mastery-oriented modes of being with practices of kin-making and multispecies coexistence.

CARRIER BAGS AND ONGOINGNESS

While this article does not depend on establishing a direct line of influence, Clarke has repeatedly acknowledged her literary debt to Le Guin. She has not only described the *Earthsea* trilogy as "the closest model" for "the story of magic and magicians" in *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (Interview) but also identified it, together with Lewis's *Narnia* series, as "the greatest influence" on her work ("Books That Made Me"). Elsewhere, she has cited *The Tombs of Atuan* as a point of comparison for *Piranesi* ("This Critique"). Significantly, Le Guin is also one of the principal interlocutors in Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble.* Practising what she calls "tentacular thinking," Haraway brings her ideas into collaborative dialogue with other scholars and texts, and Le Guin's "carrier bag" essay is among those most frequently visited. Given these entanglements, reading *Piranesi* alongside the work of Le Guin and Haraway seems hardly arbitrary.

Central to Le Guin's essay is the figure of the carrier bag, through which she reimagines storytelling as a practice of gathering, holding, and sustaining relations. The account opens with an observation by anthropologist Elizabeth Fischer that the earliest human tool was not a weapon but a receptacle, "a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier" (qtd. in Le Guin 166). This remark undermines the prevailing weapon-centred narrative of human development, which Le Guin dubs the "killer story" (168), a model that depicts civilisation as progressing through acts of violence and mastery, with the lone male hero at its centre. Le Guin cites the famous "Dawn of Man" sequence in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* as an expression of this worldview (166–67). Fischer's container, however, points towards a different narrative. Instead of the linear, conflict-driven arc of the heroic model, Le Guin proposes what she calls the "life story" (168), which she imagines as a capacious container—a bag or a pouch—for the various activities that constitute ordinary existence. Such a form foregrounds what she terms "continuing process" (169), casting fiction as a space for holding and relating rather than for domination or triumph.

If Le Guin's carrier bag theory offers a way of reimagining narrative through practices of gathering and sustaining, Haraway's *Staying with*

the Trouble extends this reorientation by shifting attention towards the networks of relations that bind beings together within a shared world. Drawing on conceptual allies such as Le Guin, Vinciane Despret, Isabelle Stengers, and Bruno Latour, among others, Haraway develops a relational account of multispecies entanglement that emphasises stories of "becoming-with," in which lives, meanings, and capabilities are co-constituted through ongoing contact. Central to this perspective is her notion of sympoiesis, the idea that systems "make-with" rather than make themselves (58), and her focus on companion species, whose relations with humans unsettle the logic of mastery that has long shaped Western epistemology. Together, these ideas constitute the backbone of what Janina Loh defines as Haraway's "ethics of kinship" (1085–86).

Haraway's conceptualisation of sympoiesis as "a carrier bag for ongoingness" (125) provides an apt starting point for analysing Clarke's novel. Presented as the journals of its eponymous narrator, *Piranesi* unfolds within a seemingly boundless labyrinth of halls that he calls the House. For all its vastness, the House has only one human inhabitant, known as Piranesi. Despite the often harsh conditions and the periodic flooding of the halls by ocean tides, Piranesi adores the House, viewing himself as its child and repeatedly expressing gratitude for its generosity. Although devoid of other living humans, the space bears traces of former inhabitants, and twice a week it is visited by another man, whom the narrator refers to simply as the Other. Carrying "a shining device" (21)[2]—which the reader, but not the narrator, readily recognises as a tablet or smartphone—and capable of procuring vitamin pills, sports shoes, sleeping bags, and polymer fishing nets, the Other is clearly a visitor from our contemporary world who has found passage into the uncanny realm that constitutes the protagonist's entire reality. Their brief meetings punctuate the monotonous rhythm of Piranesi's days, which he largely fills with mundane tasks necessary for survival: fishing for food, collecting seaweed, tracking the tides, cooking, cleaning, and maintaining his sparse possessions. The persistent repetitiveness of these activities is reinforced by the journal form itself, which resists clear narrative beginnings and endings, and brings to mind Haraway's "big-enough stories without determinism, teleology, and plan" (50). Recurrent references to mending (Clarke 24, 70, 111, 131), cleaning (113, 193, 199), and cooking (34, 113) similarly unsettle the logic of narrative development, foregrounding instead the ethos of "continuing process" that Le Guin identifies as central to non-heroic storytelling and echoing Haraway's related notions of "ongoingness" and "staying with the trouble" as modes of dwelling in, sustaining, and caring for a damaged world.

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Susanna Clarke will be to *Piranesi*.

"THE DOMAIN OF BIRDS AND OF MEN"

As an unheroic actor in Le Guin's life story, Piranesi quickly emerges as a believer in what Haraway describes as "variously and dangerously configured relationality," a form of thinking that does not presume "isolated . . . unities and polarities" (175). Although he is confined within a labyrinth of halls, he is no captive of what Haraway, in "A Cyborg Manifesto," calls "the maze of dualisms" structuring western thought (67). One of the clearest manifestations of this non-binary sensibility appears in his attitude towards the human bones enshrined throughout the House. As Merja Polvinen notes, Piranesi does not "make a distinction" between the living and the dead (333), and his treatment of the human remains reflects his view of life and death as an ongoing, entangled process in which death is a natural and acceptable outcome of the House's ordaining of "a certain span" for its inhabitants (Clarke 47). Unsurprisingly, then, when another person enters the halls, he refers to her as "16." This choice perplexes the Other, but the protagonist justifies it by adding the newcomer to his list of "the Thirteen Dead and the Two Living" already inside the House (74), revealing his willingness to engage in what Haraway terms "sympoiesis with the dead" (157).

Drawing on Vinciane Despret, Haraway emphasises the significance of practices that allow the living to bring "the dead into active presence" (7–8). In her work, Despret insists that "the dead are people like everybody else" ("Inquiries" 236) and identifies acts such as welcoming their company or commemorating them through rituals as ways of sustaining the vitality of relationships with the deceased (236–42). Piranesi repeatedly engages in exactly such practices. He visits the dead regularly and keeps their remains "tidy" and "in good order" (Clarke 214), for instance, when he rebinds the bones of the "Fish-Leather Man" after the twine holding them together has come apart (9). He also brings the dead offerings of food, drink, and water lilies (12). He speaks to them, telling them about his daily tasks and describing the "Wonders" of the House so that, as he explains, "they know that they are not alone" (12). The relationship is reciprocal, however, with "the quiet, consolatory presence of the Dead" filling Piranesi with a sense of "gratitude" (39). His experiences resonate with Despret's reflections on the therapeutic effect that such gestures of care and attention can have on survivors. They also illustrate why she understands such practices as forms of worlding that generate new relational realities ("Inquiries" 246). Seen from this perspective, Piranesi's ministrations do not merely unsettle boundaries between life and death but also exemplify Haraway's sympoietic knottings whereby all beings remain entangled in webs of connection and response-ability, thus contributing to the novel's affirmation of inclusive relational ethics.

The same approach shapes Piranesi's interactions with the many birds that inhabit the House: herring gulls, rooks, blackbirds, sparrows, crows, buzzards, and albatrosses. The birds accompany the protagonist on his travels, appearing throughout the novel as his companion species. Their number and variety explain why Piranesi describes the Middle Halls as "the Domain of birds and of men" (7), in that order. The phrase gestures towards his understanding of the House as a shared world, akin to Haraway's Terrapolis (110), while also suggesting his rejection of human exceptionalism. This view is further corroborated by his hypothesis that birds possess a form of collective wisdom (Clarke 42). In his daily interactions with birds, Piranesi invariably treats them with warmth and affection. He speaks to them (31, 193, 210), and he laughs when they perch on his shoulders or peck at his ear (132). He takes pleasure in listening to their song and chatter. Yet his practices reveal not only fondness but also a willingness to participate in shared modes of living. This becomes especially evident when a pair of albatrosses arrive in the halls in search of a nesting site. Realising that the birds cannot find suitable nesting material, Piranesi gives them some of the seaweed he has collected and dried to use for winter fuel. Although this sacrifice will cause him discomfort, he prioritises "a new albatross in the world" over "a few days of feeling cold" (32). He then visits the birds regularly and tends to their wellbeing, for instance by ensuring before the flood that they will remain safe (196).

Piranesi sees himself as a scientist, and his attitude to birds corresponds closely to what Haraway calls the practice of "polite inquiry" (127). Drawing on Vinciane Despret's account of Amotz Zahavi's work with Arabian babblers, Haraway describes such inquiry as "going visiting," a phrase she borrows from Hannah Arendt. Rather than imposing pre-established assumptions on the animals they study, those who "visit" approach other beings with curiosity, openness, and a willingness to be surprised, allowing their interlocutors to "shape what occurs" (127). In the example discussed by Despret, Haraway argues, Zahavi's unconventional methods enable observations of behaviour not usually associated with birds: trust, cooperation, and care. She attributes these findings to the "dynamic, moving relations of attunement" (128) between birds and researchers and characterises Zahavi's methodology as "making experiments *with* rather than *on* babblers" (128, emphasis in the original).

Interestingly, many of Piranesi's methods and observations correspond to those of Zahavi, whom Despret describes as asking the babblers "to cooperate" as he "invites them" and offers them gifts of food ("Domesticating Practices" 35–36). The protagonist of Clarke's novel behaves in a similar manner: not only does he "visit" the birds (Clarke 32)—just as he "visits" the dead (12, 55, 82) and the statues (109, 229)—

but he also greets them (29, 31, 40, 41), speaks to them (231, 193, 10), and feeds them scraps of fish (132). Such polite practices lead to similarly surprising observations, with the birds displaying trust, care, and even altruism, as the albatrosses do when they prove to be "excellent parents . . . devoted to their egg and . . . [then] equally diligent in caring for their chick" (33). According to Piranesi, birds can also be glad (31), anxious (34), alarmed (210), despondent, and discouraged (32); they are even capable of thinking (39). While some might reject such descriptions as tainted with anthropomorphism, Despret prefers to interpret them in terms of multispecies relationality, in which people and birds "may be said to be responding to each other and to be acting according to the questioning and the response of the other" ("Domesticating Practices" 35).

Piranesi's dealings with birds also include a fable of symbiogenesis that recalls Haraway's "The Camille Stories," the final chapter of *Staying with the Trouble*. There, Haraway imagines a future community whose members enter into symbiotic relationships with endangered nonhuman kin: one of them is a girl, who becomes linked to a monarch butterfly and shares in its metamorphosis (149). A comparable vision occurs in Clarke's novel when Piranesi witnesses the arrival of the first albatross in the halls. As the bird glides towards him, the protagonist stretches out his arms, awaiting the moment when the two will "merge and . . . become another order of being entirely: an Angel" (Clarke 30).[3] To articulate this fantasy, Piranesi turns to a cosmological metaphor, comparing such a merging to planets that "collide . . . and become one" (30). The fleeting vision of fusion, figured as a gesture of welcome and embrace, operates as a symbolic compression of the novel's relational ethos. By imagining himself and the albatross as planetary bodies drawn into union, Piranesi collapses the distance between species and between worlds, encapsulating the sympoietic modes of becoming that animate Haraway's speculative fabulation and his own life.

CONTAINERS AND RELATIONAL WORLDING

A comparable emphasis on relationality arises from Clarke's repeated references to containers, which function in the narrative not only as tools of survival but also as holders of identity and, more importantly, as catalysts for connection. Piranesi's "ordinary, everyday tasks" (Clarke 70) consistently involve sacks, bowls, nets, blankets, buckets, and bags. Plastic

[3] As Myśliwiec notes, Piranesi's affinity for hybrid beings is also evident in his attachment to the faun statue, which she reads as indicative of his capacity for interspecies connection (116).

bowls collect fresh water (53, 160, 196), fishing nets and improvised lobster traps enable him to gather food (40), pots and pans cook his meals (193, 196), and sleeping bags and blankets keep him "snug and warm" during winter nights (54). As suggested by Le Guin, these ubiquitous containers do not serve as mere props but as sustaining tools that allow the protagonist to endure the harsh conditions of the House, shaping a narrative grounded in maintenance and ongoingness. Containers also function as repositories of identity: the journals that contain the story of Piranesi's life—and the key to understanding who he is—are themselves kept inside a "brown leather messenger bag" (Clarke 196). Only by reading them is he able to reconstruct his past and regain a full sense of self, an act that mirrors Le Guin's vision of the container as a vessel for stories, memory, and knowledge.

Crucially, however, Piranesi's containers mediate his ethical relations with humans, living and dead, and with animals. He uses a bowl to feed soup to the Other after the man nearly drowns (25), and he employs his fishing nets to carry seaweed for the albatrosses to build their nest with (32) in another gesture of multispecies kin-making. Later, when he realises the middle halls will be flooded, he turns a blanket into a sack, and spends nearly three days carrying the bones of the dead to safety (195). This labour, again, transforms a container into an instrument of kinship, exemplifying Piranesi's ethics of attentiveness and care. In moments like these, containers are not about being or identity but about being-with, turning into "netbags of sympoiesis" (Haraway 176) and affirming what Haraway describes as response-ability, "a praxis of care and response . . . in ongoing multispecies worlding" (105). As such, they situate the narrative firmly within Le Guin's carrier bag tradition while also echoing Haraway's insistence on connective modes of living and thinking.

The largest of these relationality-inducing containers is the House itself. Indeed, Le Guin extends the carrier bag principle far beyond individual objects, describing speculative fiction as a means of showing "how people relate to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were" (170). Viewed in this light, the House emerges as a relational world gathering humans, nonhumans, statues, and elemental forces within a shared ecology. Piranesi's descriptions repeatedly encourage such a reading, foregrounding a succession of halls, courtyards, and vestibules, each lined with alcoves, apses, and niches.

Invoking James J. Gibson's terminology, Polvinen interprets the House in terms of "affordances," the possibilities for action that environments offer their inhabitants (Gibson 119–20). Although Polvinen's discussion centres on the "easily graspable and climbable" statues (333), Gibson's

original concept hinges on the notion of the niche. As he explains, "[i]n architecture a niche is a place that is suitable for a piece of statuary, a place into which the object *fits*. In ecology a niche is a setting of environmental features that are suitable for an animal, into which it *fits* metaphorically" (121, emphases mine). The House abounds in such architectural niches—many holding statues, others sheltering the bones of the dead. Beyond these literal recesses, however, the House also functions as Gibson's ecological niche, with the lower halls inhabited by "fish, crustaceans and sea vegetation" (Clarke 6), and the middle halls shared by birds and humans. This interpretation is reinforced when Piranesi echoes Gibson's language and describes himself as a child "*fit[ting]* seamlessly" into the world (71, emphasis mine). To recognise the House as an ecological niche, then, is to recognise it as a world—no longer simply a container but a life-sustaining sympoietic system in which "men and birds" can survive only because the lower halls "provide nourishment" (Clarke 6) and the upper halls "give fresh water" (7). This conception of the House as an ecology is strengthened by the etymology of *οἶκος*, the house or dwelling at the root of the term ("Ecology"). The novel exploits this resonance to collapse the distinction between "the House" and "the World": Piranesi repeatedly fuses these terms, insisting that "the two are for all practical purposes identical" (Clarke 228) and inviting the interpretation of the House "as a microcosm for the home ('ekos') of the planet" (Manwaring 143).

ORIGINAL PARTICIPATION AND SITUATED WORLDING

If the House is read as a figure for the planet, then Piranesi's stance towards it approximates Owen Barfield's notion of "original participation." Like Haraway, Barfield criticises Enlightenment rationalism, describing it—in a phrase that anticipates Le Guin's denunciation of weapons as instruments of rupture—as the "Cartesian sword-thrust" that split matter from spirit, and mind from world (Wilford 154). He also contrasts this post-Enlightenment approach with an earlier, premodern sense of reciprocity between humans and their surroundings that he names "original participation" (Wilford 157). This sensibility is what Susanna Clarke, by her own admission, sought to evoke in Piranesi's relation to the House, which was meant to mirror how ancient people did not feel "alienated from their surroundings" but experienced the world as "a great and sacred drama in which they took part" ("This Critique").

This participatory reverence is expressed in *Piranesi* on a number of levels. Most explicitly, it suffuses the narrator's language, manifesting in his tendency to capitalise not only "the House" but also the names of its

elements and the qualities he attributes to it. At the same time, Piranesi's behaviour reveals a deeper, lived form of participation in which meaning is encountered as immanent in the world's events and creatures. On two occasions, the protagonist interprets the movements of birds as conveying messages: once when their flight from statue to statue prompts him to be "more industrious," a decision that proves unexpectedly wise when a sudden storm disrupts the fish supply (Clarke 41); and again when he deciphers their pattern as pointing towards "innocence eroded," a cryptic message that foreshadows his awakening to the Other's deception (43). Piranesi also assumes that the House "provides" for its inhabitants, taking both the natural resources that sustain him and the modern objects carried in by the Other as signs of its benevolent agency (54). While Clarke clearly deploys this belief for dramatic irony, it nonetheless underscores the protagonist's willingness to inhabit a world that acts, answers, and participates in his understanding. Such moments exemplify a Barfieldian mode of consciousness in which meaning is not imposed on the world but discovered within it. They also explain why, for Piranesi, the claim that the "world was constantly speaking to Ancient Man" (148) is not an archaic curiosity but a description of his everyday experience (154).

Although Barfield and Haraway both criticise Enlightenment rationalism, their visions diverge over how human connectedness to the world might be renewed after the modern break. Barfield projects the remedy into the future, envisioning a moment of "final participation" when people would retain modern self-consciousness but recover "a unified understanding of parts and wholes" by means of imagination (Wilford 155). Haraway, by contrast, recasts this renewal as a present-tense, multispecies practice of sympoiesis and response-ability. Crucially, she resists any ideal of effortless connectedness, insisting instead that relations must be actively cultivated and continually renewed (91). So, too, in Clarke's novel, Piranesi's communion with the House is not a given but something he sustains through steady attention and daily acts of care.

In consequence, despite Piranesi's near-religious reverence for the House, the novel never lets its image drift into idealisation, continually puncturing its sacred aura with reminders of the sheer labour and vigilance required to live within it. Even if the reader discounts the Other's disparaging remarks about the House or Sorensen's recollections of hunger and cold, Piranesi's own account attests to these exacting conditions. His references to the abundance of food are regularly qualified by phrases such as "with a little foresight" (Clarke 126) or "for the active and enterprising person" (111), indicating that his vision of the House is more nuanced than it might initially appear. Haraway likewise cautions against viewing the world in simplified or sentimental terms. Turning to

Isabelle Stengers, she invokes the figure of "multi-faced Gaïa" to represent the planet as composed of "complex systemic phenomena": a "maker and destroyer, not [a] resource to be exploited or [a] ward to be protected or [a] nursing mother promising nourishment" (Haraway 43). For Stengers, Gaia is "implacable" and "deaf to our justifications," which is why we do not have "the liberty of ignoring her" (47). Instead, we need to cultivate what Stengers calls "the art of paying attention" (62), an ethical discipline that requires deliberate, sustained engagement. Piranesi, for his part, enacts this approach. The everyday practices he understands as "duties" (Clarke 155)—restocking supplies, repairing belongings, tracking the tides—signal that reverence for the House coexists with obligation. These routine forms of attentiveness keep him attuned to the House's shifting conditions, and when he neglects them, the consequences are unmistakable: he becomes vulnerable not only to hunger and cold (111) but also to serious danger, as when he nearly fails to predict the convergence of the tides (155).

The House's demands, however, are not merely physical; its most troubling feature lies in its gradual erosion of memory. As the protagonist comes to discover, he is really Matthew Rose Sorensen, whose former identity has been obscured by prolonged habitation in this world, allowing the Other to enact the cruel joke of renaming him Piranesi. This disclosure further complicates any attempt to idealise the House as a purely benevolent environment. At the same time, amnesia need not be read solely as a form of psychological damage but may also be understood as an inherited motif, associated with the otherworldly spaces of speculative fiction (Błaszkiewicz 124–25). Clarke herself has linked the setting of *Piranesi* to Lewis's Woods between the Worlds, a liminal realm whose inhabitants experience both a profound sense of belonging and a gradual loss of memory ("This Critique"). The House likewise offers forms of connection and participation while exacting a significant personal cost. The resulting tension is never fully resolved. Although forgetting enables Piranesi's immersion in the relations and rhythms of the House, it also threatens the continuity of his identity and entails genuine loss. The House therefore emerges as neither an ecological utopia nor a site of simple victimhood, but as an ambivalent environment whose modes of relation are inseparable from processes of forgetting and transformation.

AGAINST THE HEROIC STORY

The ethical significance of this transformation becomes clearer when Piranesi's relational practices are set against the atomistic attitudes of the Other. Throughout the novel, the Other emerges as a figure firmly rooted

in Le Guin's outdated heroic story and in Haraway's "transcendent plots of modernity" (41). Even when Piranesi still regards him as a friend, he observes that the man "likes to contradict [him] whenever an opportunity arises" (Clarke 95) and is often driven by "self-love or arrogance or pride" (144). The Other typifies what Haraway terms "bounded individualism" (30), dismissing the House as "endless dreary rooms" (Clarke 47), refusing to engage in "religious practices" (12), and displaying no fondness for birds (31). This self-enclosed disposition extends into his intellectual stance. Although Piranesi admires the Other as "devoted to the life of the intellect" (8), his approach to knowledge exemplifies Haraway's "god trick," the epistemological posture that the critic associates with "a conquering gaze from nowhere" that positions the knower as detached, superior, and entitled to mastery ("Situated" 581). In this respect, the Other's scientific attitude recalls the model announced by the self-proclaimed "great scholar" in the novel's epigraph,[4] who insists that he needs "subjects to do [experiments] *on*" (Lewis 24; Clarke's emphasis). Such a view is representative of an exclusionary hierarchical ethics that clashes with Piranesi's collaborative method of inquiry, oriented towards experimenting *with* rather than *on* others. Unlike the protagonist, however, the Other seeks knowledge as a form of power, aspiring to "becoming immortal" and "dominating lesser intellects" (Clarke 8–9), ambitions that bring to mind Haraway's observation that "renewed generative flourishing" is incompatible with "myths of immortality or failure to become-with the dead and the extinct" (101). For the Other, the House is not a living world but "the means to an end" (Clarke 61), "a riddle to be unravelled" (60), valuable only for the power it might yield. He perceives only emptiness—"mere scenery" (60)—where Piranesi encounters presence, life, and meaning. In refusing to dwell in the House and to recognise it as a place of co-presence and response-ability, the Other embodies the isolated individual of Enlightenment myth, treating worlds and beings as resources rather than relations. Such a perspective renders him incompatible with the kind of sympoietic world-making the novel affirms.

It is in the novel's closing chapters that the full consequences of the Other's worldview come into focus, linking him even more strongly to Le Guin's killer story. This becomes clear when Piranesi realises that the Other has deliberately confined him in the House, both to shield himself from

[4] The quotation comes from Andrew Ketterley in Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew*. Later in the novel, the Other is revealed to be Valentine Andrew Ketterley and, as Julie M. Dugger notes, he appears to be more than a namesake of Lewis's character. Piranesi's journals identify him as the son of "Colonel Ranulph Andrew Ketterley, soldier and occultist" and record his birth year as 1955 (167), which coincides with the publication of *The Magician's Nephew* (Dugger 64).

its corrosive effects on memory and to use him as "a slave" to navigate and study its inhospitable halls (188). This disclosure lays bare the exploitation that has always governed the men's relationship, presenting the Other as someone who treats those around him as "props, ground, plot, space, or prey" to be used or eliminated (Haraway 39). His instrumental treatment of those around him, whom he never imagines as partners, and certainly never as kin, becomes unmistakable when, faced with the possibility of exposure, the Other escalates his violence, contemplating the murder of Raphael, the detective who reconstructs Piranesi's story, and even of Piranesi himself.

Interestingly, the fragmentary glimpses of Sorensen before his memory loss reveal a figure whose outlook aligns more closely with that of the Other than with the relational ethos later embodied by Piranesi. As Błaszkiewicz observes, Sorensen emerges as a Faustian figure, characterised by "ambition, competitiveness and an analytical cast of mind" (113). Like his famous predecessor, he "succumbs to the temptation of pursuing a research project where the thrill of redefining barriers and winning renown is inextricably linked with real danger" (113). He is a loner, "materialistic, somewhat proud, and perhaps a little more voyeuristically interested in evildoers than he should be" (Sender). When trapped in the otherworld, he reacts with "hatred and violent fantasies of revenge" (Sender). Arne-Sayles, revisiting the House and finding Piranesi "charming," describes his former self as "an arrogant little shit" (Clarke 93). It is therefore profoundly ironic that the Other's attempt to exploit Sorensen for his own ends results in the emergence of a figure resistant to the values of mastery, hierarchy, and control that initially drew both men to the House. This transformation, however, is not merely a matter of circumstance, as Piranesi's openness to the beings around him appears inseparable, at least in part, from the forgetting of Sorensen's worldview.

The contrast between how Piranesi and the Other inhabit the world finds its clearest expression during the climactic convergence of the four tides. The scene presents the Other as one of Haraway's "sky gods," the technocratic, progress-oriented agents of Enlightenment rationalism (53–57). As he arrives in the halls armed with a gun, a life jacket, and an inflatable boat, the narrative offers a near-parodic enactment of Haraway's "comic faith in technofixes," the hubristic belief that "technology will somehow come to the rescue of its naughty but very clever children" (3). The Other's arsenal symbolises a delusion of preparedness, as though foresight and technology could secure mastery over a world that refuses to be mastered. By contrast, Piranesi and Raphael rely on fishing nets, alcoves, and concave statues for aid. These objects, resonant once more with Le Guin's "carrier bag theory," function as instruments of mutual assistance and relational

refuge. The flooding scene thus highlights the ethical divergence between the Other's dominance-driven worldview and Piranesi's commitment to collaboration and care. Where the Other brandishes a weapon to reassert control, Piranesi draws instead on the House's relational affordances. The opposition illuminates the novel's ethical and ontological vision: the inadequacy of conquest-driven narratives and the generative force of sympoietic, life-sustaining practices.

After the Other dies in the flood, Piranesi recognises him in one of the statues found in the halls: a kneeling man surrounded by fragments of a splintered sword and a broken sphere. As the protagonist explains, the man "has used his sword to shatter the sphere because he wanted to understand it, but now he finds that he has destroyed both sphere and sword" (Clarke 241). Rather than merely illustrating hubris or self-destruction, this image can be interpreted as a vignette that distils the consequences of the epistemological violence the Other seeks to enact throughout the novel. If the sphere is read as a representation of the world—its wholeness, integrity, and dense relationality—then the attempt to break it open becomes a symbolic rendering of the Other's desire to "unravel its mysteries" through force, a desire identical to the logic that governs the old heroic story. The sword, in this interpretation, exemplifies the instruments of penetration, conquest, and mastery that define such narratives. The resulting destruction—the breaking of both the world and the tool used to pierce it—embodies the dynamic Haraway identifies as "double death," the catastrophic fraying of ongoingness (177). Seen in this light, the statue gestures beyond the Other himself, cautioning against the mastery-driven epistemologies he represents, in which the impulse to penetrate and possess the world leads not to understanding but to the erosion of the very relationality that sustains life. By recognising the Other in this sculptural scene, Piranesi effectively recasts the heroic story as a narrative of failed mastery, suggesting the ultimate futility of its grandiose, technocratic impulses. Importantly, this symbolic exposure also prepares the narrative ground for the transformation that follows: the literal return of the Other to the relational, multispecies ecology that he so consistently refused to acknowledge.

This shift from heroic isolation to sympoietic worlding is realised when, after the flood, Piranesi retrieves the Other's body, places it "in a sack of plastic netting" (Clarke 240), and leaves it for the birds and fish "to strip away all the broken flesh" (216). Once the Other's skull and bones are cleaned, the protagonist intends to add them to the niches that contain the dead (240), positioning the man who strove to subjugate and instrumentalise others among those whom he tends, visits, and honours. Shaped by Piranesi's relational logic, the scene therefore operates as the

counterpart to the symbolic warning staged in the sculptural vignette as the Other's destructive dream of mastery dissolves into the entangled processes of decomposition and renewal. In an interpretatively charged gesture, Piranesi uses yet another container—one final entry in the novel's long lineage of carrier bags—to return the self-aggrandising individual to the community of "companion species, at table together, eating and being eaten, messmates, compost" (Haraway 170). The Other, who rejected relationality in life, enters into it in death, becoming sustenance for birds and fish. By orchestrating this transformation, the protagonist affirms once again the ethics of ongoingness that structures the novel. The arrogant individualist who sought immortality is reabsorbed into a system where life persists through interdependence, reciprocity, and exchange. In this way, his death is not an endpoint but a reconfiguration—a movement into what Haraway calls the "relentlessly contingent SF worlding of living and dying, becoming-with and unbecoming-with" (40). Clarke thus stages a final reversal: the heroic narrative collapses as even the would-be conqueror is drawn back into the sympoietic world he sought to dominate.

MAKING KIN BEYOND THE HOUSE

The novel's relatively brief final part follows the protagonist after his return to the world beyond the House. Earlier in the narrative, the reader encounters fragmentary impressions of this damaged world in Piranesi's half-remembered "ghosts of images": oppressive cityscapes with grey skies, throngs of people, flickering lights, and sudden, blaring noises (Clarke 26, 161–62). Its presence is also signalled by "the smell of rain, metal and petrol" seeping into the first vestibule (78), and by the discarded crisp packets and food wrappers strewn nearby (80). Now, however, the protagonist—who no longer thinks of himself as Piranesi yet refuses to identify as Sorensen—meets this world directly, confronting its clamour, grime, and densely packed crowds (243). In the closing scene, he walks through a traffic-choked city beneath "a grey ceiling" of clouds (244) and then enters a tree-lined park avenue. As falling snow mutes the din of traffic to a slow, tidal hush, the urban landscape reshapes itself into something quieter and reminiscent of the halls he inhabited, leading to a moment of recognition when the protagonist repeats the line that comes to frame the novel: "The Beauty of the House is immeasurable; its Kindness infinite" (245). Significantly, he now discerns this beauty not in a mystical otherworld but in the damaged world to which he has returned.

It may be tempting to assume that this ending simply recreates Barfield's "final participation," marking a moment in which the protagonist

returns to a pre-rational sense of connectedness with the world through the power of imagination. This, however, would overlook the scenes that show him carrying his relational practices into the new world. In the preceding chapters of the closing section, he resumes "going visiting" as he meets Sorensen's family, continues his conversations with Raphael, and travels to Manchester to meet James Ritter. In short, he reaches out to others, forging new lines of kinship. Moreover, between the moment he filters out the city's noises in the park and the moment he utters the familiar formula of connectedness, he studies the faces of passers-by, including that of a sad man he feels compelled to "seize hold of" and comfort (Clarke 244). In doing so, he displays the same qualities that shaped his life in the House: curiosity about others, attentiveness, and response-ability. Now, however, he employs them to anchor himself in the world he has re-entered, suggesting that the relational practices cultivated in the House survive the recovery of memory and can be carried beyond it.

Significantly, even as the protagonist reintegrates into the ordinary world, he remains attached to the House. He continues to revisit the halls, on his own and with Raphael, and even guides James Ritter through them, refusing to abandon this world even after recovering his memories. At the same time, he declines to reassume his former identity, a gesture that can be read as an attempt to distance himself from Sorensen's ambitions and habits of thought. Instead, he imagines his former self as existing "inside" him and requiring care and protection. In doing so, he relates to Sorensen much as he has related to the dead throughout the novel, extending the novel's ethics of care to his own past. Ultimately, the protagonist's return to ordinary reality does not erase the House's influence. Rather, the modes of attention, care, and coexistence he cultivated there shape the person he goes on to be. Relationality is therefore neither confined to the House nor dissolved by the protagonist's re-entry into society. Instead, the novel presents it as a practice that can extend across worlds, identities, and forms of belonging.

CONCLUSION

In its depiction of Piranesi's experiences, Susanna Clarke's novel offers a powerful reimagining of how narratives and worlds might be made otherwise. Through its emphasis on containers and continuous processes of repair and maintenance, the novel echoes Le Guin's carrier bag model of storytelling, foregrounding gathering, holding, and sustaining over mastery or conquest. At the same time, Clarke's portrayal of Piranesi's daily practices—his tending of birds and the dead, his attentiveness to

tides, and his willingness to become-with the many beings and forces inhabiting the House—resonates with the relational ethics articulated by Haraway. The House emerges as a multispecies ecological niche where humans and nonhumans co-create the conditions of ongoing life, and where worlding is enacted through sympoiesis, attention, and reciprocity. Against the Other's technocratic, exploitative epistemology, the novel affirms a mode of living grounded in care and ongoingness, as if in response to Haraway's invitation "to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present" (1). By carrying these practices into the damaged world beyond the House, Piranesi emerges not as a solitary hero but as a figure of relational possibility, demonstrating how ethical response-ability and multispecies coexistence might be articulated in contemporary fiction.

Works Cited

Błaszkiewicz, Bartłomiej. "On the Idea of the Secondary World in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*." *Anglica: An International Journal of English Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2021, pp. 111–32. https://doi.org/10.7311/0860-5734.30.1.08

Caracciolo, Marco. "Mind among Material Ruins." *Contemporary Narrative and the Spectrum of Materiality*, Ohio State UP, 2023, pp. 149–69. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111142562

Clarke, Susanna. "Books That Made Me." *The Guardian*, 3 Sept. 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/sep/03/susanna-clarke-neil-gaimans-the-sandman-taught-me-to-be-courageous-in-writing, accessed 21 Dec. 2025.

Clarke, Susanna. Interview. *BBC Nottingham*, 24 Sept. 2014, https://www.bbc.co.uk/nottingham/content/articles/2004/09/15/entertainment_books_susanna_clarke_feature.shtml, accessed 21 Dec. 2025.

Clarke, Susanna. *Piranesi*. Bloomsbury, 2020.

Clarke, Susanna. "This Critique of Progress Was Something I Borrowed from CS Lewis." Interview. *Hindustan Times*, 20 Sept. 2020, https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/this-critique-of-progress-was-something-i-borrowed-from-cs-lewis-susanna-clarke/story-2IGUzUnUYHB7lfyvjEQYSL.html, accessed 20 Dec. 2025.

Clarkson, Joy Marie. "Susanna Clarke's Cautionary Tale of Re-Enchantment: *Piranesi* and Owen Barfield's Mystical Modernism." *Religion and the Arts*, vol. 28, 2024, pp. 605–26. https://doi.org/10.1163/15685292-02805004

Despret, Vinciane. "Domesticating Practices: The Case of Arabian Babblers." *Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies*, edited by Garry Marvin and Susan McHugh, Routledge, 2014, pp. 23–38.

Despret, Vinciane. "Inquiries Raised by the Dead." Translated by Catherine V. Howard. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2019, pp. 236–48. https://doi.org/10.1086/705734

Dugger, Julie M. "Lewis and Clarke in the Caves: Art and Platonic Worlds in *Piranesi*." *Mythlore*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2021, pp. 63–83.

"Ecology, *N*." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, December 2024. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6977061619

Gibson, James J. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Psychology, 2015.

Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto." *Manifestly Haraway*, U of Minnesota P, 2016, pp. 3–90. https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816650477.003.0001

Haraway, Donna J. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575–99. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q

Kellermann, Jonas. "Ambiguous Story Worlds in the Fiction of Susanna Clarke." *Ambiguity and Narratology: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Diachronic Case Studies*, edited by Simon Grund, Robert Kirstein, and Julian Wagner, De Gruyter, 2024, pp. 189–216. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111502618-009

Le Guin, Ursula K. "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction." 1986. *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, Grove, 1989, pp. 165–70.

Lewis, C. S. *The Magician's Nephew*. HarperCollins, 1980.

Loh, Janina. "Posthumanism and Ethics." *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, edited by Stefan Herbrechter et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 1073–95. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04958-3_34

Manwaring, Kevan. *The Ecological Imaginary in Literature and Other Media: The Nature of Fantasy*. Routledge, 2026. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003463665

Myśliwiec, Katarzyna. "Animism as a Key to Remodelling Modern Environmental Ethics: An Ecocritical Reading of *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke." *InScriptum: A Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 5, 2024, pp. 107–27. https://doi.org/10.25951/13113

Polvinen, Merja. "Literature and Enactive Cognition." *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Cognitive Studies*, edited by Jan Alber and Ralf Schneider, Routledge, 2025, pp. 327–38. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003387473-31

Sender, Courtney. "Ways of Knowing, Ethics of Care in *Piranesi*'s Labyrinth." *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 2022, https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/ways-of-knowing-ethics-of-care-in-piranesis-labyrinth/, accessed 12 Feb. 2026.

Stengers, Isabelle. *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. Translated by Andrew Goffey, Open Humanities/Meson, 2015. https://doi.org/10.14619/016

Ursa, Andra-Iulia. "Mental Illness, Identity, and Philosophical Inquiry in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*." *Incursiuni în imaginar*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2024, pp. 299–319. https://doi.org/10.29302/InImag.2024.15.1.12

Wilford, Sarah. "Metaphor, Meaning, and Mind: Knowledge and Imagination in Owen Barfield." *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism and Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism Revisited*, edited by Gene Callahan and Kenneth B. McIntyre, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 145–70. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-05226-2_10

Marta Goszczyńska is Assistant Professor in the Department of British Literature and Culture at the University of Lodz. She completed her PhD in 2006 with a dissertation that explored the hybrid nature of late 20th-century neo-Victorian fiction. She is co-editor of *Changing Ireland: Transitions and Transformations in Irish Literature and Culture* (Wydawnictwo UŁ, 2010), *The Playful Air of Light(ness) in Irish Literature and Culture* (Cambridge Scholars, 2011) and *Reading Graham Swift* (Lexington Press, 2020). Her research interests include women's studies, neo-Victorianism, and narrative theory. She has published, both nationally and internationally, on such authors as William Trevor, Michèle Roberts, Sarah Waters, A. S. Byatt, Valerie Martin, Graham Swift, and Colum McCann.

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3156-8670

marta.goszczynska@uni.lodz.pl

WORLD LITERATURES MATTER

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.24

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Karolina Kmita
University of Silesia in Katowice

Queer Relational Ontologies in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*

Abstract

This article examines how contemporary Nigerian writers Akwaeke Emezi and Chinelo Okparanta reconfigure dominant understandings of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Under the Udala Trees*, respectively. Bringing decolonial thought into dialogue with queer ecology, I firstly show how these texts mobilise Igbo relational ontologies to unsettle binary constructions of gender and challenge Western separations between body, spirit, and natural environment. Within this framework, the Mami Wata figure, the concept of *ilo uwa*, the udala tree, and the ecological affinities represented in the texts under discussion function not only as symbols of indigenous belief systems but as active forces that inform the relationships between bodies, spirituality, and nature. In this way, queerness emerges in both novels as a mode of becoming constituted through more-than-human entanglements that transcend the binary limitations of modernity. Secondly, the article demonstrates how both Emezi and Okparanta problematise anti-queer violence to critique colonial regimes of power, particularly those reinforced by religious dogmas. Such regimes discipline queer subjects through shame, exclusion, and physical coercion, exposing the persistence of colonial dominance in knowledge production. Finally, I conclude the present article by stating that both texts underscore the anticolonial practices of queer relatedness, enacted through ethics of care, commemoration, and collective bonds, as a condition which enables a queer Nigerian future.

Keywords: queer relational ontologies, colonial gender binary, Nigerian literature, decolonial queer ecology, Akwaeke Emezi, Chinelo Okparanta.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: This article is a part of the research project entitled *Beyond the Flesh: Representations of Corporeality in Anglophone Nigerian Novels of the 21st Century* (Grant No. 2024/53/N/ HS2/00463) supported by the National Science Centre, Poland (Narodowe Centrum Nauki). **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 5 Dec. 2025. Verified: 28 May 2026. Accepted: 16 June 2026.

INTRODUCTION

In a 1994 interview with *The Paris Review*, Chinua Achebe reflects on an African proverb which accentuates the need for centring marginalised people in crafting their own stories. The author employs the metaphor of writers as historians who should strive to recount the history of hunting from the perspective of the figurative lion rather than the hunter (Achebe). More than thirty years later, Achebe's words still reverberate among Nigerian writers—including Akwaeke Emezi, Francesca Ekwuyasi, Arinze Ifeakandu, Romeo Oriogun, and Chinelo Okparanta. Taking up the torch from the pantheon of Nigeria's first-generation authors, such as the aforementioned Achebe and Wole Soyinka, contemporary Nigerian authors build on earlier literary traditions. As Lindsey Green-Simms notes, Achebe and Soyinka subtly alluded to non-heteronormative expressions of sexuality in their works. However, considering the socio-political contexts in which their works were written, they did not address this issue explicitly (Green-Simms 140). By contrast, this new generation of Nigerian writers brings such a discussion to the forefront by shedding light on marginalised sexual groups in Nigeria. In doing so, they create a counter-narrative to claims that seek to present homosexual relationships as un-African. Addressing the common argument against homosexuality informed by the gender complementarity rule, they articulate a response to the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act. Signed by Nigeria's president in 2014, the law penalises homosexual encounters, carrying a maximum sentence of fourteen years. It also fosters a precarious and hostile environment toward non-heteronormative subjects by punishing not only same-sex unions but also individuals who are aware of them with imprisonment of up to ten years (Balogun and Bissell 116).

In the Nigerian public discourse, same-sex desire is often portrayed as a remnant of colonial influence by leaders who instrumentalise sexuality for their own political ends. However, given the history of colonialism, it may be concluded that it was, in fact, homophobia, not homosexuality, that was transported to Africa with the colonial enterprise. As Sylvia Tamale points out, narratives regarding homosexuality as un-African are bereft of historical context, obfuscating queer genealogies across the continent (34). To illustrate this point, she further historicizes queerness in Africa by providing an example of the Langi community of northern Uganda, where effeminate males known as *mudoko dako* were regarded as females and were allowed to marry other men (35). Additionally, in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, Ifi Amadiume argues that in the precolonial society of her hometown in Nnobi, located in southeastern Nigeria, the disconnection between biological sex and

ideological gender paved the way for women to assume roles traditionally associated with men. Subsequently, they were recognised as 'males' in terms of power and authority and, as a result, were allowed to marry other women (185). Similarly, Oyeronke Oyewumi argues that, in precolonial times, gender was a fluid concept in southwestern Nigeria, specifically the Oyo-Yoruba region, and it did not determine one's social position. In fact, it was seniority that marked an individual's status in the community. Therefore, Oyewumi suggests that the idea of biological determinism as the organising principle of social hierarchy, which she conceptualises as "bio-logic" (X), was introduced to indigenous knowledge systems alongside Christianity and Western education: "The goal of the missionaries was to transform African societies, not to preserve them, [thus] the African family system was to be targeted for reform and, in turn, to be the vehicle for the 'civilization' of these societies" (128–29). Nevertheless, one should exercise caution in accepting Oyewumi's understanding of Yoruba identity without a careful critical examination. In fact, in some instances, her arguments seem to lack empirical evidence. While it is true that the category of gender is a by-product of colonisation, Oyewumi's theorising does not take into account the fact that seniority as the main organising principle among the Yorubas was based on patrilineality. This gave men a dominant position in certain spheres of life before the arrival of the Western missionaries. Thus, in some cases, the idea of seniority reinforced gender hierarchies prior to the emergence of social constructs such as *male* or *female*. In this regard, it appears that Oyewumi's reasoning reflects her revisionist motives, and that she herself constructs an idealised image of a pre-colonial society in which the concept of gender held no significance (Mama 69). Driven by her longing for a culturally pure African selfhood, she falls into the dichotomous Africa-versus-the-West trap, perpetuating the dualisms she vehemently opposes (Bakare-Yusuf 137). These incongruities in Oyewumi's historiography do not negate the fact that her critique of gender and Western dominance in knowledge production was and still is an inspiration for a whole array of scholars. Among them is Maria Lugones, a decolonial feminist thinker who, picking up on Oyewumi's arguments, introduces the term "coloniality of gender" ("Toward a Decolonial Feminism" 746). This notion emphasises how colonial gender-coded logics continue to shape power relations, structure social hierarchies, and inform the production of knowledge in the present. In other words, Lugones accentuates the need to understand how these power structures operate along intersecting axes to reveal our complicity in systemic, gendered, and racialised violence. By doing so, she seeks to acknowledge these forms of violence in our daily lives, which she refers to as "our maps of reality" ("The Coloniality of Gender" 56).

Such an appeal to acknowledge the persistence of colonial legacies on gender roles, power dynamics, and knowledge production is a common thread that runs through the works of contemporary Nigerian writers who shed light on how queer individuals in Nigeria are stripped of what is commonly referred to as the essence of *Africanness*. In doing so, they forge new paths for renegotiating queer belonging within Nigerian cartographies. Reclaiming and sharing stories of same-sex desire among Nigerians, their literary works resist the imposed hierarchies determining which forms of indigenous knowledges emerging from the Global South are worthy of consideration.

In the present article, I examine how Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji* and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* redefine dominant understandings of gender, sexuality, and embodiment. Situating decolonial thought in dialogue with queer ecology, I argue that these texts engage Igbo relational ontologies to challenge fixed gender binaries and unsettle Western divisions between the body, spirituality, and the natural environment. In this context, the Mami Wata figure, the notion of *ilo uwa*, the udala tree, and the ecological affinities illustrated in both novels are not just symbolic of indigenous beliefs; they are also presented as active forces that dismantle the nature/culture binary. By so doing, they problematise queer embodiment as constituted through human, spiritual, and ecological entanglements. I further underscore how both authors problematise anti-queer violence as a way to critique colonial systems of power, especially those upheld through religious practices. Finally, I conclude by illustrating how these novels render queer modes of relatedness, enacted through ethics of care, memory, and collective bonds, as foundational for queer Nigerian futures.

DECOLONISING GENDER THROUGH IGBO METAPHYSICS AND NIGERIAN QUEER ECOLOGIES

In their writing, Nigerian-born Akwaeke Emezi and Chinelo Okparanta draw on indigenous epistemologies that unsettle fixed boundaries between the human, spiritual, and environmental realms. Consequently, they situate their novels within the broader tradition of Nigerian writing, including Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), which foreground indigenous relational ontologies that challenge Western epistemic frameworks. Both *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Under the Udala Trees* exemplify this approach. Weaving Igbo metaphysical concepts such as *ilo uwa*, the Mami Wata figure, and environmental references, these texts articulate queerness as constituted through more-than-human entanglements. Through this framework, they

employ Igbo vocabularies not only to deconstruct gender but also to enact a decolonial intervention in queer ecology.

In *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010), Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson suggest that, through its recourse to nature, queer ecology dismantles the essentialist binaries that frame iterations of same-sex desire as unnatural. Thus, a nascent scholarship in queer ecology links queer sexuality with an environmental sensibility. "Queer ecology," as they argue, refers to "a new practice of ecological knowledges, spaces, and politics that places central attention on challenging hetero-ecologies from the perspective of non-normative sexual and gender positions" (22). By using the term "hetero-ecologies," the authors refer to the dominant paradigms that equate heterosexuality with nature through the lens of biological reproduction. Queer ecology, on the other hand, questions these assumptions, reconsidering nature as a site of fluidity, relationality, and non-normative embodiment. Such an alternative mode of thinking resonates with both *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Under the Udala Trees*, where the natural world is rendered as abundant in queer-affirming spaces.

Furthermore, these novels connect queer ecology and a decolonial praxis in the sense that the body's proximity to nature, historically devalued by colonial discourse, allows for a reclamation of indigenous ways of knowing/being: "[T]he very locus of othering Africans as savages and subhuman, which is their closeness to their natural world, becomes an aesthetic strategy for anti-colonial narratives" (Egya 12). Given that the concept of nature is deeply embedded in colonial gender/sexuality discourses and racialisation practices, queer ecology, as Gregory Luke Chwala suggests, should be theorised in tandem with decoloniality: "[I]t is . . . impossible to have queer ecologies, even ecocriticism, without a commitment to decolonization because fear and oppression of Western conceptions of both the erotic and isolated nonhuman environments—erotophobia and ecophobia—are so deeply intertwined" (144). In this sense, Chwala's observation makes clear that discourses of sexuality and ecology should be understood within colonial frameworks that produce and sustain exclusionary practices based on gender, sexuality, and race.

In contrast to the colonial logic that enforced a separation between flesh, spirit, and the environment, African indigenous ontologies conceived of the body as embedded within a more-than-human ensemble: "The society of humans was merely a singular segment of the *general community of beings, which included the dead*" (Mbembe 19, emphasis in the original). Thus, the novels examined in the present article manifest a shift from a Western model of the human grounded in separation, rationality, and exceptionalism to one structured by interdependence, in which embodiment unfolds across human, spiritual, and environmental registers. Both *The*

Death of Vivek Oji and *Under the Udala Trees* dislodge the nature/culture binary through their detachment from the epistemological assumptions of Western modernity, a process which Walter Mignolo theorises as "epistemic delinking" ("Delinking" 461). In both texts, this is achieved by adopting indigenous ontologies—inherently more-than-human in orientation—as frameworks that facilitate queer becoming.

For instance, in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, Emezi mobilises the Igbo metaphysical concept of *ilo uwa* to reconfigure terms such as gender, sexuality, and embodiment. Rather than signifying a cyclical reincarnation in which a discrete soul transfers between bodies, *ilo uwa* denotes a relational continuity where ancestral presence partially manifests in the living without departing from the spiritual realm. As Kingsley Nwannennaya Okoro points out, *ilo uwa* relies on the intermingling of the material and spiritual worlds. Although the ancestor remains in the spiritual realm, their diffused personhood is partially reflected in the offspring through vital qualities (Okoro 20). The novel renders this ontology through the convergence of Vivek's birth with Ahunna's death, as well as their shared starfish-shaped scar that highlights the material and spiritual connection between these two (Emezi 5, 12). When Vivek's father, Chika, asks, "How else could that scar have entered the world on flesh if it had not left in the first place?," his observation implies that Ahunna's continued presence is articulated through Vivek's materiality (13). In this light, the protagonist's further reclamation of the name *Nnemdi*, which translates to *my mother is alive* (Madubuike 49), problematises his queerness as a process of becoming constituted through his multifaceted relationship with Ahunna.

In this context, the concept of *ilo uwa* can be read as inherently queer because it figures Vivek's embodiment as fluid and constituted through relations across ontological and temporal domains. This aligns with Wesley Paul Macheso's argument that Emezi's non-normative representations of space and time show how Igbo ontologies are "queer in nature" (209). Thus, by acknowledging his connection to Ahunna and "his role as a holder of life," Vivek is able to enact his queer mode of being as Nnemdi (Durán-Almarza 89). In light of the above, *ilo uwa* emerges in the novel not only as an indigenous framework that transcends the colonial gender binary but also as an ontological actant that allows for the articulation of Vivek/Nnemdi's queer subjectivity.

As the main character's connection to his grandmother becomes more pronounced, Vivek shifts toward his feminine side, while his gender remains uncategorised. At this stage, Emezi invokes the figure of Mami Wata to describe Vivek's physical features through the eyes of those around him. According to Henry John Drewal's ethnographic study of the deity, Mami Wata embraces liminal potentialities that transcend Western categorisations

of the embodied subject: "She is a transcendent, transformative, transcultural, transnational, transgendered, and trans-Atlantic being. She straddles both land and water, culture and nature (being half-human, half-fish)" (295). Thus, the narrative situates Vivek/Nnemdi's character within the fluid ontology of Mami Wata. This is further manifested in the novel when the protagonist, appearing in public as Nnemdi, is described by bystanders in the market as "tall with long mammy water hair" (Emezi 149). In this case, Mami Wata and her aquatic realm operate not only as a metaphor. Rather, they function as a transformative medium through which Vivek/Nnemdi's queer subjectivity is enacted. This, in turn, allows us to conceptualise queerness as a relational mode of being that emerges through the dynamic interplay of human, spiritual, and ecological registers.

This relational aspect extends beyond the aquatic into the terrestrial domain, where Vivek/Nnemdi's posthumous transfiguration is realised through his material entanglement with the soil and its regenerative possibilities. In one of the closing scenes, Osita's speculative contemplation focuses on Kavita's deliberate choice to plant a star fruit tree at the head of her child's grave:

> Did she look forward to the day when it would actually have star fruits hanging from its branches? Would she pick them and eat them as if she was absorbing him, bringing him back inside where he'd come from? It would be something like Holy Communion, I imagined, body and blood turned into yellow flesh and pale green skin, bursting with juice. Or maybe she would never touch the fruit—maybe no one would—and they would fall back to the ground to rot, to sink back into the soil, until the roots of the tree took them back and it would just continue like that, around and around. Or birds would show up and eat the fruit, then carry Vivek around, giving life to things even after he'd run out of it himself. (230)

This passage indicates a process of rebirth in which death is figured as a site of ecological renewal. The merging of Vivek/Nnemdi's flesh with the earth and its bounties depicts the queer body as a source of new life. In addition, the images of germination, consumption, and decay hint at the possibility of transformation, in which the body is constantly reconstituted through relational and material exchanges. Such a perspective is consistent with Mbembe's concept, according to which the Earth is a "vibratorium" and a "binder" that enables an alteration from one form of life to another. Articulating death as a site of new beginning, as he suggests, aligns with pre-colonial African ontologies, which reject the notion of death as a demise. Instead, they conceive of death as a rite of passage from one world to another, opening onto the possibility of cyclical rebirth to "give life to what is threatened with demise" (Mbembe 8–9). In this light, Vivek/

Nnemdi's situatedness within the natural world animates the possibility of queer continuity. Framing Nigerian ecologies as fertile ground for queer existence, *The Death of Vivek Oji* articulates a decolonial queer ecology. In this framework, queer embodiment emerges as a web of human, spiritual, and ecological relations which resist colonial regimes of power.

Similarly, in *Under the Udala Trees*, Okparanta problematises queer relational ontologies by employing Igbo vocabularies such as the eponymous udala tree, the aforementioned Mami Wata figure, or environmental references. Inspired by her mother's accounts of war, Okparanta's debut novel tells the story of a 10-year-old girl, Ijeoma, who comes to terms with her lesbian sexuality against the canvas of the Biafran War. By June 1968, as Nigerian forces tighten their grip around Biafra, Ijeoma's father dies in an air raid, and her mother sends the eleven-year-old girl to live with a family friend who offers to look after her in exchange for housework. As it soon turns out, Ijeoma's departure for Nnewi marks the beginning of her quest for a lesbian identity. As such, *Under the Udala Trees* echoes a common trope in Nigerian literature, in which exile from home, whether literal or metaphysical, fosters a child's personal growth, as seen in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* or Okri's *The Famished Road*. Without the safety net of her kin, Ijeoma is not only forced to endure the hardships of growing up away from home, but she also learns how to navigate her budding sexuality.

When one day, during her stay in her grammar school teacher's house, Ijeoma is sent to fetch kerosene, she meets an orphaned Hausa girl named Amina. Interestingly, during their first encounter, Ijeoma employs a fruit-related metaphor to describe Amina's appearance. By referring to Amina's skin as "[y]ellow, like a ripe pawpaw" (Okparanta 104), the girl locates queer desire within the natural environment. This reflects Elleke Boehmer's argument that queerness can emerge through "questing and/or questioning," often expressed through metaphor and other poetic effects (175). Thus, Okparanta links vegetal imagery to the geographies of the lesbian body, situating queerness within Nigerian ecological contexts. What is more, the first enactment of Ijeoma and Amina's lesbian lovemaking takes place in a hovel located in a rural setting animated with the sounds of nature: "grasshoppers hopping, fireflies buzzing, crickets singing their songs, leaves rustling in a breeze" (Okparanta 117). The spatial framing of these queer intimacies challenges the common relegation of queer desire to urban contexts (Seymour 19). Through this bucolic setting, Okparanta brings queer desire closer to nature, and "obviate[s] the nature–culture schema," which casts the human as superior to the natural world (Seymour 38). The author embeds same-sex desire within rather than apart from the natural domain: "Ijeoma's acceptance of her love and physical attraction to Amina comes as something natural" (Cruz-Gutiérrez 104). In turn, this

secluded rural environment becomes a safe space which allows same-sex intimacies between the girls to flourish, far from the ravages of war.

As in Vivek/Nnemdi's case, Ijeoma's queerness is further manifested in *Under the Udala Trees* through reference to the Mami Wata figure. Comparing her body to that of an Igbo deity, Ijeoma describes Amina's image in terms of her resemblance to the hybrid creature: "Her hair hung in long clumps around her face, like those images of Mami Wata, hair writhing like serpents" (Okparanta 104). This reference is particularly important since Mami Wata's followers are largely individuals positioned on the margins of society (Fourqurean 21). Furthermore, the term *Mammywater* surpasses colonial-coded gender dualisms since it might be used to refer to male and female water deities (Jell-Bahlsen 30). This water-based ontology emerges in the novel as a space where rigid categories of gender and sexuality are dissolved. Within this framework, the figure of Mami Wata and her aquatic affinities exceed a purely symbolic register. Instead, linked to Amina's tangible body, they become materially implicated in Ijeoma's queer becoming.

Interestingly, Okparanta further problematises Western conceptualisations of femininity—and, in doing so, naturalises homoerotic desire—by staging the girls' first encounter beneath the udala tree, which in Igbo culture symbolises female fertility and the spirit of children (Agukoronye 95). This symbolic choice is not incidental; rather, as the author herself explains, the udala tree is "relevant to the themes of [the] novel" precisely because it enables her to "interrogate prescriptive notions of femininity" ("Queerness, Womanity, and Hope"). Consequently, femininity is redefined in the novel in a way to accommodate Ijeoma's and Amina's non-heteronormative sexualities and to create what Josephine Delali Ofei and Daniel Oppong-Adjei describe as "a justifiable space for their queer sexual desires" (69). In other words, the author portrays the girls' encounter under the udala tree and their subsequent same-sex attraction as an organic process. In addition, the material presence of the tree actively participates in their queer becoming, providing them with a natural haven where their homoerotic desires can be actualised. As Daisy Gohain notes, "[f]or Ijeoma and Amina, the tree serves as a sanctuary, shielding them from the critical gaze of their community" (12). In this context, carving out a safe space for same-sex intimate relationships is not only a manifestation of a decolonial stance but also allows for a redefinition of nature from a queer perspective.

Taken together, Emezi and Okparanta mobilise Igbo relational ontologies and Nigerian queer ecologies not only to challenge the colonial constructions of gender but also to problematise the imposed divisions between the flesh, spirit, and nature. Drawing on concepts such as *ilo uwa*,

the udala tree, the figure of Mami Wata, and environmental references, both authors articulate queerness as a relational mode of becoming, emerging through human, spiritual, and environmental entanglements. In doing so, these narratives expose the limitations of Western thought, revealing how colonial legacies suppress queer articulations of sexuality inherent in indigenous ways of knowing/being. This repression, as the next section demonstrates, takes the form of anti-queer violence, which, enforced through religious dogmas, becomes a strategic mechanism aimed at restoring the heteronormative order.

WOUNDED FLESH, DEFIANT SPIRITS

The echoes of colonial domination, which continues to shape social responses to gender and sexuality, are evident in the novels under discussion. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, this is rendered through the figure of Vivek's aunt, Mary. According to the religious doctrine she upholds, she perceives Vivek's queer embodied subjectivity as an abomination. Her perspective becomes even more pronounced when, following Vivek's significant weight loss and repeated refusals to cut his hair, she urges his mother, Kavita, to allow her to take him to church for deliverance. Given Kavita's Indian origins and her involvement in the community of the Nigerwives who treat local Christian beliefs as superstitious and performative, she is initially resentful toward this idea:[1] "All the Nigerwives liked to make fun of what they called the fanatic Christians, always catching the Holy Ghost and convulsing on carpets" (Emezi 83). However, when the doctor to whom Kavita takes her child offers no apt diagnosis or support, she eventually accepts Mary's offer. When Vivek returns from the church, he recounts being physically abused by individuals who believed him to be possessed by an evil spirit. These people, Vivek claims, "had to beat it out," leaving "a swath of dark red welts on his side" (75). This construal of Vivek's queer body as an aberration reflects a culture of deliverance that relegates queer subjectivities to the realm of evil. In this sense, the wounds inflicted on his flesh render the protagonist's body a site of anti-queer violence, deployed to reassert a normative heterosexual order. Consequently, Vivek's body is dehumanised, reduced to that of an *animal* and subjected to whipping by the self-proclaimed emissaries of God (75). These anti-queer sentiments, however, do not prevent the main character from embracing

[1] The Nigerwives are an association of foreign women married to Nigerian men, established in 1979 as a transnational support community for immigrant wives living in Nigeria (see Onyemelukwe).

his queerness as Nnemdi. As the narrative progresses, the protagonist's non-heteronormative manifestations transcend the safe space of his friends—Osita, Elizabeth, Juju, Somto, and Olunne—and enter the public sphere (Nenadović 291). As a result, Nnemdi's queerness becomes visible in the local marketplace, where ongoing political riots put her life at risk. Fearing for her safety, Osita attempts to persuade Nnemdi to return home. This leads to an argument between the two of them, during which Osita accidentally pushes Nnemdi to the ground, ultimately causing her death. However, in the novel, this death is not figured as a tragic ending. On the contrary, by dying in the arms of the beloved as Nnemdi, the protagonist moves across temporal boundaries and transcends the constraints of anti-queer discourse, as reflected in the following contemplation from beyond the grave: "I often wonder if I died in the best possible way—in the arms of the one who loved me the most, wearing a skin that was true" (Emezi 244). This posthumous transformation unsettles linear temporality and animates the possibility of a Nigerian future unencumbered by queer hostility.

Anti-queer sentiments also find expression in *Under the Udala Trees*. For example, when the grammar school teacher catches the girls in the middle of their love-making, he slaps them on their cheeks, clutches his Bible, and describes their act as an "abomination" (Okparanta 125). Proclaiming the homoerotic encounter between the girls to be a sin, the teacher resorts to physical abuse to uphold the existing norms. As a result, both Ijeoma and Amina are left feeling ashamed of their same-sex intimacies. The protagonist compares this scene to Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise: "We were naked, and we felt our nakedness Adam and Eve must have felt in the garden, at the time of that evening breeze. Our eyes had become open, and we too sought to hide ourselves" (125). In turn, the imposition of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 13), enforced through physical violence and religious discourse, leads to the separation of the girls. Consequently, Amina stays at the grammar school teacher's house while Ijeoma is fetched back home by her mother. Believing that a demon possesses her daughter, Adaora becomes determined to *cleanse* Ijeoma's soul. Arranging lessons in which she cites biblical parables, she attempts to convince her daughter that Christianity and homosexuality are fundamentally incompatible. However, instead of agreeing with her mother's biblical interpretation, Ijeoma forms her own understanding of Scripture. As Cédric Courtois notes, she eagerly explores alternative readings that question the universality of colonial paradigms (124). Thus, rather than taking the story of Adam and Eve verbatim and reading it as a mandate for heterosexual union, she perceives the creation narrative as a metaphor for human companionship, one that is not determined by gender (Okparanta 76).

Interestingly, Ijeoma is also subjected to a deliverance ritual, but unlike Vivek/Nnemdi, not at the hands of religious leaders, but those of her mother. When the Bible lessons fail to produce the desired effect, and Ijeoma confesses that she still thinks about Amina, her mother refigures Ijeoma's lesbian desire as a demonic force that must be eliminated. She attempts to free her daughter from her evil spirit by anointing her body and uttering the words: "In the name of the Almighty God, I order you to leave my child alone" (88). While initially Ijeoma attempts to conform to her mother's expectations, she gradually comes to understand that her same-sex desire is not sinful (159). After a few years apart, the protagonist reunites with her former lover, only to discover that Amina's attitude toward their relationship has changed. This change stems from a strict Catholic education during her stay with the grammar school teacher: "Maybe we were the fallen children, the sinful ones without the strength to continue in the path of righteousness" (155). Ultimately, Amina distances herself from Ijeoma, starts dating boys, and eventually announces her engagement to a Hausa man, marking the end of the relationship between the two girls.

After returning to Ojoto to help her mother with her business, Ijeoma meets Ndidi, a local teacher, and their mutual connection soon develops into a romantic relationship. Through Ndidi, Ijeoma is introduced to a community of queer women who gather in an abandoned church. The novel thus highlights how Black lesbian solidarities are pertinent to queer existence (Amodu 1). This collective lesbian camaraderie situated within a religious setting can be understood as a reappropriation of sacred space, one that strategically negotiates queer belonging within a Christian framework. It is also at this church that, dancing in her lover's arms, Ijeoma experiences a liberating affirmation of her lesbian identity for the first time: "We danced together for a long time, Ndidi and I, and I felt a sense of liberation that I had not until then known" (Okparanta 193). This scene hints at Ijeoma's subversion of the traditional notion of deliverance. In other words, she does not seek liberation from the supposed devil of homosexuality; rather, she strives to free herself from the homophobia ingrained in her environment (van Klinken and Makinana 4).

However, Ijeoma's journey toward queer liberation is not a straightforward process, and she frequently questions the moral legitimacy of her actions. As the novel progresses, she embarks on a figurative "witch-hunt" (Okparanta 196) against her own lesbian desires. Given the precarity of queer existence in a hostile environment, she temporarily succumbs to societal pressure and decides to marry her male childhood friend. Nevertheless, this abusive marriage eventually falters, and she returns home with her daughter, Chidinma, in her arms. Notably, Ijeoma's return

home marks the point where Adaora's love for her ultimately prevails over public discourses of normativity. Embracing her daughter with the words: "God, who created you, must have known what He did" (323), Ijeoma's mother finally reconciles her Christian faith with her daughter's queerness. This moment allows for queer post-secular readings that frame Ijeoma's lesbian sexuality as part of God's creation.

In the novels discussed, compulsory Christianity functions as a tool of coercion that governs acceptable expressions of gender and sexuality. Vivek/Nnemdi's and Ijeoma's queer bodies are presented as sites where colonial codes are transcribed, with religion functioning as a vehicle via which such inscriptions are enforced. However, through their refusal to accept colonial modes of knowledge production as universal, both protagonists engage in "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience" 178). As a result, they liberate themselves from the constraints of religious dogma, albeit using different strategies. In other words, although both Emezi and Okparanta use Christianity's demonisation of queer bodies as the main focus of critique, their novels simultaneously create space for various forms of queer spirituality. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, this is achieved through the reclamation of indigenous ways of knowing/being that offer an affirmative space for gender-queer individuals. *Under the Udala Trees*, on the other hand, allows for a critical reinterpretation of religious norms, one that accommodates queer subjectivities within the Christian domain. Thus, subverting the construction of queerness as inherently secular, these novels do not dismiss the spiritual dimensions of queer identity. Rather, they reject the imposition of colonial regimes that instrumentalise religious practices in order to regulate norms of gender and sexuality through shame, exclusion, and physical coercion. In doing so, they open up space not only for imagining Nigerian queer futures but also for bringing them to life.

CONCLUSIONS

In "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," Mignolo and Vázquez conceptualise the notion of "the colonial wound," which refers to the epistemic, spiritual, and ecological ruptures brought about by colonial regimes in the name of modernity. In both novels, this wound manifests in the experiences of anti-queer violence endured by Ijeoma and Vivek/Nnemdi. Highlighting how the heteropatriarchal order, enforced through religious dogmas, thwarts queer liveability through emotional/physical abuse, shame, and exclusion, both Emezi's and Okparanta's works present "the unveiling of the [colonial] wound"

(Mignolo and Vázquez). At the same time, both of these novels problematise queerness as a site of contestation where Western categorisations of gender, sexuality, and embodiment are dislodged. Framing Mami Wata, *ilo uwa*, the udala tree, and the natural environment as queer-affirming domains, the novels conceptualise non-heteronormative embodiment as a relational mode of being, constituted through human, spiritual, and ecological domains. Consequently, *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Under the Udala Trees* gesture towards the "possibility of healing" that relies on the recognition and recovery of alternative ways of knowing and being erased by the imposition of modernity (Mignolo and Vázquez).

Envisioning the Nigerian future as a space that accommodates difference and cultivates a shared sense of belonging, both Emezi and Okparanta frame these anti-colonial practices of relatedness as the foundation for queer Nigerian world-making. Enacted through ethics of care, memory, and collective action, in both novels, such practices become central to creating spaces in which queer existences may flourish. In *The Death of Vivek Oji*, this finds expression in the final chapter, where Nnemdi, despite her death, enters the story as a narrative voice. Her last words—"Somewhere, you see, in the river of time, I am already alive" (Emezi 245)—establish queer future as attainable through a reclamation of non-linear temporality. The river's ebb and flow, in turn, suggests the possibility of change enabled by a recovery of indigenous relational ontologies. In this sense, Nnemdi's posthumous narration, alongside the commemoration of her name on a tombstone by her parents, resists the systemic erasure enforced by heteropatriarchal regimes. Consequently, this cyclical ontology fosters a sense of hope through its re-negotiation of queer belonging within the Nigerian milieu.

A hopeful note is also sounded in *Under the Udala Trees*. After her marriage to Chibundu falls apart, Ijeoma reunites with Ndidi. Towards the end of the novel, Ijeoma recounts how the two often lie together in bed, while Ndidi reimagines Nigeria as a place where love is not governed by gender or ethnic divides. In the penultimate scene, Ijeoma reflects: "Many days I reason to myself that change is the point of it all. And that everything we do should be a reflection on that change" (Okparanta 322). This emphasis on transformation is evident not only in Adaora's evolving attitude, as she comes to terms with her daughter's lesbianism, but also in Chidinma's commitment to making Nigeria a safe place for queer people. Describing her daughter as a symbol of a new generation of Nigerians more inclined "toward love than fear," Ijeoma puts emphasis on collective bonds as essential to queer Nigerian futures.

In light of the above, both *The Death of Vivek Oji* and *Under the Udala Trees* foreground queer futurity as a praxis through which alternative

modes of belonging are actively produced in opposition to the epistemic and affective violences of heteropatriarchy. In doing so, they reframe queer Nigerian futurity not as a distant possibility but as a continuous process enacted through ethics of care, memory, and kinship.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "Chinua Achebe, the Art of Fiction No. 139." Interview by Jeremy Brooks. *The Paris Review*, 1994, www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1720/the-art-of-fiction-no-139-chinua-achebe, accessed 25 June 2025.

Agukoronye, Okechukwu C. "Landscape Practices in Traditional Igbo Society, Nigeria." *Landscape Research*, vol. 26, no. 2, Apr. 2001, pp. 85–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/01426390120045391

Amadiume, Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. Zed, 1987.

Amodu, Abideen David. "Literature and Notions of Black Lesbian Solidarity in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*." *Gender Questions*, vol. 11, no. 1, May 2023, pp. 1–18. https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-8457/11826

Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. "'Yorubas Don't Do Gender': A Critical Review of Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*." *African Identities*, vol. 1, no. 1, Apr. 2003, pp. 119–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/1472584032000127914

Balogun, Abisola, and Paul Bissell. "Practices of Non-Heterosexual Masculinities among MSM in Nigeria." *Queer in Africa: LGBTQI Identities, Citizenship, and Activism*, edited by Surya Monro et al., Routledge, 2018, pp. 114–31.

Boehmer, Elleke. *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*. Manchester UP, 2005.

Chwala, Gregory Luke. "Ruins of Empire: Decolonial Queer Ecologies in Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*." *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics*, vol. 18, no. 1, May 2019, pp. 141–56. https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.18.1.2019.3690

Courtois, Cédric. "'Thou Shalt Not Lie with Mankind as with Womankind: It Is Abomination!': Lesbian (Body-)Bildung in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015)." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, Apr. 2018, pp. 119–33. https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.302

Cruz-Gutiérrez, Cristina. "From Bildungsroman to Bildungsromance: Physical and Affective War in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*." *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, no. 40, Jan. 2024, pp. 97–117. https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.2024.40.06

Drewal, Henry John, et al. "Siren Serenades: Music for Mami Wata and Other Water Spirits in Africa." *Music of the Sirens*, edited by Inna Naroditskaya and Linda Phyllis Austern, Indiana UP, 2006, pp. 294–316.

Durán-Almarza, Emilia María. "Uncomfortable Truths: Queer Strangers and Gendered Necropolitics in Akweake Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*." *Papers on Language and Literature*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2022, pp. 70–94.

Egya, Sule E. "Ecology and Decoloniality: Reading the Natural World in Twentieth-Century African Literature." *Scrutiny2*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2024, pp. 9–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2024.2345638

Akwaeke, Emezi. *The Death of Vivek Oji*. Faber and Faber, 2021.

Fourqurean, Megan. "Literary Realism, Speculative Fiction, and Queer African Futures in Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*." *Science Fiction Studies,* vol. 51, no. 3, 2024, pp. 1–34. *White Rose Research Online*, Nov. 2024, https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/218418/, accessed 28 Sept. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1353/sfs.2024.a938534

Gohain, Daisy. "'Are We Heard?' A Litany for Conformity: Redefining Queer Identities in Modern African Literature." *African Identities*, 13 Feb. 2025, pp. 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2025.2465469

Green-Simms, Lindsey. "The Emergent Queer: Homosexuality and Nigerian Fiction in the 21st Century." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2016, p. 140.

Jell-Bahlsen, Sabine. "The Concept of Mammywater in Flora Nwapa's Novels." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1995, pp. 30–41.

Klinken, Adriaan van, and Belinda Qaqamba Makinana. "'Deliver Us from Evil': Pentecostal Christianity, Queer Sexualities and the Language of Deliverance in Nigerian Literature." *TransAfrica: The Languages of Postqueerness*, edited by Chantal Zabus and Chris Dunton, Bloomsbury, 2025, pp. 1–15. *White Rose Research Online*, 23 Jan. 2025, https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/218418/, accessed 28 Sept. 2025. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350400795.ch-5

Lugones, Maria. "The Coloniality of Gender." *Feminisms in Movement: Theories and Practices from the Americas*, edited by Julia Roth et al., transcript Verlag, 2023, pp. 35–58.

Lugones, Maria. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypatia*, vol. 25, no. 4, Sept. 2010, pp. 742–59.

Macheso, Wesley Paul. "Queering Tropical African Heteronormativity through Spirit Worlds: Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*." *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2024, pp. 197–212. https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.23.1.2024.4080

Madubuike, Ihechukwu. *A Handbook of African Names*. Three Continents, 1994.

Mama, Amina. "Challenging Subjects: Gender and Power in African Contexts." *African Sociological Review/Revue Africaine de Sociologie*, vol. 5, no. 2, Feb. 2001, pp. 63–73. https://doi.org/10.4314/asr.v5i2.23191

Mbembe, Achille. *The Earthly Community: Reflections on the Last Utopia*. Translated by Steve Corcoran, Polity, 2021.

Mignolo, Walter D. "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2–3, Mar. 2007, pp. 449–514. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647

Mignolo, Walter D. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7–8, 2009, pp. 159–81.

Mignolo, Walter D., and Rolando Vázquez. "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings." *Social Text Periscope*, 2013, socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/, accessed 23 Apr. 2025.

Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona, and Bruce Erickson. "Introduction: A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Indiana UP, 2010, pp. 1–48.

Nenadović, Ana. "What about Love? 'Defiant Love' and Civic Dissent in *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*." *Matatu*, vol. 54, no. 2, Dec. 2023, pp. 277–300. https://doi.org/10.1163/18757421-05402004

Ofei, Josephine Delali, and Daniel Oppong-Adjei. "Sexual Identities in Africa: A Queer Reading of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*." *Asɛmka: A Bilingual Literary Journal of the University of Cape Coast*, no. 11, 1 June 2021, pp. 64–78. https://doi.org/10.47963/asmka.vi11.435

Okoro, Kingsley Nwannennaya. "A Socio-Hermeneutical Discourse on the African Igbo Concept of Reincarnation." *International Journal of Management Reviews*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–23.

Okparanta, Chinelo. "Queerness, Womanity, and Hope: A Conversation with Chinelo Okparanta, Author of Under the Udala Trees." *Electric Literature*, 22 Sept. 2015, https://electricliterature.com/queerness-womanity-and-hope-a-conversation-with-chinelo-okparanta-author-of-under-the-udala-trees/, accessed 4 Apr. 2026.

Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Granta, 2017.

Onyemelukwe, Catherine. "Nigerwives: A Major Transnational Connection and Our Own Tribe." *Academia.edu*, 16 June 2017, www.academia.edu/33512259/Nigerwives_A_Major_Transnational_Connection_and_Our_Own_Tribe, accessed 3 Apr. 2026.

Oyewumi, Oyeronke. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. U of Minnesota P, 1997.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)." *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2003, pp. 11–48.

Seymour, Nicole. *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*. U of Illinois P, 2013.

Tamale, Sylvia. "Confronting the Politics of Nonconforming Sexualities in Africa." *African Studies Review*, vol. 56, no. 2, Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 31–45. https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.40

Karolina Kmita is a PhD student at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. She is also the recipient of a PRELUDIUM research grant (Grant No. 2024/53/N/HS2/00463) from the National Science Centre in Poland for the project *Beyond the Flesh: Representations of Corporeality in Anglophone Nigerian Novels of the 21st Century*. Her research interests include postcolonial literature, queer studies, and gender discourses.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1556-0612

karolina.kmita@us.edu.pl

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.25

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Rajesh Bharvad
Shri Govind Guru University, Godhra, India

Matter Matters: (Cloned) Humans as Infrastructure in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

ABSTRACT

The article contextualises Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* within the evolving concepts of new materialisms. It examines how the writer narrates humans as infrastructure, parallelly analysing material interaction between them. I argue that the cloned subjects exemplify the material and relational co-existence with infrastructures. The article suggests that matter, through the material memory involving intersubjective agentialism (nonhuman enmeshments), forms human subjects. It also unravels how the emotional paradox, correlating matter with emotion, describes matter as a life force for human clones and indicates simultaneous pointlessness. In other words, the paper analyses the agential interaction between humans and matter sabotaging the myth of independent subject formations and acknowledging how matter shapes human subjects. In this process, the article uncovers how humans can co-exist as equal partners in a co-constitutive world, recognising the vitality of matter as an essential step towards a sustainable future.

Keywords: infrastructure, matter, new materialism, *Never Let Me Go*, posthumanism.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 13 Feb. 2025. Verified: 10 Sept. 2025. Accepted: 1 Oct. 2025.

INTRODUCTION

Matter is often treated as passive and ineffective in the Anthropocentric vision of the world, creating an apparent dichotomy between humans and nonhumans. Recent negotiations have taken a post-Anthropocentric stance, identifying how matter interacts with us and shapes our internal (thoughts) and external realities (bodies). In this paper, I argue that matter actively participates in human interactions, modifying and controlling human subjects' physical and psychological actions by sabotaging the old dichotomies of a world filled with material disparities. This approach recognises matter not as "fixed and given nor the mere end result of mere processes" (Barad, *Meeting* 137) but as having "a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such" (Bennett xiii), and dissolving the unified segregation between humans and nonhumans. Ishiguro allows us to identify such intersubjective enmeshments involving human consciousness to recognise the material vibrancy of nonhuman things. Keeping this in view, the paper evaluates Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* in two aspects: the first part of the argument focuses on how humans and matter interact/intra-act with each other, while the other part presents how the cloned humans perform material roles assigned by humans, invoking ethical and empathic considerations in the debate.

In the novel *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro creates a world in which humans, (cloned) humans, and nonhumans (materials) create unique material eventualities or, in Karen Barad's terms, "intra-active possibilities" (*Meeting* 33) of mutual correspondence between humans and nonhumans. For Barad, intra-action develops through mutually constituted human and nonhuman agencies (ibid.). During the intra-active participation, matter exerts power over the human subjects, denying humans' Anthropocene claims of absolute control over nonhumans. She argues that individual agencies do not exist independently but emerge through intra-action between human and nonhuman agencies. Here, Barad accepts relational distinctions between agencies but denies their absolute distinction regarding individual separateness. In other words, intra-action unfolds mutually entangled entities that exist only as active parts, constituting each other's identities. Akin to Barad's intra-action is Jane Bennett's thing-power, which points to the vitality and vibrancy of matter. As Barad's intra-action, while acknowledging the active power of matter, focuses on mutually shared entanglements between humans and nonhumans, Bennett's thing-power enlists ways matter exerts its power on humans, drawing a parallel between humans and nonhumans. Bennett argues that "thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the

outside of our own experience" (xvi). While Barad's intra-action involves constitutive powers emerging through intersubjective agencies, Bennett's thing-power brings forth the vibrancy from matter. Both complement and supplement each other in assuming matter as an active agent, shaping the realities of the world. Drawing on this theoretical framework, the paper investigates the relationship between humans and the material world in *Never Let Me Go*, identifying how (cloned) humans interact (intra-act) with other normal humans and infrastructural material forms.

The paper's emphasis on materiality in the infrastructural selves of the human clones builds upon and expands the current critical threads established by numerous scholars of the novel. As one of the most popular works by Ishiguro, the novel has garnered significant interest among readers and critics of contemporary literature. Many scholars have identified the dystopian vision in Ishiguro's novel, while others have focused on the empathetic and emotional aspects of the narrative. Critics such as Leona Toker, Daniel Chertoff, and Gabriele Griffin treat the novel as a dystopian vision of a dark future, and this perspective dominates the critical discourse on the text.

Deviating from such dystopian visions, Robinson Murphy advocates for "castration desire," which signals "the other-oriented relationality" to move from more to less and suggests how castration—the renunciation of the phallic self—can lead to the greater good in the world (760). Here, castration desire refers to the selfless act of donating organs to other humans for the betterment of humanity. Similarly, Martin Ryle considers this novel a utopian vision, endorsing a sacrificial self rather than an ego-centric capitalist self to support an empathetic worldview. Both Murphy and Ryle advocate renouncing self-centred gains in favour of greater goals and noble causes for humanity. To achieve this, Ryle rejects ego-centric, capitalistic selves in favour of sacrificial selves (57), and Murphy proposes castration desire as a selfless act. Karl Shaddox argues that the novel can be easily considered a sentimental novel aligned with the abolitionist literature of the 18th and 19th centuries (448). For Sebastian Groes, the novel serves as a means to explore the complexities of empathy against the backdrop of the global crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic (3). David Peplow et al. offer a discourse analysis of empathetic and sympathetic responses from a group of readers regarding their reading of *Never Let Me Go*. Here, the critics examine varied responses to emotional connections among human clones and identify "the familiar conceptual metaphors underlying emotion representations" in the novel (44).

The latter interpretations deviate from emotional sensibilities and the other-oriented critique, as they focus on other novel ideas. Thom Dancer examines multiple complexities of the paradoxes of relatability in the novel,

identifying "ethical and political implications" (155). Anne Whitehead, on the other hand, connects the act of reading with "empathy, caring, and the healthy society" (56). Keith McDonald notes autobiographical traces in the novel's metafictional narrative (75). Rachel Carroll recognises queerness in the nonnormative sexuality of the cloned humans, marginalised by the heteronormativity of normal humans. For her, Ishiguro's clones represent a heterosexual identity as a unique case of a disempowered and marginalised section within the larger framework of a dominant heteronormative society (60). Drawing on Arthur Kroker's theory of "body drift" in the analysis of *Never Let Me Go*, Carmen-Veronica Borbély questions the idea of cohesive and unified notions of body, exposing bodily vulnerabilities posed by nonhuman environments and dehumanised conditions of human clones (n.pag.). Despite identifying bodily connections with nonhuman environments, Borbély does not systematically underscore possibilities of mutual modifications and dynamic reconfigurings between humans and nonhumans.

While Carroll describes a nonnormative heterosexual identity in the characters, and Borbély identifies dehumanisation through the concept of body drift, Kelly Rich interprets the human clones through their infrastructural roles. Rich considers this novel an interesting example of the relationship between humans and the surrounding infrastructure (632). For her, the novel presents the case of infrastructuralism as a state-sponsored agency that produces cloned humans as material resources for the rest of humanity. Rich identifies material conditions in the novel, but she overlooks posthuman material conditions, which interrogate the relationship between humans and matter through her anti-Anthropocene stance. She is right when she claims the influence of material surroundings on humans, but this influence can be better analysed through critical insights offered by new materialisms. The material reading of the novel investigates how humans connect with the material world and indicates the power of matter in this interaction. Discussing infrastructural entities without material considerations cannot lead to holistic awareness, as the interconnected world of matters (humans and nonhumans) requires us to recognise their vibrancy and active participation. Such awareness is crucial to the ecological balance required for a sustainable future, as harming one section of the interconnected world of vibrant matter can eventually harm humans (Bennett 13). In line with these arguments, the paper elaborates on Kelly Rich's infrastructuralism, offering both supplementary and polemical negotiations on her analysis of the text. While the paper borrows the idea of infrastructuralism from Rich, it extends it further through multiple materialities of both human and nonhuman bodies. In doing so, it highlights material interaction (intra-action) and equates all living and non-living entities as vibrant matters (thing-power) that independently enact material forces while adhering to complex interconnections.

From the beginning of *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro narrates the interconnections between the material world and humans. Hailsham, a building where cloned children are raised and educated, constantly floats in the narrative of real experiences and through memories. It is vital to see how a building, as a material construction, interacts/intra-acts with humans throughout the novel. Contrary to the Anthropocentric stance that terms material things as passive and stagnant, the novel unwittingly typifies the material agents, such as Hailsham and other infrastructural elements, as active participants that form human/cloned subjects. Hailsham, an intra-active agent or the thing-power, complicates the boundaries between humans and nonhumans (non-living) by reevaluating them in their intersubjective interactions involving enmeshments between humans and nonhumans.

Posthuman viewpoints offer a different angle to comprehend Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, in which the writer demonstrates how infrastructural entities deliberately designed by humans become intra-active enmeshments that resist ontological boundaries between living and non-living entities. This is a different way of seeing the entities as ontologically connected yet physically separate, as the infrastructural, intra-active agents constantly reconfigure the identity of human subjects. Such discursive practices between infrastructural entities and the human subjects, enabled by dynamic intra-activity and thing-power, redefine and resituate the respective boundaries.

The material influence on (cloned) humans is a result of the intentional design of normal humans to shape exploitative strategies of dehumanisation, as they keep (cloned) humans as infrastructural resources for medicinal purposes. The novel reveals how intentional material practices control and shape (cloned) humans' internal and external realities. Although these material practices are intended to control (cloned) humans, the material influence on the characters is both intentional and unintentional, as material reconfigurings are outside humans' control and outperform human intentions. Through exploitative material strategies, normal humans exploit infrastructural resources of (cloned) humans, but the same matter, for example, Hailsham, also forms lasting bonds that they pursue throughout their short-lived existences.

THE "THING-POWER" OF MEMORY

In this section, I argue that matter enacts performativity on human subjects through memory. Drawing on Barad's intra-action and Bennett's thing-power, I argue that nonhuman matter or things influence humans

through their active interaction with humans mediated by physical contact and memories. Infrastructural matter, such as Hailsham, does not always require physical conditioning, as memory aids the roles of the material agencies. Material memory of Hailsham as an active agent permeates the entire narrative and affects the behaviour of human clones, as it becomes thing-power for Hailsham. The memory of Hailsham aligns with Bennett's claim that a nonhuman entity can make a difference and shape the course of events. Carroll also points out that memory is indispensable in shaping identities (62), but the critic does not recognise how the memory of Hailsham as an actant co-constitutes the characters' identities. Kathy's dilemma in the novel gives testimony to this material memory when she states, "There have been times over the years when I've tried to leave Hailsham behind, when I've told myself I shouldn't look back so much. But then there came a point when I just stopped resisting" (Ishiguro 4–5). Kathy's inability to resist her memory suggests how the material world controls human bodies.

In the material interaction between infrastructure and humans, memory goes beyond nostalgic references, serving as an emotional attachment that helps the clones demonstrate their humanity. Carroll endorses such emotional attachments as essential aspects (62), but fails to explore how the material actants, in addition to their emotional bonding, enact the reconfiguring of the cloned bodies. This agential reconfiguring of the material bodies of subjects and objects depends on what Barad claims to be the ongoing material interaction (intra-action), disavowing the determinate boundaries between the material entities (*Meeting* 171). In this case, such material reconciliation between humans and nonhumans can be referred to as intersubjective agentialism, where mutually dependent active material agents have inseparable or indeterminate boundaries through which matter exerts its force on other material (human) bodies. This intersubjective agentialism results from a reconfiguring between subjects and objects, which are interchangeable in "the material-discursive boundary-making practices" (*Meeting* 93). Therefore, memory brings cloned humans and the nonhuman material world together without hierarchy, during which reconfiguring occurs.

In the novel, Kathy's memory reveals such intersubjective agentialism, implicating an intra-active relationship between cloned humans and the material world, such as Hailsham and the Cottages, allowing matter to shape and alter her body. Memory allows for the survival of Hailsham even after its extinction, and through memory, it continues to shape the human clones and is a constant reminder of their infrastructural status. In the material interaction, Kathy's memory eliminates the myth of individual separateness with determinate boundaries. Memory becomes instrumental

in allowing the infrastructure to control the cloned subjects in the novel. Through memory, Kathy keeps the longing for Hailsham alive and searches for Hailsham in other nonhuman entities, seeking its replacement. For instance, a misty field, a large house, and poplar trees become reminders of Hailsham (Ishiguro 2). For Kathy, Hailsham remains a perpetual longing as it is both an origin and an end: "If I drive past one [of those pavilions] I keep looking over to it for as long as possible, and one day I'll crash the car like that, but I keep doing it" (ibid.). This is where Hailsham, while preparing human clones for their infrastructural roles and constantly reminding them of their material status, forms material longings and lasting bonds that defy the original intentions of the exploitative strategies of normal humans.

(CLONED) HUMANS AND MATTER

Human clones, raised at Hailsham, are prepared as human infrastructure to be made available for other humans. Their short-lived existences end after three or four donations of their body parts. They are intentionally made infertile to keep them as lifelong resources for other humans. While they cannot form bonds and sexual relationships with normal humans, they are encouraged to develop emotions and engage in unregulated sexual relationships among the clones. Uninhibited sexuality is an easy distraction from their otherwise pathetic role of being a donor. Further, it contrasts with their infertile bodies, as they assume their material roles and perform the tasks of their dehumanised bodies, while prohibiting the unnecessary emotional baggage of parenthood and distancing them from normal humans. Ishiguro describes infrastructural sexuality as nonnormative and shows how clones are trained to keep their distance from normal people. Human clones' sexuality is devoid of emotional complexities, commonly found in normal people's lives, and they treat sex as an ordinary activity, just like eating and drinking (Ishiguro 82). Kathy describes this infrastructural sexuality that considers the possibility of diseases due to sexual activity: "If, say, they were telling us how we'd have to be very careful to avoid diseases when we had sex, it would have been odd not to mention how much more important this was for us than for normal people outside" (ibid.). Kathy recognises that their sexuality is different from that of normal people as their infrastructural sexuality is in contrast with both human and (living) nonhuman normative conditions, and it allows them to assume ironic heterosexuality without any possibility of reproduction. Therefore, it is obvious to acknowledge, as Carroll argues, that sexuality for human clones becomes an expression without any social meaning and does not lead to

social integration (66). In a typical human society, sex is often associated with love, marriage, social commitments, and reproduction. Ishiguro, on the other hand, establishes the clones as infrastructural resources, focusing on the materiality of human bodies.

At Hailsham, they are shielded from the knowledge that they are groomed for organ donation. This safeguarding is necessary for the healthy development of future organ donors. Such a deceptive environment develops through education and attractive surroundings. The physical infrastructure endorses Barad's intra-active agency and Bennett's vibrant matter, as ponds, pavilions, fences, and dormitories help build meaningful exchanges among the clones, inviting them to a safe refuge from the bleak future that awaits outside.

While Rich rightly takes note of this infrastructural semblance that keeps them protected, she overlooks the dynamic involvement of the matter that constructs temporary meanings and modifies the subjects. She acknowledges that "Hailsham gives their students a sizable superstructure of meaning-making values, practices, and places, either to forestall or repress their knowledge of their infrastructural purpose" (635), but does not recognise the material force of intersubjective agentialism, which makes fundamental changes among the cloned humans. Such material understanding allows for an alternative way of observing the objects surrounding us, allowing us to explore vibrant matter's intrinsic vitality, acknowledging what Bennett calls "matter-energy" as a vital force that affects human bodies that come in contact with matter (56). Bennett provides multiple examples of things having potential for matter-energy, such as food, trash, and metals, which represent powers in "human mood, action, meaning, agenda, or ideology" (x). By narrating humans' experiences and identities shaped by nonhuman environments, Ishiguro's novel portrays several examples of matter-energy in the mattering incidents between humans and nonhumans.

In the novel, matter-energy becomes a guiding and compelling force which, through the material surroundings, prepares them to be healthy and willing donors. It is noteworthy that matter-energy, as part of human designs, enacts both humans' exploitative strategies of dehumanisation and matter's independent reconfiguring that creates a meaningful interaction between humans and their surroundings. Here, independent reconfiguring refers to matter's powers that defy humans' intentions to perform dehumanising tasks. Ishiguro narrates exploitative strategies at the beginning of the novel, when Kathy mentions how they are required to be physically fit, requiring them to undergo routine medical tests to monitor their physical growth (Ishiguro 13). To further ensure safety and well-being, they are only selectively exposed to the external world, and

the authority also prohibits the clones from practising unhealthy practices such as smoking (67). Here, matter-energy relates to collaborative practices between infrastructural settings, other nonhuman surroundings, and human actions.

Devoid of normal cultural/familial upbringings, they are nurtured in a boarding school with books of literature, geography, music, and other educational tools. In this case, education becomes an agency that develops readily available human clones for society to consume. For instance, they are taught role-playing activities to prepare them to communicate with the external world. Kathy demonstrates how such "Culture Briefing" involving role play activities arouses both excitement and anxieties: "These were classes where we had to role play various people we'd find out there—waiters in cafés, policemen, and so on. The sessions always got us excited and worried all at the same time, so we were pretty keyed up anyway" (108). These practices do not approve of their status as human beings, and as Carroll suggests, they remain "less than human" (59). Normative communication and behavioural practices, i.e. the exchange system at Hailsham, add to their status as an infrastructural identity, allowing them to express their identity and buy exciting items made by other clones. Such material practices involving cloned subjects allow the intersubjective agencies to eliminate the boundaries between the cloned humans and the nonhuman entities. Intersubjective agencies involve ontological connections between matter and humans, in which matter, through matter-energy, interacts, controls, and shapes human bodies. While matter, as an actant, becomes an active participant in this intersubjective interaction, it also supports Barad's claim that "'environment' and 'bodies' are intra-actively co-constituted" (*Meeting* 170).

Kathy's experiences with the intersubjective agencies of the environment at Hailsham are notable as she claims that the Exchange system impacts the cloned subjects, and their respect is proportionate to the level of creativity of the things being exchanged by the clones (Ishiguro 16). This meaningful activity, at least for the human infrastructure, is not without traces of irony as the motive for this program is not to encourage creativity among the cloned humans but to ensure that they have emotions or, in Miss Emily's words, when Kathy and Tommy visit her to request the deferral, "we did it to prove you had souls at all" (255). The art gallery project and the exchange system were checkpoints to learn whether they had souls. Groes also identifies this paradoxical empathy among the guardians as they seek psychological relief in their attempt to foster creativity among the clones through such activities (9). Here, government agencies employ guardians to observe and oversee the experimentation, which includes various means of apparatus such as infrastructural resources, furnishing/not furnishing

information, and providing training to the clones. The guardians allow the clones to recognise their infrastructural status and ensure that they develop their emotional sensibilities through the Exchange program and creative expressions for the Gallery. The material influence, as mentioned earlier, is an outcome of humans' machinery, but matter is not confined within humans' actions, as it supplements their intentions of confining the dehumanised world and surpasses them in the actual outcomes of constructing temporary meanings in their lives.

Furthermore, the nonhuman machinery at Hailsham re-examines boundaries between cloned humans and normal humans. For instance, the boundary between observer (guardians) and observed (clones) is not based on their inherent qualities, but it "is differently articulated depending on the specific configuration of the apparatus and its corresponding embodiment of particular concepts to the exclusion of others. That is, the object and the agencies of observation are co-constituted through the enactment of a cut that depends on the specific embodiment of particular human concepts" (Barad, *Meeting* 154). By negating the Cartesian presupposition concerning the fixed boundaries between observer and observed, Barad employs the agential cut—Bohr's example of a stick, when used for navigation in the dark with a firm grip, becomes an extension of the subject and when the same stick is touched loosely to sense its features, it becomes an object—that dynamically situates the boundary between subject and object (ibid.). The switching between subject and object, in the case of the stick, demonstrates the dynamism of the agential cut that reexamines the ontological and visual boundaries between them. This can be clearly understood in how the agential cut performs its functions at Hailsham. Ms. Lucy, for instance, tries to understand human clones, and therefore, she empathises with them and finds them as extended subjects of other humans. Although incapable of helping them, she advocates for the moral rights of the cloned children at Hailsham. On the other hand, other guardians, who only see them as infrastructural resources for other humans, visualise them as nonhuman entities or as mere objects to be experimented on and utilised for a practical cause. The same human clones become subjects and objects through the application of agential cut, rejecting the inherent and fixed boundaries between them and allowing the boundaries between subject and object to be ambiguous, fluid, and dependent on the agential cut that seeks its intra-active performance in the discursive practices, differently enacted at Hailsham.

The material practices and the machinery at Hailsham prepare them as donors and carers, and they are made aware of this strange responsibility of their infrastructural being. Kathy's remarks—"Carers aren't machines. You try and do your best for every donor, but in the end, it wears you down"

(Ishiguro 4)—only indicate how their bodies are materialised at Hailsham. She constantly strives to be the best donor and takes pride in her duties as a carer. Her behaviour highlights how porous bodies are co-constituted by the environment at Hailsham, adding to the point that bodies and the environment are intra-actively connected and have no fixed boundaries. Therefore, bodies no longer end at their visual and apparent boundaries at the skin. It is essential to note what Haraway suggests: "The insistence that there is an obvious bodily boundary that ends at the skin fails to recognize the body's specific situatedness in the world" (qtd. in Barad, *Meeting* 159). The situatedness of the environment cannot be separated from bodies; it exists as entanglements that remain fixated on bodies. According to Myra J. Seaman, this involves intricate connections between corporeal bodies and their situatedness in the natural environment (248). When situations are outside the bodies and invariably associated with bodies, bodies cannot cease to end at the skin. Bodies are not produced inherently or independently but as outcomes of their situatedness.

This draws attention to the posthuman conception that dethrones humans from their centrality and superiority. Barad argues that humans' positions and situatedness are co-constitutive alongside nonhumans. There is no specific privilege for humans as they are parts of the world and considered as "being-of-the-world" and not as "being-in-the-world" (*Meeting* 160). The body's materiality is constituted by the entanglements that emerge in the situatedness of bodies. According to the agential realist ontology, its situatedness and entanglements refer to "its requisite refigurings of causality, materiality, agency, dynamics, and topological reconfigurings" (ibid.). In other words, entanglements are material extensions of human bodies that are invariably situated in a specific material context.

Situatedness also permits the transcending of boundaries between objects and subjects, or in Barad's terms, bridging the gap between words and things by negating the traditional representational approach that guarantees the separation of "words and things" and "subjects and objects" ("Posthumanist Performativity" 812). Here, subjects and objects are intermingled through material reconfiguring, which assumes that subjects and objects are part of the process responsible for ontological understanding. Posthuman understandings require this recognition of the situatedness of human bodies, as they no longer occupy the central stage as subjects. Emilie Walezak, while analysing the nonhuman turn of A. S. Byatt's work, reaffirms the need to transcend the binary of objects and subjects (442). The critic endorses the notion of the interconnectedness between humans and nonhumans as part of the analysis of Byatt's texts, identifying how intra-action between humans and nonhumans produces

knowledge and reveals the web of situatedness, which rejects the defined boundaries between subjects and objects, as well as between nature and culture. Byatt's reference to Barad's intra-action for situated knowledge is noteworthy and valid, as Barad questions the binary of words and things, exposes humans' mistrust and neglect of the nonhuman in metaphysics, and coins the word "thingification" to counter the inherent binary of words and things, which automatically rejects the binary of subjects and objects ("Posthumanist Performativity" 812). For Barad, the reconfiguring of subjects and objects, going beyond the interconnectedness in situated understanding, is a crucial point for posthuman understanding of humans' place as one of the entities on the planet, neither above nor below.

INFRASTRUCTURAL RECONFIGURINGS

The materiality of bodily constructions in *Never Let Me Go* recounts this posthuman conception of matter and meaning. Material exteriority (entanglements) is never separate from material interiority (bodies), leading to its intra-active functions and bodily reconfigurings. Ishiguro situates human clones at Hailsham, Cottages, and the Recovery Rooms, which comprise exterior materiality. Since exteriority and interiority are never clearly separate, they dynamically intra-act with one another in their situatedness. The situatedness of the educational organisation allows for naturalisation and voluntary submission to the state's program. The human clones' academic upbringing instils the values of being donors and carers, preparing them to be their best in creative tasks, academic performance, and general behaviour. Kathy recalls, "We were all very special, being Hailsham students, and so it was all the more disappointing when we behaved badly" (Ishiguro 43). Rich argues that the programs at Hailsham develop their creativity and instil meaning in their lives, allowing them to withdraw from the looming darkness of their original fate of infrastructural purpose (635). Rich recognises external factors that shape their identities, but this recognition does not involve material reconfiguration or, in Barad's terms, "intra-active agencies" that shape these clones through material discursiveness.

These intra-active reconfigurings not only forestall the hidden horrors of their lives but also help naturalise their infrastructural status, denying any possibility of rebellious attitudes in the future. These material reconfigurings, which emerge as a result of the intentional design by humans, forestall the horrors of their lives and prepare them to perform the tasks of donors and carers, allowing them to cope with the discomforting realities. This further supports Barad's assertion that agency is never a static phenomenon but rather a dynamic and ongoing intra-active process

in which "the universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming" (*Meeting* 141). Human clones express this dynamic reconfiguring through playful expressions that allow them to naturalise their material roles of clones. Suicide becomes the matter of a joke when Kathy recalls fences "where you could commit suicide any time you liked by touching a fence. This might have been intended as a serious point, but the rest of us thought it pretty funny" (Ishiguro 78). These electrified fences corroborate the fact of dehumanised bodies, as they are kept not for their protection but to stop them from exploring beyond the point. Naturalisation with their cruel reality is the only way forward, and this is again visible when the writer narrates: "The idea was that when the time came, you'd be able just to unzip a bit of yourself, a kidney or something would slide out, and you'd hand it over" (88). It is ironic how they refer to the act of "unzipping," which hints at the material construction of their bodies, as the characters joke about handing over parts of their bodies.

Further, the exquisite internal world of the infrastructure is also contrasted with the imagined horrors of the external realities that surround Hailsham. For instance, the stories of the children who tried to escape Hailsham and met with horrific deaths offer a fitting antithesis to the idea of rebellion. Ishiguro narrates the story of a boy who tried to escape Hailsham: "His body had been found two days later, up in those woods, tied to a tree with the hands and feet chopped off" (50). He further describes a girl who also tried to escape:

> She had been a Hailsham student until one day she'd climbed over a fence just to see what it was like outside. This was a long time before us, when the guardians were much stricter, cruel even, and when she tried to get back in, she wasn't allowed. She kept hanging around outside the fences, pleading to be back in, but no one let her. Eventually, she'd gone off somewhere out there, something had happened and she'd died. But her ghost was always wandering about the woods, gazing over Hailsham, pining to be let back in. (ibid.)

At the Cottages, as the splendid surroundings pave the way to tarnished and shoddy infrastructure, this active participation in the construction of the subjectivised identities takes a different turn towards fractured self-actualisation. The semblance of temporary refuge found at Hailsham suddenly disappears, partly because fully grown adults do not require the proper safeguarding of their bodies, which is only essential during the formative years. Kathy narrates, "The Cottages were the remains of a farm that had gone out of business years before. There was an old farmhouse, and around it, barns, outhouses, stables all converted for us to live in" (114).

Furthermore, the materiality of the bodies becomes more prevalent with the introduction of the notion of "possibles"—the humans on whom the clones are modelled. "Possibles" reveal their infrastructural existence as the clones have been modelled on normal humans. For instance, Ruth's quest to find her "possible" only leads her to face a gory picture of her infrastructural identity. Ruth's attempt to seek refuge in the belief of finding her "possible" as a person of repute working at an office meets with a disastrous end. For her, knowing the person from whom she was copied, as part of the cloning process, was essential as it would lead her to believe in the positive sights of the impending future (137–38). Like any other infrastructure, models are a technical necessity for human clones. Ruth's high optimism and expectations for a professional career can be attributed to her upbringing at Hailsham, as she is naturally drawn to such a managerial position at a reputable office. Upon her investigation of her model, she is forced to acknowledge that clones "are modelled from trash, junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps, maybe, just so long as they aren't psychos" (166). She further claims that "if you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that's where you'll find where we all come from" (ibid.). Her hope of claiming her true self meets with the eventual infrastructural self. Her identity crumbles and assumes the quality of matter indistinguishable from trash: societal refuse. This scene also implies, as Tiffany Tsao suggests, that they were never meant to be integrated into a human society they viewed with admiration (217). Ruth is not allowed to be part of the world she admires, nor can she assume the role of her "possible," which also represents the degenerate group of society.

Kathy, on the other hand, finds solace in the company of an infrastructural panorama through her multiple journeys by car. Her driving is not without purpose, as she carries the material remnants of Hailsham wherever she goes. Her infrastructural longing for Hailsham is constant, and the road, motor, fields, and buildings only contributes to it. She admits: "Driving around the country now, I still see things that will remind me of Hailsham. I might pass the corner of a misty field or see part of a large house in the distance as I come down the side of a valley, even a particular arrangement of poplar trees up on a hillside, and I'll think: 'Maybe that's it! I've found it! This actually is Hailsham!'" (Ishiguro 6). Kathy's experience with nonhuman actants illustrates how anthropomorphism surrounds our routine experiences and serves as a constant reminder of the nonhuman actants we often overlook. Bennett presents this anthropomorphism as an alternative to anthropocentrism, revealing that nonhuman actants constantly surround us, influencing and shaping human behaviour, emotional sensibilities, and actions (120). Kathy's attachments and relationships with nonhuman

actants are a testament to anthropomorphism, as she recognises intelligence and emotional sensibilities among the objects with which she interacts. Her character negates the Anthropocentric narcissism of human exceptionalism, as she experiences Hailsham's ceaseless emotional calls for reunion, meeting between human infrastructures and nonhuman infrastructures. In other words, Kathy's infrastructural self is contrasted with the anthropomorphic infrastructures that incessantly invoke feelings and desires in her. The objects "manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience" and reveal "a liveliness intrinsic to the materiality of the thing formerly known as an object" (Bennett xvi). The purpose of the anthropomorphism in new materialism is to offer an alternative to the widely popular truth that privileges humans as active and denounces nonhumans as passive (Skiveren 191).

Kathy's connection to Hailsham and various objects relates to Bennett's concept of material vibrancy, as these objects evoke familiar sensations in Kathy. Her constant desire to possess Hailsham while driving may also induce her to crash and meet her death, inciting her to fulfil her ultimate infrastructural role. For Kathy, driving becomes a metaphor for her materialised body, as both the car and her body share similar material goals with other normal humans. Through her driving, she can recreate Hailsham from her views of the nondescript infrastructure and perform her material duties. Kathy's experience demonstrates how her body, as matter, and matter outside of her body are inseparable. This inseparability between bodies and matter is traced when Rich notes how the car represents the "instrumentalized beings" (639) of the clones. This substantiates Rich's claim that a clear separation between exteriority and interiority ceases to exist. However, the lines between humans and nonhumans can be drawn dynamically through intra-active agencies involving material discursivity, which considers matter as an active or vibrant agent that shapes human experiences. Kathy ponders her material reality with the car: "I do like the feeling of getting into my little car, knowing for the next couple of hours I'll have only the roads, the big grey sky and my daydreams for company" (Ishiguro 204).

Towards the end of the novel, the trio of Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy visit the deserted boat, reminiscent of Hailsham. They observe "how its paint was cracking, and how the timber frames of the little cabin were crumbling away," and yet Tommy says, "Maybe this is what Hailsham looks like now" (220). This ruined status of Hailsham is also suggested by Ruth when she narrates her dream: "I was, in Room 14, and I was looking out of the window, and everything outside was flooded. Just like a giant lake" (ibid.). This resurrection of Hailsham at the deserted boat allows them to assume Hailsham's final closure and ruin. Therefore, "finding Hailsham here entails accepting its status as a ruined experiment, an abandoned structure, or in

Ruth's dream, a giant lake of trash" (Rich 642). However, this decayed infrastructure is not a passive entity waiting to be eradicated from the face of the earth. It is a matter of sustenance for Kathy while she drives on the road, a frustrated dream for Ruth, and a reason for Tommy's uncontrollable rage. Its indispensable presence speaks for its material existence in the clones' lives.

While all the characters, except Kathy, complete their organ donations, Kathy, precariously, is alive and waits for her time to complete her task. We gather that human interaction with matter is dynamic and often controlled by matter rather than vice versa. Such material understanding enables us to recognise the "efficacious powers of particular material configurations" (Bennett ix) and is necessary for sustainable development and ecological balance. The material force, though invisible, is inescapable. We notice this when the characters evaluate their infrastructural performance; for instance, Tommy opines, "It can't be good. Completing at the second donation. Can't be good" (Ishiguro 222). He further states, "I'm a pretty good donor, but I was a lousy carer" (ibid.). While the characters are treated as infrastructural resources, they are also shaped and modified by the things around them.

Kathy's final meeting with Norfolk is significant in her infrastructural fulfilment. Norfolk, as Emily narrates, "was England's 'lost corner' where all the lost property found in the country ended up," and it is equated with Hailsham's '"Lost Corner,' where the lost property was kept" (65). Norfolk in England and Lost Corner at Hailsham indicate unattainable possibilities, which offer a mirage of hope. Norfolk is where human clones go to seek their "possibles" working in an office, and this is the place that Kathy visits after Tommy completes his donations. She mentions, "I drove up to Norfolk, even though I had no real need to" (282). She further highlights, "I stood there, looking at that strange rubbish, feeling the wind coming across those empty fields, that I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing, because this was Norfolk after all, and it was only a couple of weeks since I'd lost him" (ibid.). The novel ends with Kathy's insatiable quest for Hailsham and Tommy, even if it is a mirage.

MATTER AND EMOTIONS

The narrative of the intensified materiality of the clones is counterbalanced by the portrayal of evocative feelings. The novel's narrative ensures the coexistence of the materiality of dehumanised bodies with humane emotions. Kathy's fondness for the song "Never Let Me Go" is striking, as the song involves a woman singing it while holding a baby close to her bosom. Kathy's infrastructural body is contrasted with her desire to hold a baby. Tommy, with his pointless outbursts, and Ruth, with her futile agonies, align with Kathy's

paradoxical situation. This emotional paradox, filled with futility, is a recurrent phenomenon in the novel. While referring to the narration of such feelings, Shaddox argues that the novel's primary focus is to juxtapose the evocative feelings of the clones with the inhumane society that ignores their plight (450). While we can accept the instrumentality in the treatment of the human clones, it is improbable to consider the case of sentimentality as the chief motive of the novel. The writer's function is not to lead the way for rehumanisation, as Shaddox notes, but rather to further intensify dehumanisation, allowing the emotional paradox to affirm their infrastructural status in the novel. These emotions naturally evoke compassion among the readers, but not without the heavy baggage of ironic conditions of dehumanisation.

Kathy and Tommy's request for a deferral indicates a validation of this paradox, as it meets the expected ironic end. We can quickly notice, as Groes identifies, that the evocative feelings are purposeless, and the clones meet their destined fate irrespective of their claim of pure love (8). The acknowledgement of love and the demand for deferral are narrated against the backdrop of the historical contexts of the cloning system. Ishiguro narrates both the rise and fall of Hailsham around the same time that Kathy and Tommy decide to seek deferral, which could permit them to discontinue organ donations. Hailsham was established to seek a remedy for incurable diseases during the post-war world of the 1950s and 1960s, offering the right platforms for such institutions to flourish. Through this historical view, Ishiguro juxtaposes the hope of humanity with the hope of the infrastructures—Cathy and Tommy—in their demand for deferral. This emotional paradox is further complicated by the Morningdale scandal, which attempted to create, in Emily's words, "the possibility of having children with enhanced characteristics. Superior intelligence, superior athleticism, that sort of thing" (Ishiguro 258). The idea of superior clones frightened people, as they did not want clones to be superior to them but rather to function as infrastructural resources. Emily responds to Kathy's question on the closure of Hailsham: "They didn't want to think about you students, or about the conditions you were brought up in. In other words, my dears, they wanted you back in the shadows" (259). The closure of Hailsham does not signify the end of the infrastructural project, but it reaffirms the clones' material status, leading to the rejection of Kathy and Tommy's request for deferral.

In addition to portraying such emotional paradoxes, which reinforce the material status of human clones, the novel complicates this sentimentality, which blurs the boundary between humans and nonhuman agents, as it becomes natural for us to recognise nonhuman entanglements that shape emotional sensibilities among the clones. The novel explores ways in which cloned humans associate themselves with material entanglements that form a significant part of their self-awareness. Through such nonhuman

entanglements, Ishiguro establishes what Barad terms the disavowal of "self-contained existence" (*Meeting* ix). Naturally, manufactured in laboratories, they found solace in horizontal instrumentalities and developed attachments with material entanglements. Kathy's entanglements include a cassette tape, her car, Hailsham, and Norfolk, which collectively form a considerable part of her infrastructural interiority. For human clones, such entanglements become material forces that formulate emotional responses and affect their self-awareness. Such emotional marks are developed through mattering of intersubjective agencies, which, rejecting the independent and determinate status of human clones, establish matter as a vibrant and actant entity. The emotional responses suggest that the binary of interiority and exteriority is no longer defined conventionally but dynamically situated within intersubjective agencies. The emotional responses of the clones counterbalance the otherwise scientific approach of the normals, who do not acknowledge the clones as humans but rather consider them as medicinal resources. The reader, having observed the lives of the clones through their affective narratives, recognises that the clones are more humane than Madame and other guardians, as the clones dream about better lives and strive to attain them despite encountering contrary circumstances (Seaman 268–69).

However, it becomes difficult for the reader to reconcile with the novel's outcome, which is undoubtedly saddening. The narration of emotions in human infrastructure compels readers to empathise with Kathy, as she waits for her donations, and to hope for the unlikely end. In the paper on relatability, Dancer argues in favour of a corrective reading, suggesting that it allows readers to reconcile and alleviate their dissatisfaction at the inhumane treatment of the clones (158). For him, corrective reading allows for a moment of detachment, as he tries to adhere to the greater goals for the sake of humanity at the cost of the human clones, Kathy and Tommy. This consequentialist logic, which places its core ideas on detachment, is improbable and unrealistic, as the infrastructural emotions narrated by Ishiguro compel readers to experience the eventual trauma.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the novel, through the theoretical framework of the new materialism, especially the theories of Bennett and Barad, connects with the contemporary posthuman condition, recognising human embeddedness with (non-living) nonhumans. The paper shows how humans intra-act with vibrant nonhumans, while recognising the thing-power of nonhumans and acknowledging bodily existence beyond the skin. The skin, as advocated by critics, does not define boundaries (Borbély n.pag.), as humans are

co-constitutive things and are the consequentialist outcomes of this co-constitution.

Therefore, the novel showcases how humans and matter perform their roles, in Barad's terms, intra-actively. The narrative weaves the intricacy of infrastructural interiority (the bodies and minds of the cloned humans) and infrastructural exteriority (matter that exists outside human bodies). When they interact, humans and matter intra-act, allowing them to enact a posthuman performance of mutual modifications. While the material influence, developing from human-matter interaction, evolves through the dehumanised practices of other humans, it does more than that and creates multiple meanings for the human clones. Therefore, the dichotomy between humans, emanating material qualities, and matter, emerging as a vibrant and active force on humans, remains dynamically interchangeable throughout the novel, enabling the reader to understand the nuances of material forces, and creating awareness that sustainable and ecological balance can be maintained through careful utilisation and preservation of all material entities, i.e. earth, water, plants, animals, and other commodities.

Works Cited

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke UP, 2007. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388128

Barad, Karen. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2003, pp. 801–31. https://doi.org/10.1086/345321

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391623

Borbély, Carmen-Veronica. "Body Drift: On the Precariousness of Posthuman Life in *Never Let Me Go*." *Caietele Echinox,* vol. 29, 2015, https://caieteleechinox.lett.ubbcluj.ro/body-drift-on-the-precariousness-of-posthuman-life-in-never-let-me-go/, accessed 14 July 2023.

Carroll, Rachel. "Imitations of Life: Cloning, Heterosexuality and the Human in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2010, pp. 59–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230903525445

Dancer, Thom. "Being Kathy H.: Relatability in *Never Let Me Go*." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2021, pp. 149–70. https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2021.0006

Groes, Sebastian. "Health Warnings: Reading Kazuo Ishiguro in Times of Crisis." *English Studies*, 2022, pp. 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2022.2151781

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. Faber and Faber, 2005.
McDonald, Keith. "Days of Past Futures: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as 'Speculative Memoir.'" *Biography*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007, pp. 74–83. https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2007.0025
Murphy, Robinson. "Castration Desire: Less Is More in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *English Studies*, vol. 102, no. 6, 2021, pp. 759–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2021.1952679
Peplow, David, et al. *The Discourse of Reading Groups: Integrating Cognitive and Sociocultural Perspectives*. Routledge, 2016. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315850900
Rich, Kelly. "'Look in the Gutter': Infrastructural Interiority in *Never Let Me Go*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2015, pp. 631–51. https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2015.0054
Ryle, Martin. "Ishiguro's Diptych: Art and Social Democracy in *The Unconsoled* and *Never Let Me Go*." *Boundary 2*, vol. 44, no. 2, May 2017, pp. 57–73. https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-3826627
Seaman, Myra J. "Becoming More (than) Human: Affective Posthumanisms, Past and Future." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2007, pp. 246–75. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2008.0002
Shaddox, Karl. "Generic Considerations in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2013, pp. 448–69. https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2013.0026
Skiveren, Tobias. "Fictionality in New Materialism: (Re) Inventing Matter." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2022, pp. 187–222. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420967408
Tsao, Tiffany. "The Tyranny of Purpose: Religion and Biotechnology in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Literature and Theology*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2012, pp. 214–32. https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frs001
Walezak, Emilie. "A. S. Byatt and the Quiddity of Things: A Material-Semiotic Approach to Narrating the Human through the Non-Human." *Textual Practice*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2022, pp. 438–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2022.2030119
Whitehead, Anne. "Writing with Care: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go.*" *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2011, pp. 54–83. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cli.2011.0012

Dr Rajesh Bharvad is Associate Professor of English in the Department of English at Shri Govind Guru University, Godhra. His research areas include postmodern literature, contemporary fiction, posthumanism, and emerging trends in diaspora literature. In addition to active presentations at conferences and publications in reputed journals,

he received a prestigious fellowship, the Shastri Mobility Program, from The Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute, New Delhi, in 2020. During this fellowship, he pursued his research on intersectional diasporic identities under the supervision of Prof. Nandi Bhatia of the University of Western Ontario, Canada. In 2022, he was invited as a visiting fellow at the University of Hyogo, Kobe, Japan, where he conducted research in environmental humanities. Recently, he has been editing a volume, *Post/Apocalyptic Narratives in Contemporary Indo-Japanese Environmental Literature*, to be published by Routledge, within the series *Routledge Studies in World Literatures and the Environment*.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8333-5273
rkbharvad@sggu.ac.in

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.26

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Yassine Najjar
University of Gabes

Enclosure and Urban Entropy in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how spatial forms of isolation and fragmentation in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* reflect the experience of postmetropolitan life in New York City. As the narrative follows Eric Packer's ride across Manhattan in his high-tech limousine, it presents the city not as a coherent urban environment, but rather as a hyper-mediated and destabilized space marked by fragmentation and disconnection. The limousine functions as a cocooned space of observation and a symbolic trope for the erosion of public space, bodily presence, and social interaction. Packer's movement through the city becomes a collage of hindered motion and eruptive violence, revealing a deeper pattern of systematic spatial detachment. From this vantage point, *Cosmopolis* stages the collapse of traditional urban coherence and imagines a postmetropolitan condition shaped by entropy, surveillance, and symbolic excess. Edward W. Soja's concept of Thirdspace offers a possibility of analyzing New York as a fragmented, ideologically produced postmetropolitan city shaped by the forces of late capitalism. This spatial reading is further informed by postmodern theory, which offers insight into how contemporary urban environments become saturated with signs and mediated abstractions. This paper examines how the novel maps a city in crisis and interrogates what it means to inhabit urban space when its material and symbolic foundations are disintegrating. It also considers the ethical and political implications of this spatial breakdown, asking what forms of presence or resistance might still be possible when the very ground of the city is no longer stable.

Keywords: postmetropolitan space, Thirdspace, enclosure, fragmentation, postmodernism, hypercapitalism, DeLillo.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 21 Oct. 2025. Verified: 26 May 2026. Accepted: 2 June 2026.

INTRODUCTION

The experience of the contemporary city is increasingly marked by fragmentation and disorientation. The metropolis, once thought of as the mother city or the hub of political and social life, is witnessing an erosion of coherence. Fredric Jameson identifies a "mutation in built space" (*Postmodernism* 38) as a characteristic feature of postmodernity. In his analysis of the logic of late capitalism, Jameson reads the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles as a "hyperspace" that exceeds available "perceptual equipment" (ibid.) resisting orientation through its "glass skin [that] repels the city outside" and "achieves a peculiar and placeless dissociation of the Bonaventure from its neighborhood" (42). Within this context, Jameson situates urban forms at the heart of understanding the postmodern condition.

In this sense, Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) transposes the postmodern condition into the literary text, focusing on Manhattan as a space of enclosure and hyper-mediation. The novel exposes, in a compressed temporality, Eric Packer's one-day experience of traversing New York city in his high-tech limousine. The protagonist's itinerary across the city gives DeLillo the opportunity to portray the fragmentation of urban space as it is endlessly disrupted by protests, traffic jams, and erupting violence in the streets. The limousine—initially the vehicle that carries Packer to the hairdresser—acquires a symbolic dimension serving as a shield that isolates Packer from the chaotic entropy of the streets of Manhattan while exposing the isolation of the protagonist in a disorienting urban space.

Critics have often claimed that *Cosmopolis* carries DeLillo's critique of postmodernity. Jerry A. Varsava reads the novel as a revealing diagnosis of the cultural condition of the late 20th century and a condemnation of "rogue capitalism" (104). Similarly, Martina Sciolino suggests interpreting the work as a "[s]wan song for postmodernism" (217), noting that it functions as a satirical critique of a purely economic, two-dimensional spectacle. However, less attention has been paid to its chaotic spatial logic. As such, the present article offers a reading of DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* informed by Edward W. Soja's critical urban theory. The article recontextualizes Soja's concept of Thirdspace to analyze the fragmentation of New York as a postmetropolis.

The article examines urban entropy as both a narrative form and a spatial condition showing how the city's disorder is translated into a text that foregrounds issues of narratability. It also contends that *Cosmopolis* transforms Manhattan into a postmetropolitan space where enclosure produces an intensified form of urban entropy. The novel does not simply

seek to expose a different model of spatiality but is effectively a critical literary laboratory of postmetropolitan space. Through the insulated interior of the limousine, DeLillo critically tests a spatial logic that favors the disintegration of material urban experience into digital data and symbolic excess. The article argues that the novel refashions the city of Manhattan as a collage of real and imagined spaces in which mobility transforms into stasis and information becomes an obliteration of meaning. At the same time, the literary space opens residual yet significant possibilities of resistance through lived spatial disruptions that unsettle the city's systems of mediation and control.

THE CITY AS A SITE OF FRAGMENTATION

Cosmopolis unfolds as a detailed and almost cartographic record of movement through Manhattan. Packer, a wealthy currency speculator, undertakes a journey to get a haircut at his childhood barber's shop. His movement is a catalyst that spatially structures the novel. In brief, the trip from First to Eleventh Avenue—a route already fragmented by the numerical codes and abstract signifiers of the urban grid—exposes different aspects of the city's fractured geography and mirrors the protagonist's disintegration. By documenting Manhattan's material topography, the narrative reflects on how this geography is reshaped through abstraction and mediation, mirroring the fractured spatial logic of contemporary urban life.

It is within this context that Edward W. Soja's critical urban theory stands as an illuminating framework for understanding the spatial experience presented in DeLillo's novel. In his book *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (2000), Soja conceptualizes what he calls postmetropolis as the late capitalist restructuring of the modern industrial city into a dispersed and fragmented space governed by global flows of capital. Soja accounts for the urban transformation in the late 20th century and attempts to explain the restructuring of urban life. He develops a framework of "six different discourses, each representing a different way of analyzing and interpreting the restructuring of the metropolis" (*Postmetropolis* 154).

These interrelated discourses offer distinct yet complementary perspectives through which the spatial, social, and symbolic dimensions of the contemporary city are interpreted. Accordingly, postmetropolis stands for a new spatial formation marked by uneven development and a reshuffling of social hierarchies. DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* is a crystallization of this theoretical framework into narrative form, depicting Manhattan as

a site of assemblage of differentiated and often contradictory spatialities. The novel neither contextualizes Manhattan as the mother city, with the literal meaning implied in the Greek root of the term "metropolis," nor as an emblem of modernity in the sense that it stands for a dense and dynamic space where industrial, economic, and cultural energies converge. Instead, the work presents Manhattan as a site of fragmentation, shaped by the intersection of technological mediation and financial capitalism.

The first pair of discourses emanating from Soja's framework, "postfordist industrial metropolis" and "cosmopolis," sets the stage for understanding the multiple meanings attributed to postmetropolis. Soja attempts to highlight the economic and cultural transformations that underpin the emergence of this new form of urbanism. Initially, he places emphasis "on the role of *industrial production* and the impact of *industrial restructuring* on contemporary life" (*Postmetropolis* 157, emphasis in the original) and then describes the evolution and passage from the industrial to the postindustrial city which led to the emergence of the postfordist industrial metropolis. Accordingly, Soja's postmetropolis represents "an outgrowth or, better, an extension of that modern and modernist urbanism" while at the same time preserving "traces of earlier cityspaces" (148). This model of urban organization also marks "an era of intense and extensive restructuring as profound in its impact on every facet of our lives . . . since the origins of the industrial capitalist city" (ibid.). This new urban formation obviously presents a profound change in what the city represents. What Soja terms as "the urban imaginary" (149) reflects the transition of cities into restructured entities defined by cultural symbolism. The tension between the industrial and postindustrial city in *Cosmopolis* is articulated through the felt antagonism between First Avenue and Eleventh Avenue. First Avenue embodies financial capital, services, and symbolic economies, materialized in Packer's vertical isolation or what Vija Kinski describes as a life lived in "a tower that soars to heaven and goes unpunished by God" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 103). By contrast, Eleventh Avenue marks the residue of a Fordist economy, with its tenements, car shops, and barber's shop anchoring the narrative in a space of material decay and social proximity. The tenement where Packer used to live is described as "grim," located on "a grim street, but people used to live here in loud close company, in railroad flats" (159). The barber's shop is also rendered as physically deteriorated: "paint was coming off the walls, exposing splotches of pinkish white plaster, and the ceiling was cracked in places" (160).

Soja's notion of cosmopolis designates the city's insertion into global financial and informational networks, where "the global is becoming localized and the local is becoming globalized at the same time"

(*Postmetropolis* 152). This discourse presents the postmetropolis as a new cosmopolis "generating the most economically, politically, and culturally heterogeneous cityspaces that may have ever existed" (154). Evidently, Manhattan in the novel is presented as a center of global finance and the protagonist as a speculator intrigued by the frenetic rise of the yen.

The paired discourses of the "exopolis" and "the fractal city" are useful for understanding the conditions of spatial and social fragmentation depicted in DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*. Soja argues for the restructuring of the urban spatial form of the city and declares the emergence of "a new category of city [as] being invented, one that does not fit into the conventional definitions" (237). It is this decentered urban form that challenges the conventional boundaries of the city: a space where the distinctions between center and periphery, inside and outside, and the real and the imagined dissolve producing a kind of urban entropy. In *Cosmopolis*, this dispersal is inscribed into the narrative logic: Packer's journey takes place in a city where traffic immobilizes circulation, financial flows operate beyond physical space, and events unfold as disconnected episodes.

At the same time, the fractal city foregrounds the uneven, polarized nature of postmetropolitan space fraught with unequal socio-economic possibilities (266). Soja argues that cities reproduce social and economic disparities across multiple spatial levels. He emphasizes what he describes as "*metropolarities* . . . that produce and maintain socio-economic inequality" (265, emphasis in the original). The cityspace becomes a mosaic of differentiated zones amplifying starker hierarchies of class, race, and power. This logic is condensed in the figure of the limousine that sustains social and spatial inequalities by blocking access to Packer as a representative of high society. The fortification of the car is a marker of the strict dividing line between communities in Manhattan, echoing the spatial imaginary of Zbigniew Herbert's poem "Report from the Besieged City" where "a rat became the unit of currency" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 96). By repurposing this motif, which was first introduced as an epigraph, DeLillo critiques the systemic predation of late capitalism. Herbert's rat is a sign of the market's totalitarian agency (Sciolino 214) or what DeLillo identifies as "the specter haunting the world . . . the specter of capitalism" (*Cosmopolis* 96). This is, indeed, a satirical inversion of the famous opening of Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto*. By inference, the corporate financial institutions in New York City are reducing human life to a debased financial existence embedded in the image of the rat. This metaphor highlights the divide between the exponential wealth of the elite and the destitution of the masses. Consequently, the limousine functions as a "self-sphere" (Varsava 104) isolating Packer from a public reality increasingly pauperized by the financial market forces he represents.

DeLillo's Manhattan echoes Soja's fractal city in which urban space presents an accumulation of competing spatialities. The narrative begins in Midtown, which is the beating heart of the corporate city alluded to in the text with reference to the "Chase Bank" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 40). The "midtown grid" is a place characterized by a physical vitality, which the narrative illustrates through the chaotic movement of the New York cityscape:

> Buses rumbled up the avenue in pairs, hacking and panting, buses abreast or single file, sending people to the sidewalk in sprints, live prey, . . . women in brisk skirts, half running, sandaled women wearing headsets, women in floppy shorts, tourists, others high and slick with fingernails from vampire movies, long, fanged and frescoed. . . . These were scenes that normally roused him, the great rapacious flow, where the physical will of the city, the ego fevers, the assertions of industry, commerce and crowds shape every anecdotal moment. (41)

However, this "physical will of the city" is in complete contrast to Packer's detachment and mopishness. Each stop along his itinerary reflects a different logic. Times Square, as a commercial hub, plunges the city in the undertones of the postfordist industrial metropolis that has completely restructured the way people live. The anti-capitalist protest zone and the class struggle refer back to Soja's fractal city and social polarities. The rapper's funeral, Brutha Fez, and the presidential motorcades throw glimpses of Manhattan as a simulated city engulfed by media images of lost origins. The cinematic montage of these images intensifies the similarity between Manhattan and Soja's exopolis. DeLillo's novel stages Manhattan both as a physical geography and a mediated construct. Exopolis is presented as a space of blurred borders that collapses the dichotomies between opposites, namely, the verticality of Packer's eighty-nine-story tower building and the flatness or horizontality of Manhattan's streets. The physical presence inside and outside the city is codified through Packer's movement inside or outside of the limousine. It is also important to highlight the tension marking Packer's lived experience in the city through physical presence and his mediated apprehension of the city though the numerous screens in his car. Packer

> was tired of looking at screens. . . . He watched the president of the World Bank address a chamber of tense economists. He thought the image could be crisper. Then the president of the United States spoke from his limo in English and Finnish. . . . He coded the screens into their hatches and cabinets, restoring the interior of the car to its natural grandness of scale, with sightlines unobstructed and his body isolated in space. (140)

This moment captures the paradox of the protagonist's mobility: while he crosses Manhattan, his experience of the city is one of isolation. It is a reminder of the dissolution of the material city into digital mediation producing as a result physical and psychological enclosure. Packer is *in* the city but not *of* it. This mutation of perception frames Packer's detachment as a condition produced by hyperreality.

The disintegration and fragmentation of the city of Manhattan manifested through incidents of violence and stalled motion draws attention to urban and physical entropy. The breakdown of ordered flows and the recurrence of disruptive events expose the fragility of the postmetropolis. In fact, the traffic jams that punctuate the narrative, the anti-capitalist demonstrations, the vandalism of the limousine and the encounter with André Petrescu, the pastry assassin (142), are all orchestrated episodes that build a narrative trajectory of entropy. These events reassert an unmediated contact with the lived space that cannot be fully assimilated by simulation. In practical terms, entropy has marked the narrative first through the expected market collapse and the exponential rise of the Yen. Secondly, it came to the fore due to the incidents of violence and bodily intrusions. In the postmetropolis, disorder is an emergent property of the system itself.

The final pair of discourses related to Soja's framework, the "carceral archipelago" and the "simcities," takes postmetropolitan analysis into the direction of control and simulation. The writer specifies that "the third pair of discourses is . . . more focused on the particularities of everyday life in the postmetropolis. . . . [They] explore the emerging institutional, behavioral, and ideological changes that are reorganizing what can be called a postmetropolitan mode of social and spatial regulation" (*Postmetropolis* 299). On the one hand, the carceral city foregrounds the omnipresent systems of surveillance and regulation transforming the postmetropolis into a space of enclosure. On the other hand, the simcities denote a virtual urban space where digital mediation triumphs over direct spatial engagement. This final discourse revolves around the de-/re-construction of contemporary world views and lived spaces, and approaches the city as a real place and a site of imagination (324). The carceral and the simulated city apply to DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* as Packer's limousine metaphorically stands for a control tower that surveils and isolates the protagonist, and Manhattan's details are minutely decoded through the use of monitors and data analysis. Although spatial experience is, for the most part of Packer's journey, mediated by digital and symbolic representations of different forms, it remains rooted in material reality.

Packer seeks to grasp the city uniquely through digital and symbolic manifestations, embracing the emblematic binary code of the digital world (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 24). However, DeLillo critiques this over-totalized

vision. Indeed, the novel interrupts the illusion of a purely virtual city by forcing the protagonist into unmediated, tactile encounters where the informational flow of his screens is aggressively replaced by the visceral immediacy of physical touch. This physical anchoring is given momentum through Packer's sexual encounters with three different women during his odyssey: his art consultant Didi in her apartment, his bodyguard Kendra Hays in a hotel room, and his wife Elise during the day-long journey. Those tactile encounters do represent a profound return to a dimension that the binary codes he lives by are not able to simulate.

Soja's concept of Thirdspace highlights the possibility of spatial resistance. The theorist presents Thirdspace as an encompassing lived space that reconciles and transcends the binary opposition between the perceived (physical) and the conceived (abstract) city. As a site of experience and imagination, it functions as a space of radical openness that resists closure. Thirdspace provides a framework to detect the last vestiges of spatial resistance. In this context, these vestiges represent the material frictions of the lived city that persist even as Manhattan accelerates toward a state of informational entropy in which the physical environment is both flattened and consumed by the mediated abstractions of global capital.

This study contextualizes the notion of Thirdspace "as a radically different way of looking at, interpreting, and acting to change the embracing spatiality of human life" (Soja, *Thirdspace* 29). As the name of the concept indicates, Thirdspace should be perceived as a space that "disrupts, disorders, and begins to constitute the conventional binary opposition into an-Other that comprehends but is more than just the sum of two parts" (31). By acquiring this transgressive dimension, Thirdspace becomes a meta-space of openness where everything can be found. It is in this sense that Thirdspace rejects any form of totalization that finitely encloses knowledge production in "permanent structures" or specialized compartments/disciplines . . . a constant search to move beyond (meta-) what is known" (57). This space should be seen as an "important step in transforming the categorical and closed logic of either/or to the dialectically open logic of both/and also" (60). What Soja calls "Thirding-as-Othering" is "designed to break down and disorder a rigid dichotomy and create a thirdspace, an alternative 'postmodern geography' of political choice and radical openness attuned to making practical sense of the contemporary world" (63). Thirdspace should be understood as a trialectic alternative to binary spatial logic, functioning as an encompassing lived space that integrates both material and mental dimensions. The Firstspace denotes the perceived physical space in terms of material geography, architecture, streets, and buildings. In *Cosmopolis*, material spatiality is expressed through the different details related to New York, Manhattan with its buildings

and procession of streets, and avenues that Packer traverses during his journey. Secondspace, however, presents the conceived or representational space which is related to the grids on a map, ideologies, mental images, or discourses woven about spaces. Thirdspace comes, accordingly, to stand for the lived environment where reality and simulation blur.

Soja's concept finds its full visceral expression in the limousine's navigation through Manhattan, acting as the site where the material and the virtual collide. This space erupts when the substantial action of protesters asserts its presence through the physical degradation of the limousine. The moment protesters rock the car and knock it back and forth (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 89) marks the collapse of Packer's detachment. The violent grounding of his armored, cork-lined vehicle is completed as people bang on the windows and hood (90) and spray-paint his sanctuary (93). The vehicle is transformed from a disembodied financial site where Packer watches digital tickers and discusses the abstract "visions of technology and wealth" (90) into a scarred, material object. This degradation serves as a scene "where the physical will of the city, the ego fevers, the assertions of industry, commerce and crowds shape every anecdotal moment" (41).

As such, Manhattan serves as both culmination and critique of the postmodern urban experience, a space in which entropy and paralysis are the twin results of a world saturated by abstraction. Physical paralysis is manifested in the inescapable gridlock of the material city, where Packer's limousine is trapped in "stalled traffic" (13) and forced to move in an "inchworm creep" (64) due to the different disruptions of a presidential visit, the rapper's funeral, and street riots. Paradoxically, this physical stasis is fueled by the informational entropy of the virtual city. Insulated from the street, Packer is surrounded by "polychrome numbers pulsing" (13) and a relentless flow of data. This abstract environment is identified by his chief of theory as a system "out of control" operating on "hysteria at high speeds" and "mass convulsions" (85). Through the contrast between the physical gridlock of the limousine and the convulsive speed of the market, DeLillo demonstrates how the postmodern drive toward abstraction results in a state where humanity is left paralyzed while its digital systems spiral into uncontrollable entropy.

THE LIMOUSINE AS A FORM OF ENCLOSURE

Soja's Thirdspace finds a strong resonance in Foucault's concept of heterotopia. In his article titled "Of Other Spaces," Foucault was concerned with the "problem of human site or living space" (23). He starts by apprehending binaries marking lived space. Then, he focuses on spaces

"that have the curious property of being in relation with all other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (24). "The counter-sites" (ibid.), what Foucault calls heterotopias, are real places that contain all other places. Foucault gives a portrait of the governing principles of these spaces. These heterotopias, Foucault claims, are found in all cultures but take diverse forms. Thus, their universality is foregrounded, and they are divided into "crisis heterotopias" associated with primitive societies with respect to change taking place at a personal level, and "heterotopias of deviation" which refer to places inhabited by people with deviant behavior like "rest homes, and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons" (25). Their functions shift over time. They juxtapose multiple spaces within a single real place. They are linked to slices of time (heterochronies) (26). They presuppose systems of opening and closing that isolate them, and finally, they create spaces that both reflect and contest all other sites. Such spaces, whether real or symbolic, expose the instability of spatial order and reveal how power, ideology, and subjectivity are negotiated in everyday life.

The malaise felt by Packer while navigating the city streets is also linked to the transformation of the limousine into a heterotopia that mirrors, inverts and resists the dominant metropolitan order. The limousine acts as the late capitalist equivalent of Foucault's ship which is defined as "the heterotopia par excellence" (27). He describes the ship as a "floating piece of space" and a "place without a place" that is "closed in on itself" while being "given over to the infinity of the sea" (ibid.). This corresponds precisely to Packer's armored limousine. It functions as an autonomous sanctuary that navigates the material city while remaining anchored in the infinite flow of global data. The "system of opening and closing" (26) that isolates this heterotopic vehicle is breached by the protesters, whose violent intervention disrupts Packer's simulated voyage and proves that he cannot escape the materiality of the streets. It is within view of the counter-sites, in Foucault's sense, that the contradictions of the urban condition are exposed and intensified. If Manhattan functions, in the narrative, as the entropic postmetropolis described by Soja, the limousine serves as its surrogate Foucauldian counter-site. This place without a place negotiates the trialectic of the city by isolating the subject. By applying Foucault's maritime metaphor to the limousine, one perceives Packer sailing/moving through the numerical grid of the Firstspace guided by the virtual infinity of the Secondspace. However, the material encounter between Packer and the protesters represents the eruption of the Thirdspace that engulfs and annihilates the closed world of global finance.

The limousine's function as a Foucauldian counter-site is not simply symbolic; it is constructed through the text's focus on the car's

relationship to the grid. The narrative is articulated through movement and stasis within the city of Manhattan. The initial and guiding idea of the story is Packer's ride from his penthouse on First Avenue to the barber's shop on Eleventh Avenue. Viewed from this angle, the story is about movement and mobility across Manhattan. However, the limousine—the very means of transportation—is slowed into almost stasis. The car destined to carry Packer across Manhattan to get a haircut is constantly obstructed. It moves through endless traffic congestion, political protests, and urban noise. Consequently, the sense of motion is overshadowed by immobility. Throughout the literary text, the limousine dominates DeLillo's spatial imagination and is perceived as "less an object than an idea . . . a tremendous mutant that stood astride every argument against it" (*Cosmopolis* 10). As an idea, the limo is related to collapsing the distinct social and spatial domains into a single enclosed environment monitored and controlled by human and digital sentries. The reversal of the function of the limo is directly related to a serious mutation in the perception of this privatized space. A close examination of *Cosmopolis* shows that the limousine does not simply facilitate movement across the city but also fulfills other functions. The limousine operates as Packer's alternative office, an idea stressed by his wife Elise Shifrin when she remarks, "I know you work en route" (16). Inside the limousine, Packer is monitoring financial work through data surveillance: he "looked . . . toward streams of numbers running in opposite directions . . . the roll and flip of data on a screen," studying "figural diagrams" that transform the interior into a mobile center of financial transactions and speculation (24). The car also functions as a professional meeting space, hosting advisors such as Michael Chin (22), Packer's currency analyst, and later Vija Kinski, his chief of theory, invited on her vacation day to provide counsel (77). In a dramatic episode, the limousine becomes a mobile clinic with sufficient medical infrastructure offering Packer daily examinations, as "Ingram did an echocardiogram" while listening to "his heart valves open and close" (44). Intimacy and bodily maintenance are similarly internalized as the vehicle is even equipped with a toilet (118) underscoring the car's complete self-sufficiency. Most importantly, the car is also described as a fortified engine constantly working as a mobile control tower designed to detect, assess, and neutralize external threats. Early in the journey to the hairdresser, Packer receives a "report from the complex" warning of "a credible threat. Not to be dismissed" (19). This risky atmosphere is paradoxically countered by technological reassurance in some other instances as he is told that the financial network "is secure . . . safe from penetration" (22). Security does not eliminate danger but manages it through constant surveillance and anticipation.

The mutant vehicle, perceived as a multifunctional space, is constructed to abolish the need to engage with the city in physical terms. Instead of connecting the protagonist to the city, the limo is equipped to render urban space an unstable exterior monitored from within. The vehicle functions like a site of implosion in which Manhattan is miniaturized and absorbed within the enclosed space of the car. The limousine also functions as what Marc Augé terms a "non-place," a space of transit and commerce that cannot be defined as "relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (Augé 77–78). In his limo, Packer is cut off from the shared history outside his window. As Moraru notes, building on Augé, Packer navigates through an "apathetic geography" (13), an environment deliberately designed to "de-socialize" (ibid.) him by replacing organic human interaction with the safety of individuality.

Operating within the same logic of deterrence and anticipatory security, Soja's concept of the carceral city provides a critical framework for understanding DeLillo's literary text. In *Postmetropolis*, Soja identifies an "intensification of social and spatial control brought about by new developments in the privatization, policing, surveillance, governance, and design of the built environment and the political geography of the cityscape" (299). Accordingly, urban space obeys the regulations of a regime that promotes risk management, control, and selective access. With reference to Mike Davis's *City of Quartz*, Soja contends that the carceral city is a mosaic of "protected and fortified spaces, islands of enclosure and anticipated protection against the real and imagined dangers of daily life" (Davis 224). In DeLillo's narrative, the concept of "islands" is both metaphorically and literally valid; Manhattan itself is an island. This geographical enclosure mirrors Packer's isolated limousine, which functions as a secondary, mobile fortification crossing the primary fortification of the island-city. Both islands are designed to filter out the perceived dangers of the urban outside.

Davis also insists that security in the postmetropolitan city becomes a "positional good . . . defined by income access to private protective services and membership in some hardened residential enclave or restricted suburb," functioning as a prestige marker that distinguishes "the merely well-off" from the "truly rich" (224). In this sense, security "has less to do with the degree of personal safety than with the degree of personal insulation, in residential, work, consumption and travel environments, from 'unsavory' groups and individuals, even crowds in general" (ibid.). Packer's vehicle perfectly materializes this logic in different instances of the text. As a mobile, armored, and technologically secured enclave, the limo translates the mechanisms of the carceral city into an individualized apparatus of enclosure. It is meant to shield Packer from danger and, most

importantly, to insulate him from the city, transforming the crossing into a privatized and surveilled experience that maintains social separation.

The vehicle of transit is transformed into a vehicle of withdrawal from the physical and social realities of Manhattan. The limo, with its fortified structure, cuts Packer off from the external world as he traverses it, unless he decides to step outside his sanctuary, which he does several times on his journey to the barber shop:

> "What about your car? Not so quiet surely. You spend a lot of time there."
>
> "I had the car prousted."
>
> "Yes?"
>
> "The way they build a stretch is this. They take a vehicle's base unit and cut it in half with a huge throbbing buzz-saw device. Then they add a segment to lengthen the chassis by ten, eleven, twelve feet. Whatever desired dimension. Twenty-two feet if you like. While they were doing this to my car, I sent word that they had to proust it, cork-line it against street noise."
>
> . . .
>
> "The vehicle is armored of course. This complicated the cork-lining. But they managed in the end. It's a gesture. It's a thing a man does." (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 70–71)

The description of the car as "prousted" and "armored" displays it as a mobile enclave of disconnection. "Prousting" the vehicle refers to insulating it from urban noise. In doing so, it functions as an ironic inversion of the aesthetic project established in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. While Marcel Proust sought to recover lived experience through sensory immersion, "prousting" the limousine enforces a regime of total sensory exclusion in the narrative. Evidently, Packer's cork-lined car suppresses experience altogether and filters street-level life. This form of isolation is both physical and existential as it shelters the protagonist's body, deepens his isolation from the vitality of the urban noise outside, and filters social interaction to a bare minimum. Hence, the limousine materializes what Soja theorizes as the carceral city: a space in which security operates as insulation to neutralize exposure.

The limousine functions as a spatial enclosure through which Packer's experience of the city, and the world more broadly, is ultimately navigated via technological abstraction and mediation, what DeLillo refers to as "the zero-oneness of the world" (*Cosmopolis* 24). Packer is seated "in the club chair at the rear of the cabin," experiencing Manhattan not as a lived

spatiality but through "an array of visual display units" and "polychrome numbers" pulsing across multiple screens (13). The vibrant, polyphonic city outside of the car, manifested in the "stray words in French and Somali" (17) or the "cross-roar of accents and languages" (69) that slip into his surroundings, is constantly reduced to background noise compared to the reflexive gaze of the spycams and "the streams of numbers running in opposite directions" (24). These languages and invitations of human engagement are systematically negated and replaced with a "nearly touchless" (13) context of abstraction which falsely signals the erosion of embodied perception.

What is perceived from within the limo is not the material spatiality of Manhattan associated with what Edward W. Soja terms Firstspace. Perception is mediated and conceived by data visualizations that simulate the spatial experience of the city. From this vantage point, the limousine nullifies the distinction between the circulation of capital and the paralysis of human experience. At the same time, the limousine could also be seen as a Thirdspace encompassing the intersection of the physical, the mental, and the lived dimensions. The friction of these different spaces—first, second, and third—does not resolve into coherence but instead exposes the instability of the postmetropolitan condition itself—the body's captivity, chaos, and alienation—marking Packer's journey while crossing Manhattan.

CORPOREAL ENTROPY

The logic of urban entropy does not remain confined to the streets and infrastructures of the city; it also migrates inward to inscribe entropy onto the body itself, transforming mortality into an expression of disorder. Despite the elaborate human, technological, and digital resources available, designed to insulate Packer from risk, death still emerges as a liminal space that no other spatial or technological strategy can contain. For instance, the permanent medical check-ups end with a final diagnosis "your prostate is asymmetrical" (54). This revelation operates as a corporeal crack within the system that promised symmetry and control. This minor physiological irregularity coupled with the death toll witnessed by the protagonist on one single day expose what enclosure seeks to deter: a disintegrating body undermining efforts of perfection and control. As Philipp Wolf argues, Packer is haunted by his physical body, which he attempts to discipline through excessive training and constant health monitoring. These strategies form, according to the critic, "a common attempt to manage the fear of death" (81). Yet, this effort intensifies alienation as "the intuitive relation

with our body is replaced with second-order information and the more physiological and objectified data one receives, the more the body eludes one's subjective and practical disposability" (ibid.). DeLillo makes this failure explicit when Packer reflects that

> [he] was here in his body, the structure he wanted to dismiss in theory even when he was shaping it under the measured effect of barbells and weights. He wanted to judge it redundant and transferable. It was convertible to wave arrays of information. It was the thing he watched on the oval screen. (*Cosmopolis* 48)

Within an environment that seeks to eliminate space, time, and corporeality, the body remains the one indomitable space asserting entropy in the form of pain and vulnerability. As DeLillo writes near the novel's end, Packer's wish "to extend the human experience toward infinity as a medium of corporate growth and investment" has failed because "this pain interfered with his immortality" revealing that the "things that lived and milled in his body" remain "not susceptible . . . to computer emulation" (207). In this sense, death does not come as an external catastrophe but as an internal counterforce exposing enclosure as a fragile defense against the untranslatability of embodied experience.

When urban fragmentation and bodily mortality converge to shape the two facets of entropy in *Cosmopolis*, enclosure is revealed as an illusion, and the possibility of resistance emerges not as opposition from outside the system but as a rupture within it.

THE POSSIBILITY OF RESISTANCE

DeLillo's work manifests a consistent penchant for openness, both formally, through unresolved, ambiguous endings, and thematically, through a process of becoming that defies strict linearity. While earlier works, such as *Underworld* (1997), cultivate this openness through interconnected sprawl, his later novels achieve a narrative Thirdspace through a more intensive form of suspension. In *Falling Man* (2007), this is realized through a circular structure that loops back to the trauma of 9/11, trapping the narrative in the moment the first plane strikes and denying the characters any forward progression. This traumatic stasis is maintained by the novel's performance artist, who suspends himself in mid-air to remain set forever in free fall. The suspension of the fatal fall in *Falling Man* tightly anticipates the odd time lag taking place at the end of *Cosmopolis*, where Packer exists in a state of being dead and alive depending on whether he is

measured by his biological pulse or his wristwatch camera (206). In both instances, the narrative refuses the closure of a single ontological state, creating a site of radical suspension where the virtual representation of death precedes the material event. By concluding before Levin pulls the trigger, the narrative leaves Packer in a "place of pure potential" (Boxall 232) that remains suspended between a space of possibility and a descent into nothingness.

Joseph Tabbi affirms that among contemporary novelists, DeLillo "share[s] an exemplary willingness to push beyond the limits of the literary, to bring [his] writing into contact with a nonverbal technological reality" (xi). In *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo has chosen to leave room for micro-resistances. Amid the overwhelming systems of global networks, media simulations, and capital, one detects some fleeting moments of embodied experience which gratify temporary disruptions and open up spaces of compensation. DeLillo attempts to subvert dominant discourses through the use of language to "reframe, reconfigure, or subvert certain tendentious and reductionist elements in linguistics, psychology and literary theory" (Cowart 151). The novel seems to compete with other discursive tools presented as substitutes for fiction. These forms of resistance are implicitly shown through Packer's decision to leave the shielding cocoon of his car and walk through the chaos of the city in order to reengage with material spatiality. Walking through the chaos of the city can be understood as an attempt to map what Christian Moraru calls a "counter-topology" (13). This immersion is an entropic collapse and a desperate spatial practice aimed at recovering the ethical and relational ties severed by the hypercapitalist postmetropolis. Although these micro-resistances are fragile and easily absorbed by the vortex of the system's logic, they show cracks and breaches in the system and testify to the presence of possibilities. These micro-resistances, however, do not amount to an oppositional stance outside the system. DeLillo stages resistance as an invitation to probe into a problem constantly threatened with absorption by the very structures it seeks to unsettle.

The most pervasive of these structures is the regime of information abstraction, which *Cosmopolis* explores: Packer internalizes the logic of the information society as his perception of himself and the city is mediated exclusively through screens and data visualizations. However, as DeLillo demonstrates, information does not remain a purely dematerialized force. Corporeality is, at times, in tension with the information society that organizes Packer's perception. As Laila Sougri observes, DeLillo "does not seek to unveil the workings of information only as a dematerialized aspect of communication," but instead "locate[s] the subtle embodied manifestation of information in technocultural dailiness" (160). Accordingly, the novel

resists the fantasy of a fully disembodied subject by insisting on the body as a responsive and vulnerable interface. Information is turned to "the immaterial discourse to which embodied circumstances respond," yet without friction or cost (ibid.).

One of the most visible of these breaches is the irreducible materiality of the body, exemplified by Packer's asymmetrical prostate. This "lopsided" biological reality serves as a reminder that the living body cannot be wholly serialized or assimilated into a digital totality (Moraru 19). While technological extensions attempt to reconfigure the subject into a data-driven interface, the body remains an asymmetrical residue that resists total translation. Ultimately, corporeality eludes this regime of information abstraction through the immediacy of pain.

Packer's limousine, estimated to be the ultimate enclosure vessel, gradually reveals its failure. The narrative stages instances of breaches in the form of social exposure: protestors rocking the car, traffic interrupted several times, noise, and threats detected expose the limits of insulation. As Peter Boxall observes (225), the novel repeatedly returns the body to states of radical vulnerability, notably in scenes such as the self-immolated protestor or the film featuring naked bodies in a "city of stunned flesh" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 172) where embodiment is rendered "unprotected" and stripped of mediation. These moments are not to be falsely understood as acts of liberation; they are eruptions that the system cannot absorb.

Resistance is also sustained at the level of literary form. DeLillo constructs the novel as a fragmented, episodic assemblage foregrounding the logic of entropy it describes. The narrative similarly advances through interruptions: stalled traffic, abrupt encounters, sudden disappearance of characters, digressive dialogues, and unresolved scenes. The non-linearity of the story, cast in a collage-like structure, denies the reader the comfort of synthesis and sense-making. As Veggian observes, the novel deploys a language that "moves at light speed" and "transitions are abrupt and every detail and word quickly loses depth" (88). At different levels of the narrative, asynchronous time denies temporal continuity and interpretive closure. This chronological disruption is especially articulated through the novel's anachronistic handling of death. Packer's assassination is described multiple times and from different temporal positions, including chapters that precede the event itself. This generates a narrative structure that is "slightly out of sequence" (92–93). The novel structurally enacts what it thematizes: the exhaustion of simulation and the instability of meaning. As Sougri notes, postmodern technoculture reconfigures language itself into "a game of information" that generates infinite, fragmented possibilities (160). The narrative becomes a site where abstraction and embodiment collide without reconciliation. Instead of offering an escape from this data-

driven world, the novel exposes its limits by highlighting its breakdowns, gaps, and unresolved tensions. The novel concludes in a state of irresolution, confirming that resistance is structural rather than ideological.

These irregularities and disruptions of the system do not amount to a politics of resistance. They rather expose resistance as a small space, a limited condition emerging when systems of enclosure and abstraction falter. In this sense, resistance, like death, serves as a Thirdspace, a site of openness, that reconciles the material friction of the street with the virtual abstractions of the market. Embodied experience, moments of forced exposure, and the fragmented narrative form do not overturn the logic of the system but interrupt its claim to total control. In this sense, DeLillo's resistance is neither heroic nor emancipatory; it resides in the refusal of final meaning and the persistence of entropy, functioning as a lived space that reasserts the irreducible materiality of being.

CONCLUSION

DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* stages the postmodern city as an entropic system monitored by enclosure, abstraction, and mediated perception. DeLillo dramatizes the transformation of urban experience, marked by stasis, insulation, and simulation, through Packer's crossing of Manhattan. Examined through the lens of Soja's postmetropolitan theory, Manhattan emerges as a fragmented collection of carceral and simulated spaces foregrounding control.

Within this spatial logic, the limousine serves as a mobile vessel that condenses the irregularities of the postmetropolis. Initially designed to protect the protagonist and deter potential risks, the vehicle at once absorbs the city and transforms urban life into streams of images and abstractions. However, the promise of absolute insulation proves illusory.

The logic of entropy also shifts from the urban space and affects the physical body. Death asserts itself as a site of disorder where the corporeal vulnerability triumphs over technological insulation and financial abstraction. By bringing together urban and bodily decay, DeLillo unveils the fragility of the postmetropolitan system and frames resistance as a material rupture of the lived experience.

DeLillo offers glimpses of hope in the novel's possibility of resistance within this entropic spatial order. This form of resistance is not a proclaimed act of transcendence or total disruption of the system, but rather a form of negotiation of the lived space as an interesting form of openness and rehabilitation. Basically, resistance in this context is neither a denial of the structures of financial capitalism nor an escape from mediation but

a recognition of the instability of these discourses. The novel transforms the cityspace into a site of reflection in order to rethink the way urban life is experienced and narrated.

DeLillo's work seems to mirror qualitative transformations at the level of concerns, feelings, and lived experiences and explore the saturation of contemporary life by media and capital. As a writer concerned with the postmodern condition, he has produced texts that tap into "inner networks of global communication and information" (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 384). These new forms of writing are perceived as testing grounds for understanding postmodernity; "a kind of laboratory experiment in which the geographical-cultural light spectrum and bandwidths of the new system are registered" (385). Thus, DeLillo's work is a diagnostic tool used to explore what happens when technology, capital, and culture fuse into a single system. Contextualized within the dynamics of late capitalism, his works chart a fundamental change initiated by a new world order.

Works Cited

Augé, Marc. *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Translated by John Howe, Verso, 1995.

Boxall, Peter. *Don DeLillo. The Possibility of Fiction*. Routledge, 2006. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203315422

Cowart, David. "DeLillo and the Power of Language." *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, edited by John N. Duvall, Cambridge UP, 2008, pp. 151–65. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521870658.012

Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. Verso, 1990.

DeLillo, Don. *Cosmopolis*. Picador, 2003.

DeLillo, Don. *Falling Man*. Scribner, 2007.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22–27. https://doi.org/10.2307/464648

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso, 2005.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Verso, 1991. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822378419

Moraru, Christian. "Heterotopics: Space, Time, Identity." *University of Bucharest Review*, vol. IX, no. 3, 2007, pp. 8–20.

Sciolino, Martina. "The Contemporary American Novel as World Literature: The Neoliberal Antihero in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 57, no. 2, Summer 2015, pp. 210–41. https://doi.org/10.7560/TSLL57204

Soja, Edward W. *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2000.

Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Blackwell, 1996.

Sougri, Laila. *Representations of Technoculture in Don DeLillo's Novels*. Routledge, 2024. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003407768

Tabbi, Joseph. *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*. Cornell UP, 1995. https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501717642

Varsava, Jerry A. "The 'Saturated Self': Don DeLillo on the Problem of Rogue Capitalism." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 46, no. 1, Spring 2005, pp. 78–107. https://doi.org/10.1353/cli.2005.0017

Veggian, Henry. *Understanding Don DeLillo*. The U of South Carolina P, 2015. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6sj90p

Wolf, Philipp. *Death, Time and Mortality in the Later Novels of Don DeLillo*. Routledge, 2022. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003289937

Yassine Najjar is Assistant Professor in the English Department at the University of Gabes, Tunisia. He holds a PhD in Contemporary American Fiction with a dissertation focused on the work of Don DeLillo. His research interests include American literature, metafiction, experimental narratives, and cultural studies. Najjar's work explores the intersections of literature, media, and identity in postmodern and contemporary American literature.

https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6145-4454

yassine.najjar@islgb.u-gabes.tn

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.27

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Syed Fuzail Kaunsar
B. S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai

A. Sulochana
B. S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai

Rational Egoism and Alienation: Reading Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*

Abstract

This article analyses Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* as a text that explores the alienated condition of existence of individuals whose lives are marked by an inherent conflict between their self-understanding and the external world, focusing on the existential and psychological conflict that arises from the dissonance between the protagonist's self-perception and the normative rational egoist structure of society. Contextualized within the framework of Rahel Jaeggi's contemporary critique of alienation, the study employs Melvin Seeman's classification of the forms of alienation as the theoretical framework to explicate the condition of the Underground Man as alienating. The article, therefore, emphasizes the relevance of Dostoevsky's literary critique of contemporary ideological conformity and its alienating effects by situating this 19th-century text within modern philosophical discourse.

Keywords: alienation, Dostoevsky, rational egoism, *Notes from Underground*, Rahel Jaeggi.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 16 June 2025. Verified: 9 Feb. 2026. Accepted: 17 Mar. 2026.

INTRODUCTION

Written by Fyodor Dostoevsky in 1864, *Notes from Underground* emerged amidst a turbulent socio-intellectual climate in Russia. During this time, Russia witnessed the ascent of radical materialism and the decline of idealism (Walicki 225). Marked by the social changes of the Great Reforms, a new generation of thinkers arose who rejected the romantic ideals of the past in favor of a strict materialist worldview. This movement promoted rational egoism, a belief that human life is governed by scientific laws and that a perfect society could be constructed through the use of pure reason.

Notes from Underground was written in response to the "disturbing trends" in Western European philosophy, which Dostoevsky had identified after his visits to London, Paris, Berlin, and other European cities (Roberts 397). These travels left him with the impression that the "spirit of brotherhood and love" (ibid.) had been supplanted by a new belief in individualism and self-interest, characterized as rational egoism, which diminishes moral choice to a simple calculation of profit and necessity. This deprives the individual of autonomous agency, based on the belief that the benefit of an individual coincides with the collective good, which can be rationally dictated. One of the most prominent proponents of this ideology in Russia was Nikolai Chernyshevsky, who articulated it in his influential novel *What Is to Be Done?* This presents an idealized image of the "new men" generation, the revolutionaries of the sixties, who embodied a novel morality alongside a fresh rationalist and materialist perspective. The protagonists of the novel are driven not by irrational convictions but by logical self-interest, or rational egoism, which aligns their own goals with the collective benefit of society (Walicki 189). It is based on Chernyshevsky's belief that people are inherently good and open to reason. This would make it possible to build a perfect society with the help of science and reason once they came to know their true interests (Frank 312). Dostoevsky acknowledged humanity's potential for goodness; however, he equally perceived individuals as imbued with malevolence, irrationality, capriciousness, and destructive tendencies. This unsettling reality is presented through the Underground Man as an answer to Chernyshevsky's naive optimism.

Dostoevsky visited the Crystal Palace at the Great Exhibition in London, a structure representing Western rationalist utopianism which Chernyshevsky later adopted as the central metaphor for the scientific utopia in *What Is to Be Done?* In his novel, the Crystal Palace would be the home for the inhabitants of a paradise based on rational egoism. Contrary to the popular perception at the time, Dostoevsky, in his *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions,* associated it with an "Apocalypse," a sign of "insensible and zombie-like" mass conformism (qtd. in Aho 835). In the same text,

Dostoevsky equates egoism with immorality and deems consequential self-absorption as a cardinal moral failing (Scanlan). Dostoevsky's Underground Man also critiques the symbolism of the Crystal Palace, likening a person who adheres to such a deterministic philosophy to nothing more than a piano key or an organ stop—mechanical components devoid of agency or individuality (Dostoevsky, pt. 1, sec. 7). As Joseph Frank elucidates, Dostoevsky's polemic functions through direct narrative inversion, where the protagonist's "hyperconsciousness" mockingly adopts Chernyshevsky's deterministic "laws of nature" to demonstrate their paralyzing effect (319). Furthermore, Frank identifies key episodes in Part II—specifically the collision with the officer and the failed rescue of Liza—as parodic reversals of scenes in *What Is to Be Done?*, designed to expose the practical uninhabitability of the rational egoist utopia (313).

Notes from Underground is a first-person narration by the unnamed *underground* man who is a prototypical Dostoevskian intellectual, isolated and hyperconscious (Corrigan 144). Structured in reverse chronology, the text separates the forty-year-old's philosophical monologue (Part I) from his youthful interactions sixteen years prior (Part II), a structural gap that reveals his current ideology as the entrenched result of his past social failures. He is a "sick man," an "evil man" by his own description (Dostoevsky, pt. 1, sec. 1).[1] The narrative presents the individually perceived truth of the Underground Man regarding the world he lives in, the conditions it puts forward for him to act out his life, and his self. The truth as experienced and expressed by the Underground Man serves as the primary object of analysis in this inquiry.

LIFE OF THE UNDERGROUND

The life of the underground represents a condition of expulsion from a world in which the man still lives and moves around (Rapaport). It is a life in stark contrast to normative existence that is characterized by conformity and thus belonging. The underground signifies a place for individuals alienated from the world they live in, and their selves. Such an alienation, in a socio-psychological conception, has various forms: *powerlessness*, *meaninglessness*, *normlessness*, *isolation*, and *self-estrangement* (Seeman). These multiple forms of alienation can be effectively adopted for a holistic analysis of the alienated condition of individuals who, like Dostoevsky's Underground

[1] All textual references are to the Boris Jakim translation (2009) unless otherwise noted. Comparative references are drawn from the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation (2004), hereafter cited as P&V.

Man, experience existential alienation arising from an irreconcilable tension between the internal desire for a self-determined mode of existence and an external ideological framework structured by rational egoism that inhibits such a mode of existence. Jaeggi's conceptualization of alienation as a multifaceted and entwined set of topics reinforces this argument. She describes alienation as a "relation of relationlessness," thereby implying the existence of an ever-present relation between the alienated subject and the entities of the world they live in, however impaired or deficient that relation may be. Society governed by the norms of rational egoism constitutes what Rahel Jaeggi refers to as the *given*, the pre-established socio-historical context within which the Underground Man is compelled to exist. The relation of the Underground Man with his world is one of relationlessness, too. He does not identify with the prescribed normative mode of enacting life, yet remains inextricably linked to the very world he repudiates. The rational egoist world alienates him, yet, at the same time, it is also the very context that defines his identity and existence. His attempts at belonging are numerous, but Zverkov's farewell party becomes the most illustrative of all.

Being subjected to an alienated existence is based upon an unsuccessful *appropriation*. Through appropriation, individuals shape their connection to themselves and the world, and in doing so, claim their own autonomy, enabling the "integration and transformation of what is given" (Jaeggi 1). Appropriation is not a reappropriation of a given essence that corresponds to the *true* nature of the self; instead, it is a productive process wherein the appropriated is also the result of appropriation. Jaeggi argues that alienation from the self and alienation from the world are mutually dependent states; alienation is therefore the "*deficient praxis* of appropriation" (36) of the *given*, the background conditions of life in the form of social norms, institutions, roles, and values that appear as natural, fixed, or inescapable.

In the first part of the novella, the Underground Man establishes his ideological profile through a disjointed monologue that delineates his character. He presents himself as someone who is at odds with the world around him. He has a paradoxical and contradictory character; he will not visit a doctor even when ill, is educated but superstitious, and feels simultaneously superior and inferior to his peers (Lethcoe). He experiences extreme emotional swings, is "calculating and vindictive" at one moment, and suddenly changes to being uncontrollably in despair the next; he is "literally and figuratively, a man submerged" (Roberts 401). He has, by his own admission, "a hysterical thirst for contradictions" (Dostoevsky, pt. 2, sec. 1). Coetzee describes this contradictory nature as a "fever of oscillations" that is typical of hyperconsciousness (218). In the narration of his condition, when a positive conclusion is suggested, he negates it sooner rather than later (Reed). This internal chaos serves as

a phenomenological refutation of the mathematical consistency demanded by rational egoism. When the Underground Man refers to the "bulls" (Dostoevsky, pt. 1, sec. 3), the typical men of action, he conveys an apparent belief in the existence of laws, and when he describes the helpless pleasure he derives from sinning in accordance with his nature, he reasons as though these laws are indeed real (Wasiolek 41). When he asserts that humanity universally has always believed in free choice and that such free will undermines the validity of logarithm tables, he reasons as though the laws do not exist. In the character of the Underground Man, Dostoevsky presents one of his most complex psychological portraits:

> [C]oncentrated and decisive portrait of the unhappy "I" in all of its intensity, broken and paralyzed by self-consciousness, desperately at odds with its own embodiment, desiring freedom and self- mastery while depending begrudgingly on others for existence, and thus compelled to affirm its freedom from the laws of nature and from the reductive eyes of others by means of self- destruction and industrious solipsism. (Corrigan 10)

Lethcoe classifies this sort of narration as self-deception, which gives rise to a distorted consciousness and ultimately results in a distorted account. His account is distorted by self-deception, as he convinces himself that his social isolation is a superior act of free will rather than a result of his own inadequacy. The Underground Man uses various devices for self-deception, of which the rifest is rationalization. Ironically, it is rationalization that he rages against. His tendency to hedge his statements with qualifiers and ambiguity reflects his deliberate attempts to cancel any idea that comes into his consciousness (Reed). This paradoxical and contradictory character represents the internal division between his indoctrinated self and his perceived true self that he is unable to externalize. This dissonance embodies the foundational riddle of Dostoevsky's psychology, manifesting as an intense conflict between the urge for the annihilation of the "I" through conformity to the social collective and the passionate defense of the "irreducible and inviolable nature" of the individual personality (Corrigan 4). The indoctrinated self that wants to identify with the zeitgeist of rational egoism does so to achieve a sense of belonging. On the contrary, the true self perceives this zeitgeist as unnatural and unfavorable to exist in.

The Underground Man concedes that "an intelligent man of the 19th century must be, and is morally obliged to be, fundamentally a being without character" (Dostoevsky, pt. 1, sec. 1) and that civilization in general cultivates "a many-sidedness of sensations . . . and absolutely nothing else" (pt. 1, sec. 7). He thus attributes his alienated existence to

the given external factors of rational egoism that coerce an individual's being into a rigid mold. Where P&V describe the modern man as a "characterless being" (7), Jakim's "being without character" (pt. 1, sec. 1) sharpens the ethical paradox: one is morally obliged to renounce moral personhood—a formulation that underscores Dostoevsky's critique of rationalism's demand for self-annihilation in the name of progress. This implies the feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness.

THE DIMENSIONS OF UNDERGROUND ALIENATION

For Jaeggi (22), a loss of power and a loss of meaning are two different but entwined diagnoses of alienation. Only the world that an individual can "make" their own by appropriation is the world in which the individual can act in self-determination. The Underground Man in the first part rants, raging against the "mechanized predictability" (Aho 836) of rational egoism in which all human actions and relations are calculated mathematically, "like a table of logarithms" (Dostoevsky pt. 1, sec. 7). He then contends that man only needs "*independent* desire" (ibid., emphasis in the original), no matter the cost or the end it may lead a man to. It is the "maximally profitable profit," the one that is omitted by all the "statisticians, all these sages and lovers of the human race" (ibid.). It is what preserves the personality and the individuality, which are "for us what is most important and most precious" (pt. 1, sec. 8) and a counter to rationality. Jakim's "maximally profitable profit" as compared to P&V's "most profitable profit" (20) preserves the narrator's sarcastic mimicry of utilitarian jargon. The Underground Man accepts the value of reason but argues that it is only partially satisfactory, only "some one-twentieth of all my life faculties" (pt. 1, sec. 8). Human nature, according to him, is ideally supposed to act as an entire whole, but as "[r]eason knows only what it has succeeded in learning" (ibid.), it leaves human nature wanting. He understands that the pursuit of a purely rational existence alienates the individual from their innermost desires (Aho). Even if a man possesses all the worldly goods and all that is left for him to do is sleep, eat, and worry about the noncessation of world history, it is at this very point in his life that his destructive self will appear.

SELF-ESTRANGEMENT

Since the Underground Man's conflict is within the self, it corresponds to Seeman's *self-estrangement*. His conception of this form of alienation derives from Eric Fromm's *The Sane Society*, wherein he describes alienation

as a mode of experience in which the alienated individual experiences his self as an alien. In self-estrangement, an individual is estranged from some perceived ideal human condition. Self-estrangement thus means to be at an inferior level than one may potentially be if the societal conditions were different. The Underground Man frequently signals a superior self when he puts forth his dissatisfaction with himself and desires for things to be different. He looks at himself with "frenzied dissatisfaction verging on loathing" (Dostoevsky, pt. 2, sec. 1), and reflects, "I've never been a coward at heart, although I've always been a coward in action" (ibid.). Jakim's "frenzied," in comparison to P&V's "furious dissatisfaction, reaching the point of loathing" (40), captures the unsustainable pressure of a consciousness straining against its own rational containment, where affect becomes the last index of agency.

Seeman also describes alienation with respect to the "degree of dependence of the given behaviour upon anticipated future rewards" (790), rewards that lie outside of the behavior itself. Jaeggi (207) too concedes that not every individual link constituted by an activity that an individual undertakes has intrinsic value, and getting caught up in a teleological circle is what threatens the process of self-realization, alienating the individual from his self. Every significant action undertaken by the Underground Man is driven by a predetermined objective exemplifying the utilitarian calculus of rational egoism, where human agency is subordinated to the external mandates of necessity and calculated benefit. He goes to Nevsky Prospect in order to overcome the persistent humiliation inflicted upon him by the police officer by being dismissed without an "authentic quarrel, a more correct and decent one, a more literary one, so to speak!" (Dostoevsky, pt. 2, sec. 1). Seeman uses the archetype of a salary-dependent worker to critique this very dependence of an individual's actions upon anticipated outcomes. The Underground Man falls under the same archetype as he confesses that even though he despised his service employment, he continued because he was getting money for it (ibid.). He resigned at once when he received six thousand rubles from a distant relative (pt. 1, sec. 1).

In the episode surrounding the farewell dinner for Zverkov, a successful army officer and the protagonist's former schoolmate, as well, the Underground Man acts in accordance with a similar utilitarian calculus. He does not pay his servant Apollon's wages only to be able to be part of a social situation in which he anticipates a significant risk of humiliation. He accompanies his former schoolmates Ferfichkin and Trudolyubov, both of whom he regards with resentment. By putting himself in such a situation, he intends to gain the sympathy of Simonov (the organizer), Ferfichkin, and Trudolyubov, thereby displacing Zverkov as the group's central figure. This imagined reversal of social dynamics would place him

in a position of superiority. This episode instantiates the Underground Man's contradictory desire for both domination and acceptance. This foregrounds the pathological logic that underlies his alienation.

POWERLESSNESS

The powerlessness of the alienated Underground Man is due to his acquiescence to *heteronomy*. Jaeggi (23) defines heteronomy as "having one's properties determined by an other" and equates such powerlessness to impotence. Seeman declares *powerlessness* to be the most frequently referenced contemporary usage of the concept of alienation, and defines it in terms of the probability and expectancy of the outcome(s) not being determined by the actions of an individual.

For the sake of foregrounding the universality of powerlessness, one can argue that although socio-political events are macro and collective phenomena, they are represented and enacted discursively or in practice individually. For the Underground Man, other individuals embody the socio-political ideology of rational egoism that he is against, and it is against each individual that he seeks to triumph over, both in reality and in his imagination. Seeman provides two examples of "love and affection" and "status and recognition" pertaining to his categorization of alienation as powerlessness (785). The Underground Man presents an instance of powerlessness in both. The former relates to his entanglement with Liza, a young prostitute he meets at a brothel after his humiliation at the dinner. He initially attempts to rescue her with high-minded rhetoric to soothe his wounded pride after the humiliation. He ultimately finds himself powerless when she offers genuine compassion and retreats into cruelty to protect his fragile sense of self. The interaction with Liza instantiates the moral failure of rational egoism, demonstrating that a worldview based on advantage reduces the other to a mere instrument for the self, hindering any possibility of authentic human connection. During his first meeting with Liza, the Underground Man derives a sense of power over her by bringing her into the feeling of guilt for her involvement in prostitution: "And for the sake of what have you ruined your life here, if you come to think of it? For the coffee they give you to drink and the plentiful meals?" (Dostoevsky, pt. 2, sec. 7). This perceived sense of power dissipates after Liza discovers him "crushed, overwhelmed, revoltingly embarrassed" (pt. 2, sec. 9) after the frenzied confrontation with Apollon over not paying him his wages. What follows this is an enraged confession about how he sought to dominate and humiliate Liza, just as others had done to him, and eventually descends into self-mortification. Liza stretches her arms to him in what he perceives as pity, and he bursts out into sobs, "They won't let

me . . . I can't be . . . good" (ibid.). With this remark, the roles of power are reversed; she becomes the heroine and he is "the same sort of humiliated and oppressed creature she'd been" (ibid.) before him a while ago.

For Jaeggi (22), a loss of power and a loss of meaning are two different but entwined diagnoses of alienation. According to her, only the world that an individual can "make" their own by appropriation is the world in which the individual can act in self-determination. The feeling of powerlessness does not necessarily suggest an actual entity of power outside oneself that gives rise to this loss of power. The Underground Man's powerlessness, according to him, is due to the "stone wall" of "the laws of nature, the conclusions of natural science, mathematics" (Dostoevsky, pt. 2, sec. 3). He is cognizant of this powerlessness of his, yet resists in his pathological attempts at gaining a sense of agency.

His perception of his experiences being limited by the stone wall of rationality circumscribes free will to an illusion, negating the possibility of authentic choice or meaningful agency. He argues that an individual prefers "one's own caprice, even the craziest one, one's own fantasy, excited sometimes to the point of madness" (pt. 1, sec. 7), the most profitable profit that gives the man a sense of meaning as it implies a possession of power in the hands of the individual, no matter what rationality dictates. He knows he is shaped by forces beyond his control, yet longs to act freely, revealing the contradiction at the heart of his character.

Additionally, the Underground Man often reflects on his own existence and actions, suggesting that his life is devoid of meaning or purpose. He sees himself as a contradiction, acting against his own best interests and desires.

MEANINGLESSNESS

Meaninglessness, as conceived by Seeman, is largely based on Karl Mannheim's differentiation between "functional rationality" and "substantial rationality," specifically, the phenomenon of the increase of the former and the concomitant decline of the latter (786). Functional rationality is the rationality of means, concerned with the instrumental aspect of decision-making that focuses on how to achieve a particular end. Substantial rationality, on the other hand, concerns itself with the evaluation and selection of goals themselves. It considers whether the goals pursued are worth pursuing in the first place. It emphasizes the importance of values and ideals, potentially at the expense of practicality or efficiency. Mannheim posits that, with society's growing tendency to organize its members based on the optimal realization of objectives (as is characteristic of societies organized around rational egoism), there is a corresponding

decrease in the capacity of an individual to act intelligently. The increase in functional rationality, with its emphasis on the role of the individual as an instrument towards a collective end, makes it impossible for the individual to act in a way that could lead to meaningful engagement with the world around them. The Underground Man's protest is against this denial of *intelligent* action, which reduces the human subject to the mechanical passivity of a piano key or organ stop, caused by a heightened conflict between functional rationality and substantial rationality. This intelligent action still associates itself with the rationality that the Underground Man ostensibly wants to entirely dispense with. Yet his demand for the provision of space for an individual to act independently on the individual level appears to correspond with the idea of substantial rationality.

Jaeggi asserts that self-alienation is associated with a perception of *being driven* by the circumstances of one's life rather than taking control of them by appropriation. Consequently, the individual being driven is unable to identify with his desires and is uninvolved in the world in which he lives. For her, the journey of an alienated individual towards an unalienated life is possible by appropriation alone, which requires the individual to play an active role in this process of change. To be able to initiate such a process, the worthiness of the process and the end that entails it need to be established. Seeman argues that even though they are not logically related, there are obvious connections between meaninglessness and powerlessness. The belief that one lives in an intelligible world, a world that one sees meaning in, may be a necessary condition for expectancies of control (the individual's claim to certain power over life, to state it generally). On the other side, the unintelligibility, i.e. not perceiving meaning, is conducive to powerlessness. This is what inhibits the Underground Man's attempt at appropriation. He thinks that the laws of nature which dictate all the aspects of the world have offended him, and that it is meaningless to act against this offender because he believes neither in his right to act against it nor in the possible success of such an act. In addition, he believes that such attempts will only make him suffer more while the offender will not be affected.

NORMLESSNESS

Another categorization of alienation by Seeman, normlessness, derived from Durkheim's concept of "anomie," typically describes a state of disruption or weakening of social norms that usually guide individual behavior. For the Underground Man, the world he lives in is in a state of anomie due to the prevalence of rational egoism. Merton associates such an anomic society with the facilitation of alienation and estrangement,

causing the individual to perceive his true self as incompatible with the given state of social norms. The individual finds no acceptable mode of self-expression within the prescribed frameworks, and as a result adopts deviant behaviors. The relation between the individual and society in such conditions becomes, as Jaeggi describes, alienation, a "relation of relationlessness" (1). In *Notes*, the Underground Man displays multiple instances of maladaptive behaviors that foreground his attempts at coping with what he perceives as an anomic world. His interactions with Liza present clear instances of such behaviors. Although the Underground Man is attracted to Liza and desires a sincere bond with her, he consistently repels her and precludes any potential for closeness between them. After engaging in an evening with Liza and encountering a fleeting instance of bonding, the Underground Man finds himself overwhelmed by his fears and by profound self-disgust. Subsequently, he vilifies Liza, eradicating any potential for a significant connection with her. This conduct is a manifestation of avoidance, as the Underground Man employs his self-destructive inclinations to evade confronting his authentic emotions and the susceptibility that accompanies authentic human bonding.

Passive aggression is a maladaptive behavior evident in the Underground Man's interactions with Zverkov and his friends. Throughout the evening, he vacillates between wanting to leave out of contempt and stubbornly staying to assert his presence. Instead of leaving a gathering he despises, he stubbornly chooses to "sit it out to the very end!" (Dostoevsky, pt. 2, sec. 4), turning his physical presence into a weapon of spite. This hostility culminates in his awkward toast, through which he attempts to mask his contempt with performative civility: "I love true comradeship, on an equal footing . . . Seduce the Circassian maidens, shoot the enemies of the fatherland, and . . . and . . . To your health, M'sieur Zverkov!" (ibid.). Through these actions, he converts his internal conflict into an external spectacle of resentment. He makes inciting remarks, deliberately challenging their viewpoints, and thereafter faking concurrence. With Apollon, whom he regards as haughty and disapproving, he engages in indirect hostility rather than confrontation. These occurrences of passive aggression depict the psychopathology of the Underground Man, revealing his incapacity for direct and constructive self-assertion. Such behavior is a means of coping with the sense of impotence and frustration when confronted with social and personal difficulties.

In Part II, the Underground Man describes at length his imaginary confrontation with the officer who had insulted him years ago by treating him as an object and moving him aside in order to pass through: "I had been treated like a fly" (pt. 2, sec. 1). For years to come, he would view the officer with hatred and spite: "what if I encounter him and . . . don't move

aside? What if I don't move aside on purpose, even if I have to bump into him? What would happen then?" (ibid.). He envisions himself triumphing over the officer. However, this fantasy is never actualized in reality, and the Underground Man remains stuck in his isolated and ineffectual existence. Instead of confronting the officer in person or moving on from the trivial incident, he adopts maladaptive daydreaming. Although he attempts to convince himself of winning the final battle, it is only a delusion:

> [W]e collided solidly, shoulder against shoulder! I didn't yield an inch and passed him on a perfectly equal footing! He didn't even look back and pretended not to notice the collision; but he was only pretending—I'm convinced of that. I'm convinced of that to this day! Of course, I got the worst of it: he was stronger, but that wasn't the point. The point was that I had attained my goal, preserved my dignity, yielded not a step, and placed myself publicly on an equal social footing with him. (ibid.)

The Underground Man's victory is a delusion because the officer remains oblivious, rendering the "equality" a private fantasy. This parodies rationalism by showing how his calculated attempt to assert agency ironically transforms him into a predictable projectile governed by the laws of nature.

The Underground Man does not identify his true self with such behaviors. Instead, he interprets his maladaptive behaviors as an innate reaction to the underlying paradoxes and inequities of reality, rather than making deliberate decisions that can actively modify the given circumstances through appropriation and consequently lead to a successful identification with one's actions and self as a whole.

ISOLATION

Isolation, according to Seeman, is most relevant to the role of the intellect in alienation, wherein the intellectual disengages from popular cultural standards. In the context of the novella, this disengagement manifests as a rejection of rational egoism, the dominant philosophy of the time, which the Underground Man views not as a path to progress but as a coercive system of values. Seeman defines this specific form of alienation in terms of reward values: the alienated individual assigns low value to goals or beliefs that are traditionally esteemed by his society. Consequently, the Underground Man despises his employment, rejects companionship, and deliberately violates the power dynamics and social etiquette expected in hierarchy. By systematically devaluing these external norms, the protagonist severs his tie to shared reality, retreating into a state of solipsism in which his own isolated consciousness becomes the only validity he recognizes.

APPROPRIATION

Jaeggi's solution to this alienation is the successful appropriation of the self and the surrounding world. This includes the integration and the transformation of what is given. Appropriation entails an active working through and independent assimilation instead of a passive taking up of external things, so that they are internalized and identified with. The concept of appropriation presents a dichotomy between what is already given and what can be created, between assuming control and generating new things. Appropriation entails two aspects. Firstly, an individual can engage in action, shape, and establish their significant influence on the world. Secondly, it is inherently tied to a pre-existing content, the given. While appropriation can be reinterpreted, it cannot be entirely created from the ground up.

"Appropriation is a process of learning and experience in which the relation between freedom and uncontrollability is negotiated" (Jaeggi 64). To appropriate the uncontrollable in one's life implies bringing it into an affirmative relation to oneself. This requires an active engagement with the performative nature of human existence. Hans-Peter Dreitzel terms the component of appropriation dictated by the individual's unique capacity to shape their life the "subject function" (qtd. in Jaeggi 87). The subject function does not imply the non-existence of standardized functions (so to speak) of external factors and their effect in the process of appropriation but presents the space for individual expression that engages with the standardizations, the external social roles and factors that form the context of reality. For Jaeggi, a human subject is not "natural"; instead, it is shaped and formed. It is precisely when an individual denies the performative nature of his existence that he behaves inauthentically. The Underground Man's assertion, "I swear to you, gentlemen, that to be overly conscious—is a sickness, a real and full-fledged sickness" (Dostoevsky, pt. 1, sec. 2), reveals his error: he equates the performance of social roles with blind conformity and thus refuses to participate. Thus, the Underground Man fails to perform and facilitates his own alienation. He occupies a liminal space, cognizant of the forces that estrange him, yet simultaneously powerless to resist or transcend them. In his desperation at this paralysis, he comes to lament the burden of consciousness itself: "For common human purposes, it would be more than sufficient to possess ordinary human consciousness" (ibid.). This perpetuates his delusion, providing him with the comfort of ignorance.

The roles are thus to be accepted and appropriated, and if the individual deems the role(s) hopelessly non-appropriable, the decision to inhabit it demands re-evaluation to determine if the choice was driven by

intrinsic interest or instrumental necessity. Jaeggi emphasizes the necessity of engaging in actions intrinsically, rather than instrumentally, by arguing that the possibility of self-realization is threatened precisely when one gets caught in a teleological circle in which "one does one thing for the sake of another without ever connecting them to a final end" (208). This sort of instrumental action takes away identification and autonomy due to the very choice made that establishes the individual as a performing subject of that particular action. Acts are only meaningful if they are pursued for their own sake. Although the Underground Man is right in his perception of the existence of an irrational self within the self that is incompatible with the rational egoist world, this recognition destabilizes his sense of identity to such an extent that he becomes incapable of envisioning the possibility of appropriating the givens of his existence or attempting such appropriation through deliberate action. Instead of any active incorporation of the given, the Underground Man adopts maladaptive behaviors, which keep the problem unsolved, consequently perpetuating his alienated predicament. The only way for the Underground Man to escape his predicament, and arrive at the ground *per* Jaeggi, would be to actively attempt successful appropriation. This does not entail recovering a lost state of unalienated existence; rather, it involves "taking possession of the world in a way that first establishes a mutually constituting relation between self and world" (Neuhouser xiii). This is to be achieved by what Kierkegaard calls "taking hold of oneself in practice" (qtd. in Jaeggi 9). By actively participating in the "given" world rather than rejecting it, the individual transforms the external environment from a hostile force into a medium for self-expression.

CONCLUSION

This article reads Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* as a psychological case study that explores the alienated subjectivity of individuals whose existence is marked by an inherent conflict between their self-understanding and the external world, focusing on the existential and psychic conflict that arises from the dissonance between the protagonist's self-perception and the normative rational egoist structure of society. This condition of alienation is based upon Rahel Jaeggi's conception of alienation and further explored through Melvin Seeman's categorization of the forms of alienation. The article then discusses Jaeggi's notion of appropriation as a remedy for such a condition, arguing that instrumental actions entrap individuals in a teleological circle that inhibits identification and autonomy, instead emphasizing the acceptance of the performative nature of human existence,

which opens the possibility of appropriation through action that will integrate the individual into the world they live in and, therefore, the self. Building on this, it goes further and emphasizes the value of choosing a goal that will present the "given" associated with it, prior to any attempt at appropriation. Such a choice provides more appropriable contexts and constraints. The Underground Man's struggle reflects the broader human pursuit of agency and self-realization; therefore, a critical discussion based on his condition facilitates understanding and possible forms of resolution for such a state.

Works Cited

Aho, Kevin. "Dostoevsky, Existential Therapy, and Modern Rage: On the Possibility of Counseling the Underground Man." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol. 61, no. 5, May 2019, pp. 828–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167819852234

Coetzee, J. M. "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 37, no. 3, Jan. 1985, pp. 193–232. https://doi.org/10.2307/1771079

Corrigan, Yuri. *Dostoevsky and the Riddle of the Self*. Northwestern UP, 2017.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*. Translated by Boris Jakim, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*. Introduction by Richard Pevear, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Everyman's Library, 2004.

Frank, Joseph. *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860–1865*. Princeton UP, 1986.

Jaeggi, Rahel. *Alienation*. Translated by Frederick Neuhouser and Alan E. Smith, Columbia UP, 2014.

Lethcoe, James. "Self-Deception in Dostoevskij's *Notes from the Underground*." *Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1966, pp. 9–21. https://doi.org/10.2307/305374

Merton, Robert K. "Social Structure and Anomie." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 3, no. 5, Oct. 1938, pp. 672–82. https://doi.org/10.2307/2084686

Neuhouser, Frederick. Translator's Introduction. *Alienation*, by Rahel Jaeggi, Columbia UP, 2014, pp. xi–xvii.

Rapaport, Herman. "Secondary Thinking and Trauma: Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*." *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, edited by Michelle Balaev, Springer Nature, 2014, pp. 42–69. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137365941_3

Reed, Merrill. "The Mistaken Endeavor: Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1972, pp. 505–16.
Roberts, Peter. "The Stranger Within: Dostoevsky's Underground." *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 45, no. 4, Sept. 2012, pp. 396–408. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2012.718146
Rosenshield, Gary. "The Fate of Dostoevskij's Underground Man: The Case for an Open Ending." *Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 28, no. 3, Jan. 1984, pp. 324–39. https://doi.org/10.2307/307831
Scanlan, James P. "The Case Against Rational Egoism in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 60, no. 3, July 1999, pp. 549–67. https://doi.org/10.2307/3654018
Seeman, Melvin. "On the Meaning of Alienation." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 24, no. 6, Dec. 1959, pp. 783–91. https://doi.org/10.2307/2088565
Travis, Robert P. "On Powerlessness and Meaninglessness." *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 37, no. 1, Mar. 1986, pp. 61–73. https://doi.org/10.2307/591051
Walicki, Andrzej. *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism*. Stanford UP, 1979.
Wasiolek, Edward. *Dostevsky: The Major Fiction*. The MIT P, 1964.

Syed Fuzail Kaunsar is Research Scholar in the Department of English at B. S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science & Technology, Chennai, India. His research interests include the areas of literary theory and criticism, cultural studies, and alienation. His recent publication is titled "'I Had No Identity': Acculturation, Liminality, and Alienation in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*."
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8846-093X
sfk913@gmail.com

A. Sulochana works as Assistant Professor of English at B. S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science & Technology, Chennai, India. Her research interests include subaltern studies, Indian literature, and cultural studies.
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3612-7286
sulochana@crescent.education

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.28

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Assyl Matayeva
L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana

Sagymbay Zhumagul
L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana

Akmaral Dalelbekkyzy
Farabi University, Almaty

Yrysgul Shakaman
Pavlodar Pedagogical University

Seifitden Sutzhanov
Pavlodar Pedagogical University

Contemporary Kazakh Literature in Comparative Studies: Current Trends

Abstract

This study aims to examine the influence of globalisation, multiculturalism, and modern theories on Kazakh comparative literature studies within the framework of global trends. The research was conducted concerning scientific paradigms, focusing on the role of globalisation and emerging trends that significantly impact global science and culture, prompting a reconsideration of such fundamental concepts as nation, culture, and state. Particular attention was given to the challenge of preserving national identity in the context of globalisation, where rapid economic, cultural, and political integration poses a threat to traditional cultural values and identity. The findings indicate that the integration of contemporary paradigms and global trends has enriched Kazakh comparative literature studies, facilitating a deeper understanding of textual complexity, symbolism, and semiotic systems. The results emphasise the importance of integrating innovations and contemporary scholarly approaches into Kazakh comparative literature studies, thereby strengthening its position in international academia.

Keywords: multiculturalism, globalisation, postcolonial criticism, literary paradigms, Kazakh comparative literature, national identity.

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: The article was written within the framework of the scientific project No. AP22685428 (*Poetological Model of Sacred Places*) funded by the Scientific Committee of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 27 May 2025. Verified: 19 Mar. 2026. Accepted: 22 Mar. 2026.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of cultural dynamics on Kazakh literary theory has grown increasingly significant recently. These global trends have presented both challenges and opportunities for the development of national literary traditions, particularly in regions such as Kazakhstan. Within the context of rapidly evolving global processes, examining the influence of these factors on Kazakh literature—defined as works written in the Kazakh language—is of critical importance. At the same time, the term Kazakhstani literature encompasses the broader literary traditions of the country, integrating both Kazakh language and Russophone literature, the latter referring to works written in Russian, which hold a significant place in Kazakhstan's literary landscape. As Kazakhstan continues to deepen its integration into the global community, its literary discourse must adapt to new paradigms that transcend national boundaries, reflecting the multifaceted nature of its literary and cultural identity.

An increasing number of studies focus on the influence of cultural transformations. For instance, Botescu-Sireteanu highlights that these global processes have prompted a profound reassessment of national identity in literature, presenting new tasks and challenges for Kazakh literary scholars. The study by Ryspayeva et al. examines the role of multiculturalism in reshaping the understanding of Kazakh literary heritage, emphasising the importance of dialogue between diverse cultural traditions to enrich interpretations of Kazakh texts. Ariely stresses that multiculturalism encourages a re-evaluation of traditional approaches to Kazakh literature, creating opportunities for novel interpretations and methodologies. In particular, the research demonstrates how incorporating elements from other cultural traditions enhances the exploration of themes such as identity, national memory, and cultural heritage.

Ananyeva et al. highlight in their study how transnational research has influenced the methods and perspectives employed in Kazakh literary studies, noting that this approach has opened new opportunities for exploring connections between Kazakh literature and global literary movements. The authors observe that the transnational perspective allows literary studies to move beyond traditional national boundaries, focusing on the interplay of cultures and literature from different countries. This has not only deepened the understanding of Kazakh literature within the context of global literary processes but has also identified common themes, motifs, and stylistic features that link Kazakh literary works with global literary trends.

Friess explores the dynamics of Russophone literature in Kazakhstan, emphasising the ways in which young authors in the region navigate their identities within the broader context of the "Russian World." Friess analyses the literary production of Kazakhstani writers who write in Russian, revealing how their works engage with both the national and transnational spheres. Her study critically examines how these authors address themes of cultural hybridisation, national identity, and the complex legacies of Soviet and post-Soviet structures in Kazakhstan. The author studies the way young Russophone writers in Kazakhstan are redefining the boundaries of literature and engaging with the socio-political implications of their language choice. Friess's analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how Kazakhstani literature operates within the global literary field while also navigating local and international politics.

Global literary trends, particularly those shaped by multiculturalism and transnationalism, often challenge traditional literary frameworks, requiring scholars to reconsider established methods of analysis and interpretation. In the context of globalisation, national literary traditions are viewed through a new lens, where the interplay of diverse cultural contexts becomes inevitable. Research conducted by Jakipova et al. emphasises the necessity of integrating global perspectives into Kazakh literary theory. This approach not only ensures the relevance and vitality of Kazakh literature but also enriches it with new meanings and interpretations.

Matayeva highlights the impact of global literary trends on the evolution of Kazakh literary criticism, particularly in how these trends contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex cultural interactions shaping literary production. Ananyeva examines how the intersection of global and local literary traditions has led to new interpretations of Kazakh literary texts, emphasising the importance of adaptability and openness to diverse theoretical approaches. The author specifically notes how globalisation has fostered intercultural exchanges, resulting in a richer and more dynamic literary discourse in Kazakhstan.

Caffee's study offers a transnational perspective on Russian-language literature, challenging traditional boundaries that categorise Russophone literature as confined to Russia alone. Caffee argues for a more inclusive and fluid understanding of Russian-language literature, positioning it within a broader Eurasian context. By examining how literature in Russian transcends national borders, Caffee proposes a conception of Russophonia that connects Russian-language literary traditions across diverse cultural and political spaces. Her work contributes significantly to the ongoing debate about language and identity in post-Soviet states, including Kazakhstan, where the Russian language continues to be an important

cultural and literary vehicle. Caffee's analysis reveals how Russophone authors in Kazakhstan engage with global and local themes, reflecting the intersections of Kazakh, Russian, and Eurasian identities.

A review of the available literature reveals that, despite the substantial body of research on the influence of globalisation and multiculturalism on Kazakh literature, further studies are needed to explore how these influences are integrated into the theoretical frameworks employed by Kazakh literary scholars. The ongoing development of Kazakh literary theory in response to global trends necessitates a deeper examination of how these influences can be harmonised with the preservation of national literary identity.

The impact of globalisation on Kazakh literature has raised significant debates within contemporary literary studies. While it is tempting to draw a simple opposition between the global and the local, framing the global as an external, often homogenising force, and the local as an authentic, culturally preserving element, such a dichotomy risks oversimplifying the complex dynamics at play. This simplistic opposition does not account for the ways in which Kazakh literature both adapts to and reshapes global literary trends. Instead of a straightforward conflict, the relationship between global influences and Kazakh cultural identity is more nuanced and interwoven. Authors within Kazakhstan engage in a dynamic exchange, blending global literary paradigms with local traditions, creating hybrid forms that reflect the nation's evolving identity in a globalised world. The aim of this study is to explore how contemporary Kazakh literature navigates these tensions and enriches the global literary landscape while preserving national cultural identity. The main objectives of the research are as follows: a) identification of the principal literary paradigms influencing the development of Kazakh literature; b) assessment of the impact of global literary trends on the interpretation and analysis of Kazakh literary texts; c) analysis of the current state of Kazakh literary theory within the context of global processes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research process involved the collection, systematisation, and analysis of data from various sources. A comprehensive approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis, was employed to achieve the research objectives and ensure accurate findings. The study was conducted using data and materials from international sources, which allowed for the consideration of a global context and ensured a high level of objectivity and precision in the results.

The initial phase of the research involved an analysis of key texts in Kazakh literature written in the 20th and 21st centuries. Particular attention was paid to the works *Paper-thin Skin* by Aigerim Tazhi (2019) and *To Hell with Poets* by Baqytgul Sarmekova (2023). These texts were selected based on their significance in examining processes of cross-cultural dynamics that had had a substantial impact on the development of Kazakh comparative literature studies. They were chosen as representative samples reflecting the cultural and social changes that occur in Kazakhstan and globally. The primary focus was on analysing symbolism, narrative structures, and sign systems that allowed for a better understanding of the interaction of Kazakh literature and global literary traditions.

The second phase of the research was dedicated to analysing the impact of global processes on the development of Kazakh comparative literature studies. Particular attention was given to these processes' contribution to the rethinking and broadening of traditional approaches to studying Kazakh literature. The research explored various aspects of the interaction between Kazakh literature and world literary processes, as well as how cultural integration and multiculturalism shaped new directions in literary studies.

Particular attention was paid to the issue of preserving national identity in the face of globalisation. The research examined processes of cultural integration to assess the adaptation of traditional Kazakh cultural values to contemporary conditions. A content analysis method was employed to identify the main themes and motifs recurring in Kazakh literature (i.e. these reflecting the struggle to preserve national identity).

The third stage of the research involved the analysis of intercultural connections and their influence on the formation of literary texts. This stage included a study of transnational research, allowing for the identification of global literary trends and their impact on Kazakh literature. Data for this stage was gathered from academic publications and reports (Jakipova et al.; Amankulova et al.). This has enabled the study of how Kazakh literature fits into a broader global context and how it interacts with other national literatures.

Quantitative methods involved statistical analysis of data obtained from official sources and analytical reports (Kalybekova et al.), allowing for an objective assessment of the degree to which globalisation and multiculturalism have influenced Kazakh literature. Qualitative methods, such as content analysis and discourse analysis, were employed for an in-depth study of symbolism and sign systems, as well as for analysing the influence of international cultural trends on Kazakh literature.

RESULTS

A) TRENDS IN GLOBAL LITERATURE AND THE ROLE OF KAZAKH AUTHORS

Globalisation and multiculturalism are mutually reinforcing processes that create new opportunities for understanding complex cultural, social, and political processes in the contemporary world. However, they also raise new questions related to the preservation of cultural diversity, the sustainability of national identities, and equality in a globalised world. Contemporary trends also contribute to the development of new methodological approaches in Kazakh comparative literature studies. The influence of postcolonial criticism, gender studies, intertextual analysis, and other modern theories leads to a re-evaluation of traditional conceptions of Kazakh literature and the creation of new research paradigms (Abdurazakova et al.). Kazakh comparative literature studies have undergone significant changes in recent decades, associated with a rethinking of historical heritage, cultural identity, and the search for a place in the global literary context. Some of the key areas of contemporary Kazakh comparative literature studies have been globalisation, postcolonial criticism, and the study of issues of national identity and culture. These areas are relevant not only for understanding the development of Kazakh literature but also for researching broader processes occurring in the post-Soviet space.

A comparison of global bestseller rankings with those in Kazakhstan reveals minor yet noticeable differences in readers' literary preferences. On the global stage, thrillers, science fiction, fantasy, and works addressing socially significant issues dominate. For instance, bestseller rankings (such as the GoodReads 2024 one) frequently feature books such as *The Covenant of Water* by Abraham Verghese, George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* saga, and *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus.

In contrast, different literary preferences are observed in Kazakhstan. While global bestsellers such as *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman and *Dune* by Frank Herbert are present in the top rankings, Kazakhstani bestseller lists (Meloman) are primarily dominated by works focused on national history, culture, and traditions (see Table 1). For example, popular authors include Amir Karakulov and Zaure Seitova, whose novel *The Archer* delves deeply into Kazakhstan's national traditions, historical roots, and social realities. The work explores important themes such as the search for national identity, personal freedom, and social expectations within the context of Kazakh society. Such works play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting cultural values, making them particularly significant for Kazakhstani readers.

Top global bestsellers		Top bestsellers in Kazakhstan	
Author	**Book title**	**Author**	**Book title**
Bonnie Garmus	*Lessons in Chemistry*	Victor Pelevin	*Journey to Eleusis*
Prince Harry	*Spare*	Daniel Kahneman	*Thinking, Fast and Slow*
James Clear	*Atomic Habits*	Frank Herbert	*Dune*
Mark Manson	*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck: A Counterintuitive Approach to Living a Good Life*	Amir Karakulov	*The Archer*
Jennette McCurdy	*I'm Glad My Mom Died*	Liu Cixin	*The Three-Body Problem*
Charlie Mackesy	*The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse*	Margulan Seisembayev	*Mission Accomplished*
Colleen Hoover	*It Starts with Us*	Gulnar Nauryzbai	*Salem, Almaty!*
Delia Owens	*Where The Crawdads Sing*	Sarah Cameron	*The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan*

Table 1. Comparison of bestseller rankings in the world and Kazakhstan (2023). Compiled by the authors based on data from Goodreads (2024) and Meloman (2024).

A comparison between global and Kazakh bestseller rankings reveals cultural and societal disparities in literary choices. Memoirs, science fiction, psychological research, and self-help books like *Spare* by Prince Harry and *Atomic Habits* by James Clear dominate the global market. Personal stories and psychological insights appealing to international readers are common themes in these publications. Kazakh rankings favour books about national identity, culture, and history, such as Sarah Cameron's *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* and Margulan Seisembayev's *Mission Accomplished*. Kazakh readers want to discover themselves through local and national literature. While global literature explores human progress, social justice, and futurism, Kazakh readers choose books that highlight cultural identity and historical history. Global and Kazakh literary preferences differ mostly

due to cultural, historical, and social considerations. The global market values novelty, technological development, and re-imagining the future, as shown by futurism, dystopian narratives, and science fiction, i.e. genres exploring humanity's future, technology's impact, environmental crises, and social justice. Literary choices often reflect global issues like inequality, climate change, and technology advancement, making them relevant to international audiences.

Concurrently, Kazakh readers tend to gravitate towards literature reflecting their national consciousness, historical heritage, and cultural roots. This preference can be attributed to the prolonged struggle to preserve national identity, particularly in the context of historical events such as colonisation, the Soviet era, and the contemporary period of independence. Kazakh readers value literature that underscores their cultural traditions, customs, and native language, while also addressing issues of national pride and the preservation of cultural distinctiveness. Social factors also play a pivotal role in shaping literary preferences. In the context of globalisation, many Kazakh readers need literature that resists homogenisation and helps preserve the unique aspects of their national culture. Such books serve not only as works of art but also as important cultural artefacts that contribute to strengthening national spirit and solidarity. For instance, during periods of political and economic instability, national literature becomes a vehicle for expressing and reinforcing cultural values, which is particularly significant for maintaining identity in the face of global change.

It is important to note that Kazakh literature is, nonetheless, influenced by globalisation, which, on the one hand, allows it to transcend national borders and gain international recognition, but, on the other hand, presents it with the challenge of preserving national identity. The integration of Kazakh literature into the global context is evident through the translation of works by Kazakh authors into other languages, participation in international literary festivals and symposia, and the study of Kazakh literature within the framework of literary and cultural studies.

Despite international recognition, Kazakh authors remain underrepresented in the bestseller market. Themes related to postcolonial criticism, nomadic culture, and national traditions make Kazakh literature unique but also less universally appealing to the general reader. Contemporary Kazakh writers such as Tazhi and Sarmekova are striving to align with global literary trends by combining national themes with pressing global issues (e.g., environmental problems, social justice, intercultural dialogue). A closer examination of their works reveals how these writers navigate the intersection of Kazakh identity and globalisation, adapting their literary voices to resonate with both local and international audiences.

For instance, Tazhi, a prominent figure in contemporary Kazakh poetry, exemplifies an author whose work reflects both the influence of globalisation and a desire for integration into the global literary space. In her collection *Paper-thin Skin*, Tazhi creates a dialogue between Kazakh traditions and contemporary themes such as issues of identity, environmental degradation, and social justice. Through her delicate blending of traditional Kazakh symbols and modern-day concerns, she crafts a multi-layered cultural dialogue. One such example is her evocation of the steppe, not merely as a symbol of Kazakh heritage but as a metaphor of the vulnerability of nature in the face of industrialisation. The recurring imagery of fragility serves as a critique of both personal and environmental vulnerability, linking global environmental issues with Kazakh cultural identity. Through her poetry, Tazhi demonstrates that Kazakh literature can be both rooted in national traditions and responsive to global concerns, making her work accessible to an international audience while remaining deeply connected to the specific cultural context of Kazakhstan.

In *Paper-thin Skin*, Tazhi delves into the complexities of human vulnerability, a theme that resonates universally across cultural boundaries. Her poetry is characterised by intertextual connections that transcend Kazakh culture, making her work relevant on a global scale. One example is her portrayal of personal and collective fragility in the face of modern global crises. Tazhi's use of traditional Kazakh metaphors, such as the yurt or horses, interacts with contemporary themes of global environmentalism and human rights, creating a bridge between the local and the universal. The way in which she intertwines Kazakh imagery with global themes demonstrates her ability to preserve national identity while engaging in global literary trends, highlighting how Kazakh literature can adapt to the globalised literary landscape without sacrificing its cultural roots. Her exploration of social equality further underscores this engagement with global literary movements, contributing to the wider discourse on human rights and social justice that is prevalent in contemporary global literature.

Sarmekova, however, stands out among the presented authors as a writer who integrates Kazakh literature into the global literary context while preserving its national specificity. In *To Hell with Poets*, this is achieved not through abstract reflection, but through the satirical depiction of Oryngul's encounter with literary authority, which becomes a means of exposing broader tensions between aspiration, social hierarchy, and disillusionment in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The heroine's inner world is revealed through a combination of naïve self-perception, emotional projection, and humiliating experience. Oryngul believes that she "was born for poetry" and even considers her simple poem beginning with "Hey, stone egg, you have life too" a "masterpiece," which at once introduces both her sincerity and her comic vulnerability (98–99). This mixture of self-

belief and awkwardness gives the character a tragically comic dimension: she is not ridiculed from outside, but shown as a young woman whose longing for recognition makes her susceptible to illusion.

Sarmekova's irony becomes especially clear in the representation of Itbai, whose public image as a celebrated poet is steadily dismantled by deflationary detail. He is introduced ceremonially at a wedding as a great poet, yet the performance itself is undercut by the indifference of the audience: "the women had moved on to talking among themselves," Eltai "had already fallen asleep and woken up," and "only the lonely Oryngul was listening to the poet" (14). In this way, literary prestige is shown as theatrical rather than substantive. The satire sharpens further when Oryngul, imagining Itbai as a cultural guide and even "a towering mountain," encounters instead the grotesque materiality of his body: as he tries to kiss her, "the dandruff-like flakes that had gathered on his shiny bald head, like a mirror, covered his face like a fly" (88). This abrupt collapse of elevated poetic authority into physical absurdity exemplifies Sarmekova's rejection of conventional literary idealisation. In place of the romanticised poet-genius, she offers a figure marked by vanity, manipulation, and bodily vulgarity.

The story also demonstrates how Sarmekova connects specifically Kazakh realities with themes that remain legible to a wider audience. Oryngul's desire to enter the literary world through patronage, her trust in promises that she will become "famous throughout the world" (99), and her subsequent exploitation reflect a recognisable structure of unequal power, especially between an inexperienced young woman and an older male cultural authority. This tension culminates when her poem is published only after being altered beyond recognition: it retains merely the title "Life," while "it was a completely different poem" (106). The episode transforms an apparently local literary situation into a broader commentary on authorship, gendered vulnerability, and the violence of symbolic appropriation. Thus, Sarmekova's prose resonates beyond the Kazakh context not because it abandons local specificity, but because it renders that specificity through irony, humiliation, and frustrated aspiration, all of which make the text accessible within broader global discussions of social inequality, cultural authority, and the search for identity in a changing world.

However, a significant portion of Kazakh literature often fails to reach the top positions in global rankings due to the language barrier and limited availability on major international platforms. In addition, the uniqueness of Kazakhstan's historical and social realities may reduce the immediate recognisability of its literary concerns for broader audiences. Nevertheless, contemporary Kazakh comparative literature studies play a pivotal role in interpreting such texts, strengthening national identity, and integrating Kazakh literature into a wider global context. By analysing cases such

as Sarmekova's, Kazakh comparative literature studies demonstrate that national literature can preserve its cultural distinctiveness while also contributing meaningfully to international literary and scholarly discourse.

B) CURRENT ISSUES IN KAZAKH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE STUDIES

The preservation of national identity in the age of globalisation is one of the most pressing and complex challenges of the modern world (Abdurazakova et al.). Globalisation, with its rapid pace of economic, cultural, and political integration, poses significant challenges to national communities, threatening traditional cultural values and identities. National identity, encompassing a sense of belonging to a particular culture, language, history, and traditions, confronts new forms of cultural interaction and competition. In this context, investigating ways to preserve national identity becomes particularly important for understanding the dynamics of cultural processes in the age of globalisation.

One of the key aspects of this problem is the impact of globalisation on cultural practices and traditions. On the one hand, globalisation promotes the spread of ideas, technologies, and products that can enrich national cultures and stimulate cultural development. On the other hand, it poses a threat of cultural homogenisation, where dominant global cultures, such as American or European, begin to displace and replace local traditions and customs. As a result of this process, there may be a loss of unique elements of national culture, such as language, folklore, traditional crafts, and customs, which are the foundation of national identity. This is particularly relevant for smaller nations and ethnic groups whose cultural traditions are at risk of disappearing in the context of global cultural exchange.

The changing conceptions and meanings of national identity in a globalised environment are another important issue (Kerubo). Traditional national identity theories viewed culture as immutable and unchangeable. Globalisation is changing this notion, and national identity is seen as more flexible and dynamic, subject to external influences. Migration, international communications, and global cultural trends can influence national identity perceptions. This can produce new identities that mix national and global cultures. Globalisation affects cultural beliefs and national identity, especially among millennials, who mix traditional and modern cultures. Globalisation presents new difficulties and opportunities for Kazakh literature, which affects national identity. Traditional and cultural themes are being combined in contemporary Kazakh literature, especially for younger readers. Themes, genres, and storytelling tactics are shifting as authors experiment with Western and Eastern literary forms while retaining

national qualities. Kazakh youth, engaged in culture through the internet and (social) media, increasingly find their identity in writing that blends national motifs with pop culture such as music, film, and digital art. Short stories and essays, which are easier to read in the digital age, are popular among young Kazakh authors. They reflect global trends like urbanisation, migration, and the modern-world search for personal identity.

Works by Kazakh writers increasingly incorporate elements of intercultural interaction, references to foreign literary trends and cultural symbols, creating a unique blend of the local and the global. Authors such as Dan Sugralinov, popular among young people for his cyberpunk works, exemplify these processes of synthesis. In works such as *Kirpichi* [*The Bricks*] Sugralinov seamlessly blends cyberpunk elements with Kazakh cultural realities, creating worlds in which high technology and social alienation coexist with national characteristics and cultural symbols. This unique approach allows the author not only to introduce fresh genre solutions to Kazakh literature but also to adapt global motifs to a local context, making them more accessible and understandable to the Kazakh reader. These works demonstrate how Kazakh literature is adapting to a changing world, striving to preserve its uniqueness while simultaneously becoming part of the global literary process. Thus, globalisation, with its diversity of cultural influences, is shaping a new generation of Kazakh authors who are reimagining traditional plots and motifs through the lens of contemporary world trends, which in turn contributes to the creation of new forms of cultural expression and perception of national identity (Table 2).

Table 2. Evolution of genres and themes in Kazakh literature under the influence of global trends.

Period	Main genres	Popular themes	Key authors	Impact of globalisation
1980s	Realism, historical prose	National identity, traditions	Mukhtar Auezov, Olzhas Suleimenov, Abish Kekilbayev, Ilyas Yesenberlin	Limited impact of globalisation, focus on preserving national traditions and critiquing historical events
1990s	Modernism, social realism	Social change, post-Soviet transformation	Gerold Belger, Saparbai Mukhambetov, Rakhimzhan Otarbayev	Post-Soviet transformation, the influence of social changes and initial globalisation, the emergence of new literary forms

Period	Main genres	Popular themes	Key authors	Impact of globalisation
2000s	Postmodernism, psychological prose	Personal crises, migration, cultural conflicts	Rollan Seisenbayev, Dulat Isabekov, Akhmetbek Kuatov	Influence of Western postmodern literature, increased focus on cultural conflicts and adaptation
2010s	Cyberpunk, science fiction, magical realism	Technology, virtual reality, global issues	Dan Sugralinov, Aigerim Tazhi, Baqytgul Sarmekova, Murat Tashimov	Integration of global genres, such as cyberpunk and science fiction, with emphasis on global themes and emerging technologies

In the context of globalisation, supporting and developing national literature, art, and other forms of cultural expression becomes a crucial aspect of preserving national identity. These cultural forms play a key role in shaping and transmitting national identity, preserving and transforming cultural symbols, images, and narratives. Literature, in particular, can serve as a means of preserving national memory and history, helping national culture adapt to the changes brought about by globalisation and find new forms of self-expression. Questions of adaptation and interpretation of Kazakh literature on the world stage are central to contemporary Kazakh comparative literature studies. In the era of globalisation, Kazakh literature faces the need to adapt to new cultural and literary contexts while preserving its uniqueness and authenticity. This process requires the development of new methodological approaches and interpretive strategies that can reveal the richness of Kazakh literature to an international audience, taking into account both traditional and contemporary aspects of Kazakh cultural identity.

Translating Kazakh literature for a global audience means translating both the text and the cultural codes, symbols, and metaphors that underpin it. Kazakh literature is difficult to translate, especially when communicating cultural themes relating to history, customs, and culture. Kazakh epics present nomadic lives, steppe scenery, and national identity-forming beliefs. Kazakh literature uses these traits for cultural and symbolic purposes. Images of the endless steppe, a yurt, or a herd of horses may lose cultural meaning after translation since foreign readers may not understand them. The steppe symbolises independence, space, and oneness with nature in epics and folk tales. Kazakh nomadic symbolism is unique to Kazakh culture and requires more complex

translation to keep its meaning. Kazakh literary translation is challenging because idioms, phraseological units, and expressions lose stylistic or cultural weight. Traditional Kazakh addresses to the original nation, nature, or elders show reverence, adoration, and a deep connection to history, which may seem conventional in other languages. National colour, dialogue authenticity, and character traits are hard to convey in literature, thus translators must immerse themselves in the culture. Historical and mythological literature, which mixes cultural symbolism with Kazakh-only history, is tougher to translate. Kazakh texts contain multiple meanings, while symbols and visuals carry cultural memory. Epics like *Koblandy Batyr* and *Alpamys* depict courage, devotion, and patriotism. Translations of natural metaphors may sound foreign or alien to express these notions. Thus, visual arts may lose their authenticity and be seen by foreigners without understanding their cultural and historical significance. Such challenges demonstrate the need for innovative Kazakh literature translation methods that convey textual meanings and conserve cultural norms essential to literary history.

It is important to note that the process of interpreting Kazakh literature on the world stage should not be reduced to simply adapting texts to new cultural contexts. It should also involve critiquing and rethinking the approaches and methodologies used in Western comparative literature studies to analyse Kazakh literature. While Western literary theories, such as postcolonial criticism, gender studies, or narratology, can be useful tools for analysing Kazakh texts, they may also fail to account for the specific aspects of Kazakh culture and history. In this context, Kazakh comparative literature studies should strive to create their own theoretical and methodological approaches that adequately reflect the features of national literature and culture.

Furthermore, in the context of globalisation, Kazakh literature faces challenges related to its perception on the international stage. On the one hand, Kazakh literature can be perceived as exotic and unique, which may contribute to its popularity. On the other hand, there is a risk that it will be interpreted within the context of stereotypes and preconceived notions about Central Asia, which could lead to a distortion of its meaning and significance. In this context, researchers and translators of Kazakh literature need to strive for interpretations that not only convey cultural meanings but also contribute to a deeper understanding of Kazakh literature within its global context (Abdul Jabbar; Kuttybaev and Abdimomynov).

The adaptation and interpretation of Kazakh literature on the global stage necessitate the development of new methodological approaches and interpretive strategies that consider both traditional and contemporary

aspects of Kazakh culture. Kazakh comparative literature studies should strive to create its own theoretical and methodological tools that adequately reflect the unique features of the national literature and culture and can be effectively employed in a global context. In an era of globalisation, Kazakh literature has a unique opportunity to become part of the cultural arena but to achieve this, it is essential to ensure its adequate perception and interpretation. This requires both innovative and traditional approaches to comparative literature studies.

DISCUSSION

The research findings reveal that Kazakh comparative literature studies are at the crossroads of several significant processes that have had a profound impact on the development and perception of national literature in a global context. Globalisation has been a dual process. On the one hand, it has facilitated the integration of Kazakh literature into the world's cultural context, allowing it to transcend national boundaries and gain international recognition. This is evident in the growing interest in Kazakh literature abroad, the increasing number of translations of works by Kazakh authors into other languages, and the inclusion of Kazakh texts in world literature curricula. Kazakh literature has become part of the cultural exchange, opening up new opportunities for its development and dissemination. On the other hand, globalisation has posed a threat to unification and loss of national identity. The standardisation of research approaches and the pursuit of universal research methods could lead to a smoothing over of cultural differences, which, in turn, weakens the uniqueness of Kazakh literature.

The research findings highlight the importance of striking a balance between globalisation and preserving national identity, as well as the necessity of integrating Kazakh literature into a multicultural and transnational context. This has enabled Kazakh literature not only to retain its uniqueness but also to become a full-fledged part of the world's cultural heritage, actively interacting with other cultures and enriching them with its own experiences.

The study reveals that the processes of globalisation and multiculturalism have played a pivotal role in contemporary Kazakh comparative literature studies. The results obtained corroborate the findings of many contemporary researchers examining the impact of globalisation on national literature. In particular, Ariely has indicated that globalisation contributes to the standardisation of cultural products, which may pose a threat to the preservation of national identity. This is

because global processes often necessitate the unification of scientific and cultural approaches, which can lead to the loss of the uniqueness of national cultural traditions. This study also underscores the importance of preserving cultural distinctiveness, despite the pressures of globalisation, which aligns with the conclusions of the aforementioned researchers.

Additionally, it is worth noting the research of Kerubo highlighting that globalisation does not always have exclusively negative consequences for national literature. In some cases, it can contribute to its dissemination and recognition on the international stage. However, this is coupled with the risk of losing cultural uniqueness. It is important to understand that in the context of globalisation, Kazakh literature, like any other national literature, is on the cusp of integration into the global context and preserving its own identity. The results demonstrate that this boundary has become increasingly blurred, necessitating further research and the development of strategies to maintain cultural diversity in the face of global processes.

On the other hand, the results of this study corroborate Gaur's findings regarding the positive impact of multiculturalism on the development of national literature. In this research, the author argues that multiculturalism creates conditions for the preservation and development of national literature, providing them with the opportunity to adapt to changing circumstances without losing their uniqueness. The study has shown that Kazakh literature actively employs multicultural approaches to integrate into the global literary community while simultaneously preserving its national roots. This is evidenced by examples from contemporary Kazakh literature, where national motifs and traditions are organically combined with elements of other cultural traditions, creating unique works that resonate with both Kazakh and international audiences.

Furthermore, Ariely's publication demonstrates that multiculturalism has played a significant role in shaping literary identity in the context of globalisation. Hall's research indicates that literatures that successfully adapt to multicultural environments not only preserve their national characteristics but also enrich them through interaction with other cultural traditions. The results of this study also confirmed this finding, showing that Kazakh literature not only preserves its traditions but also actively engages with other literary movements, contributing to its development and international recognition.

Contemporary Kazakh authors, such as Tazhi and Sarmekova, demonstrate a unique ability to combine national thematic focuses with pressing global issues, giving their works not only relevance on the international stage but also a deep connection to Kazakh culture. This has also been highlighted by Abisheva et al., whose research discusses

the contribution to expanding the horizons of Kazakh literature through integration into the global context and active participation in dialogue between different cultures, enriching the world literary discourse.

Such processes have underscored the importance of introducing innovative approaches to Kazakh comparative literature studies. There has been a growing recognition of the need for methodologies that account for the complexity of cultural interactions and the impact of globalisation on national literature. The research of S. Ananyeva et al. confirms that the integration of global paradigms into Kazakh comparative literature studies has significantly enriched this field, offering new perspectives and analytical tools for understanding the multifaceted nature of Kazakh literature. However, such integration is also accompanied by certain challenges, as it requires a delicate balance between preserving national identity and embracing global influences.

Contemporary Kazakh comparative literature studies have extensively employed a combination of various paradigms such as comparative literature, intertextuality, semiotics, narratology, globalisation, multiculturalism, and postcolonial criticism, enabling researchers to conduct deeper and more multifaceted analyses of literary texts. These paradigms have not only facilitated the identification of unique features of Kazakh literature but also contributed to understanding its place within the global literary context. Within the framework of this research, the application of these approaches has allowed for a more accurate assessment of how Kazakh literature interacts with cultural processes while preserving its distinctiveness. In conjunction with globalisation and multiculturalism paradigms, these approaches have enabled an exploration of how Kazakh literature has adapted and evolved in the face of changes, while maintaining its national identity. This synthesis of paradigms has highlighted the importance of a comprehensive approach to studying Kazakh literature. This is supported by the findings of Cerigo and Quesnel-Vallée, who demonstrate that only through the integration of various methodological approaches can a full and objective understanding of its multilayered and dynamic nature be achieved.

The prospects for further research in this area are vast. Of particular interest is the study of the role of the Kazakh diaspora in preserving and developing national literature outside of Kazakhstan. This would allow for a broader understanding of the processes of adaptation and transformation of national literature in new cultural contexts.

In conclusion, the results of this research confirm the importance of preserving national identity in the context of globalisation. At the same time, they demonstrate that multiculturalism and transnational studies play a key role in the preservation and development of Kazakh literature.

CONCLUSIONS

This research analysed the impact of globalisation, multiculturalism, and contemporary theories on Kazakh comparative literature studies within the context of global trends. Particular attention was paid to how these modern paradigms have shaped new approaches to studying Kazakh literature. Globalisation, by expanding cultural and academic connections, has a significant influence on national literary traditions, creating opportunities for the exchange of ideas and methodologies between different cultures. Multiculturalism, as an ideology and practice, promotes the recognition and preservation of cultural diversity, which is also reflected in comparative literature studies. The research aimed to analyse how the integration of these processes has enriched Kazakh literature and contributed to a deeper understanding of it on the world stage. The study examined various approaches to interpreting literary texts, symbolism, and sign systems, as well as their interaction with the world literary tradition. The methods of comparative analysis, hermeneutics, semiotics, and narratology helped identify how Kazakh literature preserved its unique features while simultaneously engaging in dialogue with global literary traditions.

Key findings of the research indicate that the integration of modern scientific approaches, such as intertextual/comparative analysis, has strengthened the position of Kazakh comparative literature studies in the international academic community and contributed to a deeper understanding of both national and world literature in the context of globalisation. This attests to the significant potential of Kazakh literature in shaping the global literary discourse.

The results obtained underscore the importance of further study of Kazakh literature in a global context. In the globalisation era, the task of preserving and promoting the national literary tradition, which must integrate into world culture while maintaining its uniqueness, becomes increasingly relevant. The research findings highlight the need to integrate innovations and contemporary paradigms into the study of Kazakh literature, which will allow for a more comprehensive exploration and preservation of national identity in the context of cultural interaction and exchange. This is particularly important for maintaining cultural distinctiveness, which serves as the foundation of national self-awareness and cultural heritage in the age of global change.

A limitation of the research was the one-sidedness and narrowness of the sources. The study encountered a shortage of accessible or comprehensive data on Kazakh literature and its interaction with the international context. Promising avenues for future research include a more in-depth examination of the interactions between Kazakh literature and other cultures and literary traditions. Further research is needed into the impact of digitalisation

and new technologies on comparative literature studies, as they open up new possibilities for analysing and interpreting literary works and expand the boundaries of traditional literary analysis. This will enable Kazakh comparative literature studies not only to remain relevant but also to actively participate in shaping new academic approaches on the international stage.

Works Cited

Abdul-Jabbar, Wisam Kh. "The Theoretical and Methodological Framework: Postcolonial Theory, Double Consciousness, and Study Design." *Negotiating Diasporic Identity in Arab-Canadian Students: Double Consciousness, Belonging, and Radicalization*, edited by Wisam Kh. Abdul-Jabbar, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 47–74. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16283-2_4

Abdurazakova, Gauhar, Daurenbek Kussainov, and Gauhar Mussabekova. "Reflection of Problems of National and Cultural Identity of Kazakhs in Modern Literature." *Adam Alemi*, vol. 93, no. 3, 2022, pp. 3–13. https://doi.org/10.48010/2022.3/1999-5849.01

Abisheva, Saule, et al. "Poetics of Modern Literature of Kazakhstan." *Bulletin of Kazakh National Pedagogical University*, vol. 34, no. 85, 2018, pp. 344–61.

Amankulova, Layla, Asem Kospagarova, and Ögut Eker. "Ethnocultural Values in Contemporary Kazakh Poetry: Based on the Work by Poet A. Shegebay." *Keruen*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2024, pp. 211–19. https://doi.org/10.53871/2078-8134.2024.1-17

Ananyeva, Svitlana. "World Literary Studies as a Field of Scientific Knowledge: Traditions and Trends." *Keruen*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2024, pp. 28–35. https://doi.org/10.53871/2078-8134.2024.1-02

Ananyeva, Svitlana, Kuralay Tattimbetova, and Zhybek Tattimbetova. "Contemporary Kazakh Literature: Post-socialist Contexts and Artistic Translations." *Eurasian Journal of Philology: Science and Education*, vol. 189, no. 1, 2023, pp. 114–23. https://doi.org/10.26577/EJPh.2023.v189.i1.ph12

Ariely, Gal. "National Identity and Globalization: Findings from Cross-National Surveys." *Globalisation, Cultural Identity and Nation-Building: The Changing Paradigms*, edited by Joseph Zajda and Suzanne Majhanovich, Springer, 2021, pp. 17–35. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-2014-2_2

Botescu-Sireteanu, Ileana. "Literature and Globalization: Rethinking Difference, Narrative and Transculturality." *Researchgate*, July 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382079582_LITERATURE

_AND_GLOBALIZATION_RETHINKING_DIFFERENCE_NARRATIVE_AND_TRANSCULTURALITY, accessed 9 June 2025.

Caffee, Naomi Beth. "Russophonia: Towards a Transnational Conception of Russian-Language Literature." *eScholarship*, 2019, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3z86s82v, accessed 10 Apr. 2025.

Cerigo, Helen, and Amélie Quesnel-Vallée. "Systematic Mixed Studies Reviews: Leveraging the Literature to Answer Complex Questions Through the Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence." *International Journal of Public Health*, vol. 65, 2020, pp. 699–703. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-020-01386-3

Friess, Nina. *Young Russophone Literature in Kazakhstan and the "Russian World."* Frank & Timme, 2019.

Gaur, Punit. "Multiculturalism and National-Building Processes in Kazakhstan: Theoretical Perspective." *Eurasian Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2022, pp. 99–104. https://doi.org/10.26577//EJRS.2022.v32.i4.r10

GoodReads. "Most Popular Books Published in 2024." *GoodReads*, 2024, https://www.goodreads.com/book/popular_by_date/2024#?ref=nav_brws, accessed 20 Nov. 2025.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms [1980]." *Essential Essays, Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley, Duke UP, 2019, pp. 47–70. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw7c7.8

Jakipova, Gulsana, Zhainagul Beisenova, and A. Toleubayeva. "Reception of Contemporary Kazakh Prose in the Global Cultural Space." *Scientific Herald of Uzhhorod University Series Physics*, vol. 55, 2024, pp. 686–93. https://doi.org/10.54919/physics/55.2024.68so6

Kalybekova, Kalamkas, Karlygash Khamzina, and Ainash Bekkulova. "Reflection of Social Reality in Kazakh Prose." *Language and Literature: Theory and Practice*, vol. 3, 2023, pp. 43–54. https://doi.org/10.52301/2957-5567-2023-3-43-54

Kerubo, Charlene. "The Impact of Globalization on Cultural Identity." *International Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2024, pp. 58–72. https://doi.org/10.47941/ijp.2097

Kuttybaev, Shokan, and Edil Abdimomynov. "Tradition and Innovation in Modern Kazakh Poetry (XX Century and Independence)." *Bulletin Series of Philological Sciences*, vol. 76, no. 2, 2021, pp. 118–28. https://doi.org/10.51889/2021-2.1728-7804.15

Matayeva, Assyl. "Research of Modern Kazakh Literary Criticism." *Bulletin of the Eurasian Humanities Institute. Philology Series*, vol. 4, 2023, pp. 207–19. https://doi.org/10.55808/1999-4214.2023-4.14

Meloman. "Sales Hits." *Meloman*, 2024, https://www.meloman.kz/books/, accessed 19 Nov. 2025.

Ryspayeva, Dinara, et al. "Multicultural Space: The Study of Kazakhstan Folklore." *International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 12, 2019, pp. 843–51. https://doi.org/10.18769/ijasos.478223

Sarmekova, Baqytgul. *To Hell with Poets*. Translated by Mirgul Kali, Tilted Axis, 2023.

Tazhi, Aigerim. *Paper-thin skin*. Translated by Jim Kates, Zephyr, 2019.

Assyl Matayeva is Doctoral Student at the Department of Kazakh Literature, L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan. Her scholarly work focuses on the intersection of transnational literary processes and national literary traditions in the post-Soviet space.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3470-0756
assyl.matayeva@gmail.com

Sagymbay Zhumagul (PhD) is Professor at the Department of Kazakh Literature, L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan. The author's work emphasises the necessity of integrating global perspectives into Kazakh literary theory, arguing that such integration is essential to maintaining the vitality and international relevance of the national literary tradition.
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9891-0237
sagymbay_zhum@outlook.com

Akmaral Dalelbekkyzy is Doctoral Student at the Department of Theory and History of Kazakh Literature, Farabi University, Almaty, Republic of Kazakhstan. The author's scholarly contributions highlight how contemporary world literature has enabled more nuanced understandings of the complex cultural interactions that shape literary production in Kazakhstan.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1223-1872
akmaraldalelbekkyzy9@gmail.com

Yrysgul Shakaman (PhD) is Professor at the Pavlodar Pedagogical University, Republic of Kazakhstan. Drawing on statistical and discourse analyses, the author's research provides an empirically grounded assessment of how globalisation and multiculturalism have influenced reading cultures and literary production in Kazakhstan.
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9554-4761
yrysgulshakaman@hotmail.com

Seifitden Sutzhanov (PhD) is Professor at the Pavlodar Pedagogical University, Republic of Kazakhstan. The author's research aims to establish multiculturalism not as a threat to national identity but as a generative force that deepens and diversifies the conceptual tools available to Kazakh literary scholars.
seif.sutzhanov@proton.me

REVIEWS

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.29

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Weronika Szwebs
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

A Review of Kasia Szymanska's *Translation Multiples. From Global Culture to Postcommunist Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2025)

Trends that have emerged with the advent of contemporary Translation Studies have certainly made quite a stir—we have been encouraged to relegate the question of equivalence to the background, to view translations predominantly as facts of the target culture, functioning alongside its other cultural products and bearing ethical significance, and to acknowledge the translator's subjectivity and visibility. Yet older categories and habits persist stubbornly, among scholars and the reading public alike, often constraining translation's prerogatives to a relatively narrow domain. Both in the phenomenon which it examines and in the approach which it adopts, Kasia Szymanska's book may serve as yet another invitation to recognize and appreciate the formative, creative potential that lies in the practice of translation.

The existence of multiple translations of a single text and the study of such phenomena—whether called retranslations or translation series—is, of course, nothing new. What, then, makes the idea underlying Szymanska's book innovative? The author focuses on highly specific instances of retranslation: those that, taken together, constitute a single book or a discrete artistic project, yet do not take the form of an academic edition. In such cases, multiplicity is not merely a by-product of reception unfolding over time; rather, it is a consciously embraced quality at the core of a literary endeavor. The term "literary" is significant here. Szymanska proposes that translation multiples be understood as a distinct literary genre—one that emerges in dialogue with a foreign-language original, is often conceptual in character, and frequently draws from experimental practices.

A translation multiple, as construed by Szymanska, represents a new quality in relation to the individual translations that comprise it. Often

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 2 Mar. 2026. Verified: 28 Apr. 2026. Accepted: 5 May 2026.

closely connected to the target cultural context, it tells a story, constructs a narrative, and offers an interpretation that exceeds the aims of the original. In the case of such practices, the translator's role cannot be understood in narrow terms. The translator becomes the creator of an artistic project, a writer who draws on the original as inspiration for their own literary work, a commentator of surrounding realities—independent, visible, and creatively autonomous.

According to Szymanska, translation multiples are challenging—and are meant to be so—on several levels and in different regards. What exactly gives them their subversive and provocative force depends largely on the individual case and its specific context. Firstly, they challenge the reader. Their conceptual, often experimental character, combined with the implications of multiplicity itself—the programmatic inconclusiveness and disruption of semantic fixity—makes them difficult to assimilate. They may appear "distracting and alienating," prompting readers to reconsider overly optimistic assumptions about translation as a transparent vehicle of communication, a bridge between cultures, or a guarantee of mutual understanding (37). Secondly, translation multiples challenge deeply entrenched Western principles of translation—ideals that have proved remarkably resilient despite decades of theoretical critique. It is telling that Szymanska begins by recalling the legend of the translation of the Septuagint and the miraculous concord among the seventy-two translators, a story that helped establish the import of equivalence. Translation multiples openly contest this sanctified model of one-to-one correspondence. Finally, translation multiples have the potential to challenge—and critically engage with—broadly understood political conditions, a theme already signaled in the book's title. In a global culture in which English occupies a hegemonic position and often functions as its own measure, translation in general—and the translation multiple in particular—undermines the assumption of full translatability and commensurability. In the Polish context, the transition from the monolith of centrally controlled culture in the People's Republic of Poland to democratic pluralism created conditions in which translation multiples could serve as a means of working through earlier ideological homogenization and commenting on newly reconfigured power relations.

To understand how translation multiples operate in practice—what they are, how they are constructed, how they draw on the works that give rise to them, and how they engage the contexts—let us consider a few specific examples. In the first two chapters of her book, Szymanska discusses translation multiples created in English. The telling subsection title, "Translation Multiples Tell Their Own Story," invites us to ask what kinds of narratives this literary genre can produce and by what means. One example is *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei: How a Chinese Poem Is*

Translated (1987) by Eliot Weinberger. The multiple renderings of the 9th-century original are conceived as its incarnations, recasting in Buddhist terms Walter Benjamin's notion of translation as the text's "afterlife." Weinberger brings up the visual metaphor, shaping his collection as a series of distinct acts of seeing and perceiving the same poem. Within such a framework, both the multiplicity itself and the variation inherent in language become far more than just the nemesis of sacred equivalence. Another captivating case is *Le Ton beau de Marot* (1997) by Douglas Hofstadter, which includes as many as eighty-eight renderings of Clément Marot's 16th-century poem "À une damoyselle malade" ("To a Sick Damsel"). The original is conceived as a musical work that can be performed in many different ways. The inclination to think in musical terms informs not only this overarching concept, but also the translational strategies: Hofstadter often privileges sound over meaning. The volume also constitutes a meditation on loss and death, painfully intertwined with the author's personal experience—his wife, who contributed one of the translations, fell ill and died during the book's preparation. These two examples illustrate only part of the richness of the Anglophone translation multiples examined by Szymanska.

Even more attention, however, is devoted to translation multiples created in Polish. Szymanska argues that the emergence of the genre in Poland was closely tied to the post-1989 ideological landscape: "As [translation multiples] break through the illusion of one-to-one equivalence, they also discredit beliefs in one monolithic truth about society, one authentic ideology, and one ideal system" (62). She devotes three consecutive chapters to Polish realizations of this practice. The first case, Barańczak's humorous "Oratorium Moratorium" (1991), is interpreted as a commentary on the political aftermath of a systemic transformation which failed to resolve all the existing problems. The homophonic translation of "La Marseillaise" becomes a vehicle for presenting political content through playful mishearings: Barańczak distributes "various voices and political arguments among different renderings of the same original fragments" (85). This polyphony reflects the political landscape of early 1990s Europe, the positions represented by various political camps, as well as skepticism and reluctance toward the "new" post-communist Europe. The clash between the noble ideals behind the anthem and contemporary prejudices suggests that such ideals are not applied equally to all nations.

Another post-communist Polish translation multiple is Robert Stiller's rendering of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, published in two parallel versions: the "R" (Russianized) and the "A" (Anglicized), with a third, "N" (Germanized), planned but never completed. Whereas the English original employs Russian-inflected slang to evoke Cold War anxieties, Stiller's dual strategy foregrounds pressures emanating from two

hegemonic forces: the communist USSR and the capitalist United States. The gesture of multiple translation expands the novel's critical horizon, testing different sociopolitical scenarios and articulating a more general resistance to imperial dominance. The linguistic power struggle mirrors broader geopolitical tensions that did not end in 1989 and remain an inherent element of the fate of a "minor" country.

The third example is the 2012 volume *Ten cały Brecht* (*All that Brecht/This whole Brecht*), authored by four translators—Jacek St. Buras, Jakub Ekier, Andrzej Kopacki, and Piotr Sommer—which presents four distinct approaches to the poetry of Bertolt Brecht. Although the date of publication might seem too late to frame the book as a direct post-communist reaction, its link to the communist context and the democratic transition derives from the way the German author had been introduced, shaped, and read in the Polish People's Republic. Embraced by the authorities for his leftist engagement, he was presented as an ideological ally of the state, a simplified image that in turn provoked an oppositional rejection. By offering multiple, sometimes divergent translations of the same poems, *Ten cały Brecht* dismantles this reductive portrait and opens up new possibilities for reading Brecht beyond earlier homogenizing frameworks.

Though highly rewarding, Szymanska's book, like the phenomena it examines, is challenging in many respects. Particularly with regard to such complex practices as translation multiples, often conceptual and experimental in nature, the reader feels compelled to engage directly with the literary works themselves. While this is possible for a broad Anglophone audience in the case of translation multiples written in English, those unfamiliar with Polish must rely on the back translations which Szymanska provides to approximate the practices of Polish translators. Writing in English about translations into a language largely unknown to international readers is a bold gesture, since it inevitably compounds the difficulties. Szymanska handles this challenge with skill, and readers who are open to engaging with the multiplicity present on various levels will find her book stimulating, as it offers significant insights into both the creative and the critical potential of translation.

Weronika Szwebs is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań. Her main research interests involve translation studies, the reception of Polish literature abroad, contemporary Polish literature as well as literary and cultural theory. She published a monograph on the Polish translations of contemporary French and American theory in

the humanities, *Translacje teorii. Derrida, Barthes, Said i Butler po polsku* (*Translations of Theory. Derrida, Barthes, Said and Butler in Polish*). She translates literary, social, and cultural theory from English into Polish (Julian Baggini, Hans Gumbrecht, Silvan Tomkins, Donna Haraway, Rita Felski, Jennifer Wenzel, and others).
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9806-515X
weronika.szwebs@amu.edu.pl

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.30

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Barbara Braid
University of Szczecin

A Review of *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Andrew Smith (Edinburgh University Press, 2025)

Ghost stories might be as old as humanity itself. As Stephen King speculated, "probably all of it goes back to the caveman who had to move out of his hole in the rock because he heard what sounded like voices back there in the shadows" (299). While the ghost story has maintained its grip on our cultures up to the present—perhaps now more than ever, as the "ghost in the machine" of digital culture—the heyday in the development of this subgenre of Gothic fiction came in the Victorian era. This period spans from the publication of Charles Dickens's prominent ghost novella *A Christmas Carol* to the post-Victorian antiquarian ghost stories of M. R. James in Great Britain and H. P. Lovecraft's weird tales in the US.

Several academic monographs currently revisit the genre of the Victorian ghost story, testifying to a renewed interest in the topic. Examples include *Ghosts and the Gothic*, edited by Ruth Heholt and Joanne Ella Parsons (Manchester UP, 2025), *New Directions in the Ghost Story, Volume I*, edited by Henry Bartholomew, Joan Passey, and Jan Baker (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2026), and the upcoming *The Victorian Ghost Story and the Spirit World* by Lorena MacMillan (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2026). Nevertheless, what makes *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion* (Edinburgh UP, 2025) stand out among other publications of this type is its comprehensive and thorough discussion of multiple aspects of the genre: from its history and development, through geographical and cultural contexts and its best known authors, to the most typical haunted spaces of the Victorian ghost story.

As indicated by the book's editor, Andrew Smith (a recognised specialist in Gothic fiction, particularly ghost stories), the collection's overarching goal is to argue that "engaging with the social, political, and economic issues of the period is a key driver in the innovation of the Victorian ghost story" (1), as ghosts are "not there simply to haunt, but also to enlighten"

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 8 June 2026. Verified: 10 July 2026. Accepted: 15 July 2026.

(2). While ghosts have been used in literature as "harbingers of justice or doom" or voices for political activism since early modern folklore and fiction (Edwards 356), the Edinburgh companion presents Victorian ghost stories as texts involved in social and political reform, becoming—if not didactic—at least a genre that highlights and investigates the hegemonic structures of the Victorian empire, most keenly evident in ghost stories written by women or those with a colonial context in mind.

This collection applies a generous approach both to the definition of the Victorian era and the ghost story. The texts discussed here come from the long 19th century and encompass not only short stories but also novels that include a ghost element. This allows for a wide scope of discussion, showing the cultural significance of the motif of haunting even beyond the classically delineated Victorian era. This is particularly important in Part I of the book, "Historical Contexts," which includes a chapter by Dale Townshend surveying late 18th- and early 19th-century examples of ghost narratives that influenced the Victorians. This is followed by two chapters examining the Victorian ghost story proper (one by Anthony Mandal, focusing on periodical press from 1830–70, and the other by Nick Freeman, focusing on the most crucial instances of the genre between 1830 and 1900). Part I concludes with a chapter on neo-Victorian novels (that is, contemporary works that critically reconfigure Victorian literature and culture) by Marie-Luise Kohlke. Such a sweeping vista on not only the Victorian ghost story proper but also its predecessors and contemporary descendants is inclusive and comprehensive, and offers insight into a genre that has a long-lasting effect on Gothic culture.

The second part of the book, "Critical Contexts," presents the Victorian ghost story as an intervention in crucial aspects of the Victorian era: economy, industry and technology, gender, colonialism, and religion. This part also includes a chapter on 19th-century American ghost narratives and the Victorian tradition of a ghost story for Christmas.

In the chapter titled "Economics," Andrew Smith considers the idea of "spectral economies" (86) that became apparent in times of crisis: "Money during a recession seems to become spectral, subject to disappearance and sudden reappearance" (ibid.). Thus, motifs concerning property, inheritance, frugality, and greed became a staple of the Victorian ghost story. Bridget M. Marshall's chapter on industrialisation and technology in the Victorian era conceptualises stories about ghostly factory workers and miners as an expression of the human cost of industrial capitalism. This chapter also touches on the idea of machines and transportation (mainly railways) as spectral or haunted, expressing fears regarding the new technological developments of the era.

Lucie Armitt, in her chapter on Victorian ghost stories written by women, discusses a number of topics related to the social, political, and

cultural situation of women in the 19th century, figured in spectral terms: from women's "shadowy public existence" (115) to "authorial ventriloquism" (117), whereby women writers—such as Charlotte Riddel, for instance—expressed their ideas via a male narrator, to more classically Gothic motifs of entrapment that represent the limitations of the woman's place.

Melissa Edmundson's chapter "The Victorian Ghost Story and Colonialism" notes that a ghost story was a "fitting vehicle to express colonial tensions" (130) in the Victorian British empire. It was thus used either to depict the British as haunted by their own colonialism or to portray the colonial Other as a ghost, thereby becoming a genre in which "the troubled relations between colonised and coloniser [are] at the forefront" (131). In the chapter on religion, Alison Milbank considers various spiritual concepts behind the belief in spectral visitations and examines how both Catholic and Protestant approaches to the afterlife affected Victorian ghost stories. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock looks at the 19th-century ghost story in America as a vehicle for discussing cultural anxieties of the era. In American ghost stories, spectral justice is served concerning the abuse of women and children, and slavery. It is also a genre that allows for an examination of the afterlife and spiritualism, offering consolation to the bereaved but also reflecting the crisis of faith. Ghost stories also allow writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Henry James to examine instabilities and ambiguities in perspectives on reality.

Finally, in this first section, Tara Moore looks at the seasonality of ghost stories, focusing on the tradition of storytelling for Christmas. She shows how, in the Victorian era, it became a commercialised form of a nostalgic harking back to the English mansion Christmas, in which Charles Dickens played an important role. Over time, the genre shifted from simple local legends to sophisticated literary ghost stories that promoted moral reform, capitalism, and eventually, late-Victorian parody and Gothic horror, offering the comfort of a frightening tale in a cosy environment.

What follows is a section gathering the most recognised authors of the Victorian ghost story: Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Margaret Oliphant, Charlotte Riddell, Vernon Lee, Henry James, and M. R. James. Undoubtedly, from this group, Dickens is most often associated with the Victorian ghost story. Scott Brewster summarises Dickens's interest in the genre by stating that in Dickens's writing, "ghosts fulfil a variety of functions: sources of diverting fireside entertainment, . . . agents of justice, vengeance, moral guidance or social critique; or symptoms of physical or psychological illness" (198). Brewster also notes the importance of the aforementioned theme of spectral technology; in particular, "the railway is also a site of the uncanny" (207), as evident in "The Signal-Man." Minna Vuohelainen presents Rudyard Kipling as a writer who enjoyed the ghost story

form due to its set conventions and brevity, while simultaneously anticipating modernist literary experimentation by challenging the well-trodden paths of the ghost story. The themes Kipling explored include "colonial unease, the uncomfortable and often violent nature of intercultural encounters, the centrality of loss and grief to modern life, and the experiences of belonging, marginality, transit and exile" (211). In particular, the sense of the colonial place is a characteristic feature of Kipling's short stories, which depict "an Indian landscape haunted by the past" (211).

William Hughes discusses Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's ghost stories, particularly *The Purcell Papers*, as an expression of nostalgia for the past during times of political and economic instability, where the uncanny is used to convey religious and political tensions. The chapter on Margaret Oliphant by Valerie Sanders notes that the ghost story is an unusual genre choice for a writer associated with realist fiction; nevertheless, personal experience of grief fuelled Oliphant's interest in the possibility of the living communing with the deceased. Thus, Oliphant's ghost stories fall into two types: those in which spectral visitors are benign and approach the living to warn or help them, and those where malign ghosts traumatise the living. The nature of spectral visitations is also discussed in her stories. Charlotte Riddell's ghost stories, discussed by Helena Ifill, often focus on the motif of the haunted house. While Riddell explores this motif to examine the situation of Victorian women within domesticity and marriage, what is innovative in her oeuvre is her frequent use of male narrators and protagonists. Often young and financially struggling, these male characters in haunted houses are placed "in conventional positions of femininity" (Smith qtd. in Ifill 256), and Riddell is thus engaged in a discussion of masculinity and gender roles in the Victorian era, and in particular, how these gender expectations intersect with economic issues.

Ardel Haefele-Thomas writes about Vernon Lee as a writer who uses ghost stories to examine and subvert heteronorms and cisnorms in the *fin de siècle*, particularly regarding "family, heterosexuality and reproduction" (271). As suggested by Haefele-Thomas, Lee's ghost stories are characterised by "their nostalgia for the past via the haunting of the present" (271). Similarly, Luke Thurston describes Henry James's ghost stories as an avenue for exploration and experimentation, "a precious way to express the more ludic and experimental possibilities" (285). Thurston's main point is to show that Henry James's personal experience—particularly its queer aspects—served as inspiration for his ghost narratives. Finally, another James—Montague Rhodes James—is the topic of the last chapter in this section, written by Roger Luckhurst. This chapter delineates M. R. James's creation of the antiquarian ghost story—an activity that was marginal to his academic research—also touching upon the writer's repressed homosexuality as a possible influence.

The last section of this companion is devoted to haunted spaces in Victorian ghost stories, including landscapes and seascapes, houses, museums, libraries, and—reflecting the Egyptophilia of late-Victorian culture—pyramids. Emma McEvoy examines stories set within the "hauntings outdoors" (317), most often within the British Isles. As the author notes, such settings are usually related to marginalised and dispossessed characters, and thus reveal their social and economic contexts: "The urbanite meets the rural dweller, gentry encounter labourers, those from industrial and agricultural economies eye each other askance, and the imperialist and the colonised come into contact" (317). McEvoy also touches upon colonial landscapes, "ghosts outside Europe" (326), in her examination of landscape in ghost stories. Joan Passey's chapter explores "the spectral seascape in the Victorian imaginary" (332), discussing ghost stories of maritime disasters and shipwrecks, folklore, "seascapes, smuggling, wrecking" (333), colonial travel, and being at sea. The seascape in the Victorian ghost story becomes an uncanny place.

An important part of any discussion of the Victorian ghost story is also, of course, the haunted house—a motif that becomes a vehicle for anxieties related to Victorian domesticity, marriage, and family, as examined by Emma Liggins, who states that "[t]he haunted house is a 'troubled house,' a place of secrets, disruption and violence" (347). It is also a space of anxieties related to economics: property, inheritance, and the gendered aspects of these topics. Darryl Jones looks at specific institutional spaces—libraries and museums—as haunted locales in the Victorian ghost story. These spaces are related to the aforementioned sub-genre of the antiquarian ghost story. Finally, Andrew Smith explores pyramids as spaces of fear typical for mummy stories, which serve as vehicles for discussing the colonial relations and cultural appropriations of the Victorian era.

The Victorian Ghost Story is a mammoth work and a brilliant effort to encompass and comprehend an expansive and significant phenomenon in Victorian Gothic fiction. It is a collection recommended both to scholars who might desire a comprehensive overview of the topic and to students who are just becoming acquainted with the ghost story.

Works Cited

Edwards, Kathryn A. "The History of Ghosts in Early Modern Europe: Recent Research and Future Trajectories." *History Compass*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2012, pp. 353–66. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2012.00840.x

King, Stephen. *Danse Macabre*. 1981. Warner, 1993.

Barbara Braid is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Literature and New Media, University of Szczecin. Her research focuses on the literature of (uncanny) returns, including neo-Victorianism, Gothic literature, and adaptation. She is particularly interested in popular culture, genre fiction, and transmedia. Currently, she is working on several texts concerning neo-Victorian biofiction in fiction, film, streaming, and comic books.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4028-4066
barbara.braid@usz.edu.pl

A TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR DOROTA FILIPCZAK (1963-2021)

Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.31

Check for updates

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

Cathal McCabe
Independent Scholar

Scattered Nests of Tenderness: A Note on the Poetry of Dorota Filipczak

In the course of her tragically short life, Dorota Filipczak published—in addition to her work as a literary critic, editor, and translator—six slim volumes of poetry (plus, in 2017, a Selected Poems). She favoured titles that were arresting and enigmatic, even a little odd: *In the Shade of a Perfect Orange* (1994); *The* [or *An*] *Angel's Third Wing* (1995); *Orpheus in* [or *on*] *the Gynaecological Ward* (1997); *The Knife-Sharpener* (2003); *K+M+B* (2009); *Multiverse* (2016). *Scattered Nests of Tenderness: Selected Poems 1994–2016* was her final poetic offering. Were these the titles an artist had given to her paintings and not a poet to her pamphlets, what would we surmise? No doubt that she is a surrealist, whose compositions, rather than being conventional depictions of "reality," offer unexpected or unlikely—or, indeed, impossible—still lives, perspectives, and narratives. Enigmatic titles notwithstanding, her themes of—as Monika Kocot summarises them in her seminal essay on the poet—"spirituality, female empowerment, trauma and Polish history," "unconventional interpretations of the sacred," and "[t]he wisdom of the body," are present throughout her poetic oeuvre (175–76). Her poems consistently address aspects of this thematic spectrum.

W. H. Auden held that "[n]early every good poet has certain emotions and imagery which recur and predominate in the work" (qtd. in Murray 246). The dominant emotions in Dorota Filipczak's poetry could be said to be indignation and tenderness. It is as if each is vying for the reader's attention and sympathy. They are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Indeed, her work profits, Blake-like, from the tension. After all, "[w]ithout Contraries is no progression" (Blake xvi). The progress she is pushing for is twofold: the liberation of women from past and present misrepresentation and, that achieved, a battle of the sexes finally *on an equal footing*.

Her poetry draws strength, too, from her use of myth from unexpected perspectives and her use of dream narrative as a way of dissolving time,

creative commons

© by the author, licensee Lodz University – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 7 Aug. 2026. Verified: 15 Aug. 2026. Accepted: 17 Aug. 2026.

"mixing memory and desire," we might say. Might the title of her final verse publication, *Scattered Nests of Tenderness*, be a wistful echo of Eliot?

> Is it like this
> In death's other kingdom
> Waking alone
> At the hour when we are
> Trembling with tenderness (Eliot, "The Hollow Men" 84)

Her late poem "Sanna" ["Sledding"] is a fine example of just such an hour—out in the cold, pushing her young son on his sledge, her great love mixed with her fears for his future:

> again I push you and you disappear
> into regions where I have no power
> no influence on
> who you will meet, who you will love or
> the dangers that await you, son (*Wieloświat* 15)

Thus, the title *Scattered Nests of Tenderness* underlines one of her poetry's dominant emotions, with the poet also directing our attention to her preoccupation with the "nests" of family, safety, home. As Bachelard says: "A nest is a precarious thing, and yet it sets us to *daydreaming of security*" (122, italics in the original).

*

Asked (in 2018) which books she would most like to translate, Dorota Filipczak cited two: *The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* ("Duchowa transfuzja" 46). Lowry's great novel provides the single epigraph to *Scattered Nests of Tenderness*, her final gathering of her verse: "*No se puede vivir sin amar*." The necessity of love, the dominant emotion in her work, had earlier been signalled in another epigraph—this, from *The Song of Solomon*, to her poem "Persefona" ["Persephone"]: "Jak śmierć potężna jest miłość" ["for love is strong as death"] (*Trzecie skrzydło anioła* 40). Lowry's novel itself is prefaced by an epigraph (one of three) which must have struck a resonant chord with the author of *Wieloświat* and, in particular, its concluding poem, "Wieża" ["The Tower"]: "*Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, den können wir erlösen*" ["Whosoever unceasingly strives upward . . . him [sic] we can save")—Goethe. In the volume that Filipczak has called her most important, this poem is given added significance through the photograph of the "tower" in question—"niegdyś obserwatorium"—the

"one-time observatory" on the roof of the poet's former place of work in the Institute of Philology of the University of Lodz—on both the book's cover and within the collection, the latter showing the view it affords of the city, the author in the foreground, her head in the clouds. (One poem in the collection, "Zejście ze szczytu" ["Coming Down from the Summit"], jokes: "ktokolwiek mówił o chodzeniu z głową w chmurach / nie wiedział o czym mówi" ["whoever talked about walking with their head in the clouds / had no idea what they were talking about"] [29].) *Wieloświat*, she said in the same 2018 interview, "was for me the most important [of my poetry books]" ("Duchowa transfuzja" 44). The importance, she explained, lay in the fact that she was then "finally able to express her identity as a native of Łódź," something with which she had previously had "certain issues" ("pewne kłopoty"). She is also, in the final poem in the collection—and therefore now regarded as her last poem—finally able to realise a long-standing ambition and climb to the top of her own tower: "Od zawsze chciałam tam wejść" ["For as long as I can remember / I have wanted to go up there"] (33). "Set all your mind upon the steep ascent," wrote Yeats of modern poetry's most famous tower, a thought perhaps echoed in Filipczak's poem, as she makes her way up her own, unlikely "ancient stair" in downtown Łódź:

> I summon to the winding ancient stair;
> Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,
> Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,
> Upon the breathless starlit air ("A Dialogue of Self and Soul" 234)

"The Tower" brings to a close *Wieloświat*'s preoccupation in a number of poems with high buildings and peaks, with climbing and looking down from a height, with mountains, and, finally, the poet's "tower." "And immediately," writes Philip Larkin in "High Windows," the title poem of his own final collection:

> Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
> The sun-comprehending glass,
> And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
> Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless. (165)

Larkin's transformative vision is reflected in Filipczak's own upward striving (even if she is led—"Idę posłusznie" ["Up I go obediently"]—by a self-important *man*). Like Larkin, Dorota Filipczak sets love against "all the uncaring / Intricate rented world" of his poem "Aubade" (Larkin 209). Indeed, it is tempting to (mis)translate her similar description of the world—"nieuważny świat"—as "the uncaring world" to accommodate Larkin's peerless adjective. Either way, both set love against a world that

is, at best, indifferent. Indeed, it may be Larkin's much-quoted assertion, "what will survive of us is love," that best sums up the overarching message of Dorota Filipczak's verse.

Works Cited

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Penguin Classics, 2014.

Blake, William. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Introduction and Commentary by Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford UP, 1975.

Eliot, T. S. *The Complete Poems and Plays.* Faber and Faber, 1969.

Filipczak, Dorota. "Duchowa transfuzja." Interview by Marek Czuku. *Kalejdoskop*, vol. 11, 2018, pp. 44–46.

Filipczak, Dorota. *K+M+B*. Biblioteka *Frazy*, 2009.

Filipczak, Dorota. *Orfeusz na ginekologii*. Biblioteka, 1997.

Filipczak, Dorota. *Ostrzyciel noży na jawie*. Fundacja Anima *Tygiel Kultury*, 2003.

Filipczak, Dorota. *Rozproszone gniazda czułości: Wybór wierszy 1994–2016*. Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Polskich, 2017.

Filipczak, Dorota. *Trzecie skrzydło anioła*. Biblioteka, 1995.

Filipczak, Dorota. *W cieniu doskonałej pomarańczy*. Stowarzyszenie Literackie im. K. K. Baczyńskiego, 1994.

Filipczak, Dorota. *Wieloświat*. Biblioteka *Toposu*, 2016.

Kocot, Monika. "On Spaces Within and Between: Dorota Filipczak's (Embodied) Visions of the Sacred." *The Woman Artist: Essays in memory of Dorota Filipczak*, edited by Tomasz Dobrogoszcz et al., Lodz UP, 2024, pp. 175–201. https://doi.org/10.18778/8331-397-9.12

Larkin, Philip. *Collected Poems*. Edited and with an Introduction by Anthony Thwaite, Faber and Faber, 1988.

Lowry, Malcolm. *Under the Volcano*. Penguin Classics, 2000.

Murray, Joan. *Drafts, Fragments, and Poems: The Complete Poetry*. Edited and with an Introduction by Farnoosh Fathi, New York Review, 2017.

Yeats, W. B. *The Poems: A New Edition*. Edited by Richard J. Finneran, Macmillan, 1983.

Cathal McCabe is a former British Council Senior Lecturer in Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Lodz. A recipient of the *Gloria Artis* Medal (Silver), he founded the Ireland-Poland Cultural Foundation in 2006. *Outer Space: Selected Poems* was published in 2016. He is currently preparing the first English-language selection of the poems of Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński.
chairman@irelandpoland.org

DOROTA FILIPCZAK

"The Tower"

For as long as I can remember
I have wanted to go up there
and look down on the city
from the roof of my university
the top-floor gallery
that was once an observatory
It's strictly forbidden
says
the important person leading
the way
Up I go obediently,
evidently
mastering Time
for suddenly I'm
a student again, a wise young woman
or a not-so-wise one
writing her thesis on Golding, creator
of *The Spire*
standing as far down in the earth as high
as it does in the sky
How it was constructed
will remain my secret
Like an expedition off to find
The Holy Grail we ascend
the stairs
the several floors
of the Institute
of Philology, our retinue
a slow
procession that includes a woman who has vertigo
and a chivalrous man
eager to help with anything he can
Look, he says, to us all
Here a window and its frame were blown out of the wall
a gap like a door
starting at the floor
Lean against it and the conclusion
will be glass or the illusion
of glass
Our climb continues into darkness
Careful, the stairs are rotten

But I'm undeterred, the city will be mine
Even should Lancelot himself roar
past in that silver car
there below
no-one would see or know
The latticework on the tower
trembles just like Golding's spire
I see my thesis travel
to unravel
in the shredder
by order
of the dean,
(nothing, says the librarian, I could have done)
Built in secret in my room
my tower will evolve to become
a box of matches
that catches
fire
and consumes the entire
distracted world
A sudden urge takes hold
of me
to lean out over the balcony
and I
fly
down I go
passing the window
of my office
My job is
not so bad
something I had
never thought I would hear myself utter
ahead of me now the gutter
the tarmac's
smell and pavement's rocks
but I'm caught
in a net and brought
back up in the fabric
whose threads you could not break
And since you ask
I'm not insane, I give my all to a single task
Just a minute, gentlemen, ladies,
this blood is
not blood
but the colour of my coat Please pass me if you would
my gloves and bag, I'm able

thank you to get up myself As for these books on the table
they'll give you I fear
the wrong idea
My goal I swear
was to climb the tower
on the very day
a truck took me my true self away
to scrapyard and
recycling plant
Like passengers on the Titanic
we sway now on the shifting deck
I take a few photos, for the lens survived the fall
A month from now we shall all
be moving out moving on
we know the hour
high time then
we took the tower

Translated by Cathal McCabe.

Printed directly from camera-ready material provided to the Lodz University Press

Published by Lodz University Press
First Edition. W.12256.26.0.C
Printing sheets 36.5

Lodz University Press
90–237 Łódź, Matejki 34A
www.wydawnictwo.uni.lodz.pl
e-mail: ksiegarnia@uni.lodz.pl
phone: (42) 635 55 77

Cripqueer Pleasures and Desires

Queercrip Ecorelationality and More-Than-Human Kinships

Transnationalizing Cripqueer Practices and Multidisciplinary Theories

Queercrip Thriving and Survival Through Conflicts

Cripqueer Futures and Utopias

WYDAWNICTWO
UNIWERSYTETU
ŁÓDZKIEGO

wydawnictwo.uni.lodz.pl
ksiegarnia@uni.lodz.pl
(42) 635 55 77

COPE
Member since 2018
JM13713

ISSN 2083-2931
16
9 772083 293303