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# Matters

A Journal of Literature  
Theory and Culture

No. 9 [2019]

■ ROGUERY & (SUB)VERSIONS

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UNIwersytetu  
ŁÓDZKIEGO

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EDITED BY  
ARITHA VAN HERK  
AND VANJA POLIĆ

 WYDAWNICTWO  
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# **NEW VERSIONS OF ROGUERY**

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**Aritha van Herk**

University of Calgary

**Vanja Polić**

University of Zagreb

## New Versions of Roguery

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This number of *Text Matters* features papers which explore the changing nature of roguery in literature and film. While the figure of the rogue has earned much literary attention in the past, its present moment is ambiguous, uneasy, even as we live in an age of flagrantly outrageous rogues, so overt that perhaps roguery as a study or a subject is *outré* because the world is a collection of rogues, and the behavior of rogues is now dramatically public rather than a matter of covert and shameful conduct. Despite this development, rogues still compel attention, curiosity and stories. Note the glut of documentaries, films and books on thieves and criminals, our fascination with those who refuse to follow the rules. And that continuing interest serves as a useful critical measurement and kinesics.

Is the figure of the rogue then a historical figure, a cultural construct, a blame magnet or an object of moral suasion? Has it morphed into the trickster, the holy fool, the picaro or the magician? Who is now accorded rogue status, in literature and film? Although rogue literature's 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century origins are not to be dismissed, the current socio-political circumstances inflecting our evaluation of character have brought to light a new geography of miscreant, a new mapping of what scoundrel-saint can signal. For surely the deception of innocents, the cant of common speech, and the celebration of everyday life and its disappointments and entrapments is at a pinnacle, elevating what was previously dissentient to a commonplace.

Early discussions of the figure of the rogue and rogue literature concern themselves with the murkier aspects of the underworld, the criminal or seamier milieu of those who break rules or participate in unlawful acts,

thus delineating a genre concerned with the underworld, criminal and quasi-criminal activity. Thieves, tramps, beggars and vagabonds were asked to perform as these scapegoats and morality figures, even as the incipient joy associated with their presence could hardly be camouflaged. Rogues straddled the gap between reprehensible characters and characters arousing secret admiration—even delight—at their unruly misrule. Oh, to break the rules and to revel in the outcome of that incited chaos, to be admired for generative confusion and to sin sufficiently seriously to make repentance worthwhile.

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This is, then, an appropriate moment to examine the configuration of the reinvigorated rogue, and whether rogue depictions now take reprobate action for granted or seek to place them within the scale of contemporary measurement. Who are the new rogues? Are they humanists in a technocratic culture? Are they disclosure *débouchés* or information spies? Are they modern-day Robin Hoods? Are they transitory artists who seek to effect revelation through concealment? And how do these new rogues operate? Do they work through illusion, through sleight of hand, trickery, or through manipulated intelligence, the awful reach of surveillance or social media? What is their aim? Personal, social, cultural gain? How do they become rascals? Through accident or deliberation? Are their actions transformative, recuperative, or simply narcissistic and damaging? In a culture and at a time when materialism and politics enforce conformity, how do rogues embody disinterested thinking, and push past the boundaries of obedience and containment? Or simply refuse those demarcations and flout all compasses?

Texts that play with such variants are both instructive and subversive, and surely remark new norms, enhanced rebellions, genetic re-appraisals. This issue includes papers investigating different aspects of roguery in literature and film; they move beyond character studies or intentional stereotypes; they explore narrative interlopers, and personae who bend the rules creatively or who know the rules but who slalom between the gaps; and they include texts that themselves articulate recalcitrance.

Interest in this sub-genre has clearly broadened from the shallow definition of characters refusing to adhere to norms. In the realm of representation, exploration and deployment, markers of bad behavior like theft, graft, alcoholism, drug addiction, promiscuity or illness now seem only too common; but the papers included here offer a complex discussion of representations of knavery, how the space of disobedience, the temptation of agency, and the textual performance of unruliness is dynamically engineered. What becomes evident is that these various exemplars disrupt dominant systems by applying liminality, a crossing of categories. In that way, they most defy discursive boundaries, and

negotiate the differences marked by regulatory frameworks. Some do so recuperatively, while others signify tactical dissention.

In "A Wild Roguery: Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* Reconsidered" Christine Nicholls analyzes Chatwin's rogue appropriation of the concept of songlines, and how his misconstrual of Australian Aboriginal culture has so dominated global apprehensions and readings of that culture. The intellectual thief, in this case Chatwin, cares very little for the context of his research, and whether or not his methodology respects the subject; his performance of research and writing is about self-advancement, self-aggrandizement. *The Songlines* is an example of the "instant expert" as bounder, his "borrowing" semi-acknowledged, but his misrepresentation aided and abetted by the publishing industry and the readerly world, who hesitate to censor or to name this cultural theft as such. The tendency of such neo-colonial rogues to sanction and to anoint their own ideas as of high intellectual order, often by calling on a religious connection, further seals the theft. Such essentialism points to the extent to which "missionary" writers are attracted to Indigenous stories, seeking both to appropriate them, and to seal them with their own interpretive beliefs. Chatwin's finding material in his colonial privilege, then valorizing his version of symbolic journey is pure hoax. Nicholls's argument about how such a confidence trick wrongly argues for remote and unforgiving landscapes as purifying the spirit is compelling. The white colonist in this case is indelibly interested in *self*-discovery, accompanied by a lack of self-reflexivity. Narrative occupation then becomes a matter of reprobate disguise. The peripatetic scoundrel-traveler, foot-loose and compelled by nomadism as a celebration of white male freedom, is unwilling to face either his own demons, his obsessions, or his entitlement and privilege. By consulting only white anthropologists (not necessarily reliable sources) who study Aborigines, this rogue's lazy travesty of interpretation models a sense of entitlement where "walking" in another's shoes is recreational, rather than a necessity of survival.

The competitive motivation of the intellectual rogue contributes to a combative defensiveness about their theft: such "recorders" are keen to locate themselves as experts, and in overriding all other voices, commit a profound peculation, appropriation of voice a persistent shadow backgrounding their picaresque wanderlust. Their cultural theft then anoints them as experts, gives them celebrity, while contaminating the Indigenous culture they represent with their Eurocentric notion of nomad. The most fascinating aspect of this paper is its contention that rogues attribute their wanderlust to others, a version of negative Pandora's box, which calls out the very definition of the cutpurse.

That the picara or the *Räuberin* is less frequently deployed than her male counterpoint is a peripheral and yet important factor demonstrated by these

papers. Women are seldom accorded the nudge/wink approval of roguish behavior, certainly cannot easily become vagabonds and footloose scamps, and rather than miscreants are generally deemed bitches or monsters. The opprobrium leveled at female mountebanks is far more severe, far less forgiving than that accorded men. While the same behavior in a man would cause amusement, in a woman the level of disapproval is heightened, and the punishment incommensurate with the crime. Veronika Schuchter's analysis in "Of Grim Witches and Showy Lady-Devils: Wealthy Women in Literature and Film" offers a generative reading of how wealth enables rogue women to manipulate others to their advantage. She addresses the odd category of how few women are included in indexes of rich "characters," and she discusses how representations of wealthy women in literature and film are overwhelmingly negative, a reflection of the social expectation that women are not supposed to have economic power, and suggesting too that women do not want to be known as being rich, a symptom of privilege. The erasure of women and people of colour from the realms of affluence speaks to the potential of money as rogue possession. In general, Schuchter indicates, women characters only gain wealth by their connection to or relationship with men; they are mere "estate keepers." That passive wealth becomes, then, a matter of how they are portrayed: wealth ties women to a lack of attractiveness, making them witch-like and irrational. In short, a rich woman is textually "rogued," and any woman who falls outside of the norm of dependent and unpowerful woman is deemed rogue. If being poor is a virtue, and women are made "unwomanly" by their occupation of power, in the dichotomy between normative and "deviant" characters, these women then take on a subversive role.

The paper discusses the extent to which Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, Cruella de Vil and the wicked stepmother of Cinderella provenance (many different versions), all remark the rich woman as deviant, cruel and malevolent, women without empathy who exhibit no maternal tenderness. As enablers of those who would be rogue, readers and film viewers alike are skeptical toward women characters who control money. Further, social reliance on beauty as a measurement of goodness inflects these representations; the female rogue is depicted as unattractive, if not disheveled and ungroomed. Miss Havisham's aging body is a testament to her attempt to immobilize time, while the "wicked stepmother" is seldom attractive, and Cruella is depicted as witch-like, disturbing if striking. The decaying finery of Miss Havisham's wedding attire, a parody of the marriage day as the "happiest" day of a woman's life, further undoes the stereotype; as does her refusal to be self-sacrificing, resistant to the notion that her wealth should measure her "kindness of spirit." The unruly women in these examples have no compunction about frightening those they encounter,

little compunction about “pleasing” others with their appearance, and are uncaring that their positioning as “self-made” women is “unnatural.” Their punishment is surely the opprobrium they encounter, that they must be humiliated, burned (not quite at the stake) or abandoned. Still, despite the offense of escaping the stereotype, they relish their failure. If the reward for good behavior is marriage, and rogue spinsters are unfit for marriage, then the argument would suggest that the path most satisfying is that of an anti-heroine. Most interesting of all is the desire of each woman not necessarily to be richer, but to be the author of her own story. Cruella de Vil’s drinking black ink effectively represents this character as rogue writer; and women who enjoy unusual tastes (peppering their fruit salad!) may not be rewarded for difference, but nevertheless make a compelling argument for the pleasure of being vixens.

Beautifully aligned with Schuchter’s analysis is Michelle D. Wise’s discussion of cinematic rogue women, using as primary example Charlize Theron’s depiction of serial killer Aileen Wuornos in the film *Monster*. The discussion of Theron “going ugly” to show her ability to depict a criminal woman underscores the extent to which beauty and its desire to please the male gaze enacts a limiting role, becomes a normative prison. By contrast, fetishizing the unattractive woman ultimately becomes (for Theron) transformatively positive—at least in terms of the movie’s success and the praise she garnered for the “difficult” role.

Such pervasive cultural assumptions have laid the groundwork for what is considered “deviant” or rogue. In order to reflect our valuation of them in physical terms, the expectation is that rogues found guilty will be abject. Once again, the determination of unattractiveness as a measure of deviance records how we punish and discipline difference, determined that it not interrupt our ideas of what should be positive. The paper discusses how the film’s focus on Wuornos’s appearance is particularly important, especially because we read her as “inhuman,” thus accounting for her crimes by virtue of her “ugliness,” which is attached to her role as serial killer. The measure of the rogue and the parameter of outward appearance means that she cannot escape her inner unpleasantness. The “deviance” of the lesbian relationship and the “excessive demands of queer love” mean that sexual orientation too measures this “outsiderhood.” Refusal to participate in a heteronormative world makes the outsider even more outsiders, and emphasizes the extent to which conformity is valued. Most of all, Wuornos becomes a ready example of how society measures what is monstrous, and then judges the very monstrous it has created.

Clearly, the sanctuary of tranquil domestic space is not available to the rogue. Precarity becomes the situation the contemporary rogue must endure, as opposed to the safety of a “controlled domestic space,”

its class structure, patriarchal hierarchy and law-abiding demands. This paper beautifully articulates the extent to which the American fascination with criminal behavior as not so much deviant as a means of determining expected roles. If “the female body of the prostitute [is] a reservoir of contagion and infection,” then they can certainly be expected to perform insubordination. While none of us are immune to the charms of the rogue, none of us can escape the heterosexist and patriarchal structures that have been imprinted upon our reading. The logical question for rogue analysis then becomes: who is beyond redemption? Or is that state of eternal condemnation essential to all depictions of the new roguery? Ultimately the attraction of the rogue and representations of the same rogue show the extent to which we should be perplexed by their actions, which leaves us unable to draw simple conclusions or morals.

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It is a short distance from the notion of appearance as monstrous to the presence of the machine as an instrument of rebellion. Kornelia Boczkowska’s “The Outlaw Machine, the Monstrous Outsider and Motorcycle Fetishists: Challenging Rebellion, Mobility and Masculinity in Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* and Steven Spielberg’s *Duel*” asks the important question of whether it is possible, in a modernist mechanized world (these films are from 1963 and 1971 respectively), to act out road rogue. If *Rocinante* is the companion to Don Quixote’s travels, then as the “outlaw machines” of the present age’s automobility, these films about motorcycles merge “the road movie’s traditional discourse with auteurism and modernism.” Road movies have always integrated rebellion and movement; the open highway is a space enabling marginality and disobedience, even if the road itself is a version of direction. The subcultures that Boczkowska addresses in this essay embody nomadism, transgression and liberation, both films juxtaposing violence and eroticism through their encounters with hostile landscapes and people. The tie to quest and outlaw movies, which valorizes the lone hero trope, is indisputable. Still, fantasies of escape and liberation demonstrating the masculinist quest motif are ripe for rogue inflection, the liberation linked to mobility and irresponsibility. These films sympathetically depict the adventures of a group of outsiders and outlaws who end up being destroyed by repressive social forces; they emphasize marginality and estrangement, with destruction and punishment (usually death) as the outcome, the endpoint. But morally, “a text cannot hold its meaning steady when a viewer invests it with desire”—in these movies the power machine becomes “tribal totem,” and bike parts stand in for what the body cannot do. The indisputably American fetishism of machines, chrome and steel, violence and speed signals the mythological aspirations of the motorcyclist, the elusive, dead movie star (James Dean), and even an uneasy association with fetishized Nazism.

In these filmic examples, we come to understand the extent to which we as audience expect the rogue world to provide us (as voyeurs) with thrills, answering our fascination with inchoate yearning. While it is certainly difficult to be a rogue in suburbia, our happy embrace of aghast paranoia at the threat of these “rebels” surely guarantees their profitability through our tantalized interest. The mechanical mistress and the outlaw nomad reflect both perpetual angst and allure. As with all rogue refusals, the motorcycle movie refuses to obey traffic laws and although these films do not equate with the thrill aroused by car-chase movies, they do deploy perpetual motion as restive desire. Transgression, then, is where we can find it, and in this uber-safe world, we seek the vicarious tension of trespass in the strangest places.

This oddly contradictory human desire, to experience roguishness while evading being wholly limited by its frameworks, is explored by Jason Blake in “Roguish Self-Fashioning and Questing in Aleksandar Hemon’s ‘Everything.’” The self-fashioning rogue wants to participate in what he perceives as conceptual freedom, sexual contact and wild experience. He casts himself as a poet in order to join the fraternity of scoundrels, although that merely measures his naiveté and his unsophisticated reliance on the convenience of lies. This incipient or apprentice rogue seeks models for roguishness; he desires the ideal of that behavior despite the obvious difficulty of such a sketchy life. His apprentice aspiration is often enabled by a journey away from the safety of home, a journey that presents itself as an escape route. In Hemon’s story, the journey becomes one of return, a careful re-visitation of guilt and recrimination in tandem with a narrator’s attempt to portray himself as roguish even while he locates himself firmly within his family and his culture. The escape-rogue then is a gestural device and character, the social outsider as an unsustainable construct.

Travelling serves for this inventor as ideal rogue activity; he is one of several passengers together on the way to a hazy destination, although the quotidian task he is charged with (buying a chest freezer) is both ironic and finite. His travel companions, model rogues who use storytelling as a competition, bragging as bludgeon, have shared the same incarcerations, the same accusations, the same escapes, but also the same limitations. His encounter with their special vocabulary, their criminal experience, their braggadocio about all the places where they are not wanted, where they have been refused entry, where they have no room to ply their trade, does not educate him, but tempts him even further into cherishing his self-deception. He fools himself even as his experience proves his fantasy untenable. Acting as an emissary of his family’s survival, their daily life revolving around getting and storing food, ensuring that they have enough, interrupts his dreams of romantic escapades. But no rogue can escape history, and hovering over



Hemon's story is what is conjured by the very name of the city of Sarajevo: the war, the siege and the many resultant deaths. The changes in national boundaries, names and political circumstances measure every rogue's unstable role; places can disappear overnight, citizenship is moot, and the freedom of peace is negotiable. The necessary contrast of mischievous roguery with the serious barbarity of death is one of the ways that the playful construction of any rogue can be undercut: in such circumstances there is no cure but to beat the rogue to teach him a lesson, although his lesson is only learned later, with the losses of war.

The lesson, then, is one of perception. What can one do in such company except become a poet? The rogue assigns to himself a writing riddle, insoluble if acquiescent. This same figure is tested in Jordan Bolay's essay, "Same Old Ed, . . . Uncommitted': BMW Socialism and Post-Roguery in Guy Vanderhaeghe's Early Fiction." Again, mobility, automobiles and symbols of movement suggest the ideal of running away as cure for disillusionment, although this figure is more deflated rogue than functioning traducer. Ed, the key character under scrutiny, is flaccid, unsure of himself, yearning to be a wastrel and a vagabond, and failing. Instead, he is a "fat, lazy, emotional, unemployed intellectual," usefully summarized as a non-violent shit-disturber. He is unfortunately limited by his milieu; it is difficult to be a villainous knave in contemporary Saskatchewan (a quiet province in western Canada), and the impossibility of that dream articulates how man descends as encapsulation and embrace of rogue watered down into a socially immobile and ironically hypocritical watcher. He is less scoundrel than lazy political knave, a voyeur of others' endeavors, unfailingly sarcastic about their delusions, claiming that he says what others cannot say.

This scoundrel, who cannot see himself clearly, is the patron saint of those who abandon noble causes, the march of roguery now determined by economic circumstances more than any ideal of independence or outlaw. Here is the transit to the outsider as failure, unemployed, defensive, vagrant. He is ultimately a pathetic fool who embodies both the roles of critic and criticized, cunning blockhead and risible knave. While he claims to be a disappointed idealist, measuring the "drugged, dragooned, down-trodden, dominated, and nearly drowned" state of the lower class, he is a walking case of constant revision, cutting his cloth to suit his audience, and in the process deluding himself about his own motivation. He erases himself and his own ideals, and while Bolay argues that his

vanishment is not a forfeiture, but a rejection of all social convention, dominant and emergent, sanctioned and counter-cultural. It is a self-removal from the politics of language, for the novel, driven by Ed's

narration, and therefore his very diegetic existence, depends on his continued expression through language. And through this disintegration, Ed transcends roguery to become post-rogue,

as readers we must then ask whether or not it is possible to be post-rogue, or merely abject loser.

Ronnie Scott's analysis of representations in comics unpacks further what could be construed as a post-rogue movement toward "reinvigorated" inclemency. In "Aussies, Rogues and Slackers: Simon Hanselmann's Megg, Mogg and Owl Comics as Contemporary Instances of Rogue Literature," Scott argues that Simon Hanselmann's Megg, Mogg and Owl comics can be understood as rogue texts, showing characters responding to social and generic limits and reconnoitering those limits through a restless and innovative presentation and content. This creative exploration of how to cross boundaries flags these comics as an aberrant species, depicting "low life" and petty crime, deceit and deviance. Scott lays out the various genres that have succeeded rogue literature, incorporating some of its aspects, but broadening its influence and application: grunge fiction, dirty realism, social protest literature, fanzines and Fantagraphics. At the same time, realism is arguably the motivator here; Hanselmann observes that: "People are horrible. People are cruel. People are abused," and this text incorporates his certainty in the content it explores. The connections between mental illness, trauma, and desperate need are shown to be inescapable, and the divisions between prank and illegal act, between idea and physical assault, between rebellion and injury, are all crossed lines. The inevitable abjection that follows is not negated: "The structure of the comic begins to complicate and move towards change, when antics that may be appealing precisely because they are criminal are shown to affect characters to the point of trauma," so that some characters eventually want to go rogue from going rogue.

Using the "sharehouse" setting (a flat or house temporarily shared by several people unable to afford their own living space) to probe the dynamics of friendship and romance gathers characters who refuse to adapt to societal norms, who are outside the law and even bordering on deviant. The sharehouse sanctions the rogue in company with other rogues, a mixture and connection that incites unusual acts. But the parameters of the genre persist; the sharehouse dwellers communicate with their own distinctive cant, and in their milieu practice a code of honour among thieves, or honour among rogues. The connection to the oral tradition too is marked by the combination of fragmented overhearing, anecdote and vignette. The rogue gesture of crossed boundaries concretized by the comic form of frames and disconnected drawings, as Scott says, problematizes sequential orthodoxies.

Is some articulated law necessary for the contrast of roguery to take place? In “The Rogue as an Artist in Patrick deWitt’s *The Sisters Brothers*,” Hilde Staels undertakes to address how this revisionist western disrupts and supplants its popular western and picaresque forebears. Staels compares the “traditional” rogue with the self-aware rogue in Eli Sisters’s shift toward a reformed rogue, and how in the process the hypermasculinity of the Frontier myth is critiqued. Once encapsulating the gunfighter, the killer, the revenge artist and the outlaw, Eli Sisters turns rogue against his own occupation, and thus turns human. As the rogue who wants to repent, who no longer wants to be a rogue, Eli must negotiate two elements: his determinedly violent brother, Charlie, whom Eli must save from himself, and his own tendency toward sympathy. As the sympathetic listener, Eli is “more interested in digging out his own and other people’s hidden sadness and suffering” than in getting rich or wreaking revenge. Haunted by what he has done, what he has neglected to do, and by his own sense of what is ethical, Eli is aligned with a female sensibility; he is, after all, a Sister. The paper argues that Eli meets and takes to heart lessons from “the three spinning Sisters from classical mythology.” Haunted rogues who repent are certainly rare enough, but when they are combined with western outlaws, their cleansing effects more than mere reformation. In short, they meet with rogues’ justice, and are meted out what they have meted out, if only to be relegated finally to a life of gentle stasis, at home with their mother. “The difference between who he was then and what he is now” reforms Eli completely, and although he is figured as a writer, an artist of sensibility, here is one rogue text that seeks to achieve some closure, some “ethical” accommodation of these micreants’ future if not their past.

The adventurousness of the rogue writer is intricately explored in Mark Metzler Sawin’s “The Lynching and Rebirth of Ned Buntline: Rogue Authorship during the American Literary Renaissance.” Again, the lure of the wicked west and the American dream of upward mobility, alongside the ability to don different identities and survive by one’s wits, motivates this prolifically rogue publisher and rogue writer. Itinerant rather than reliable, always with an eye to the main chance, the story of “Ned Buntline” (Edward Z. C. Judson) argues for self-invention and re-invention as not only survival, but a cultural strategy that actually ended up shaping the discourse of the nation, the United States a reflection of this secret love of scandal, and its resultant underhanded politics. As a wastrel and a seducer, always in search of a story, his writing, however exaggerated, shaped the social order of the time, an affective reach that extends to the present day even though Judson and his texts may be long forgotten. That his transformation from ink-stained wretch to popular chronicler was in some way enabled by the lynching that he survived suggests the extent to which

the rogue who provokes a powerful response then takes that lesson to heart, and learns how to avail himself of its potential, always keeping in mind base human interest in bad behaviour. As Sawin says:

He abandoned his place among the elite writers of his day and embraced the life of a writing rogue with an authorial voice that would cause riots, launch political parties, and make him one of the most innovative and important writers of his era.

The potential for both high and low-grade scandal, the interest in all that was scurrilous, and the faux horror with which those writings were greeted played directly into Buntline's need for an audience, the dupes who would pay for his newspaper and his stories, the suggestive gossip that he propagated and marketed. Both perpetual writer and scandalous stretcher, Buntline's was a case of living his text, and in the living, texting his excess.

The life of a writer/rogue provides both a template and a temptation. The travel, the impecunious stretches, the fights and dodges between friends and enemies, paint a colourful and undeniably attractive swashbuckling line of action. Both infamous and celebrated, Judson's embrace of his own roguish alter-ego, Ned Buntline, foreshadows how easily confidence men can swing the attention of their fellow citizens, and scam their loyalty. As the exemplar of a man hyper-conscious of the next story or opportunity, he serves as an effective symbol for the extent to which the United States is willing to embrace and forgive its public rogues.

In contrast, and as a diametrically obverse Canadian measurement, Kit Dobson's "Men Without Fingers, Men Without Toes" offers a quietly meditative cross-genre essay that discusses both missing digits as markers of the rogue body, and the men who lose those parts to labour or accident. He makes the important point that to go rogue is also to go missing, to disappear, and in that image of disappearance he evokes the beautifully melancholy absence of sacrifice. The laughter of these disfigured men, despite their maiming, argues for a gentler, more repentant rogue, aware of his own pain, but proud of what he has achieved with the real physical instrument of his body. As Dobson says: "Digits, missing digits, and the labours that pull bodies apart: these show up, again and again, throughout the lives of those around me." Here is an aspect of rogue chronicles that is much disregarded, brought to light in this essay with extraordinary empathy.

Dobson discusses in turn the writing of George Ryga and Patrick Lane, and how alienation and struggle both inspire and limit the men who live that metaphorical dismemberment, making the afterlife of these working

rogues an absence. Most of all, he beautifully describes “how the rogue lives on in the afterglow of aging, fumbling past glory and failure,” while those same failures enable us, as writers and critics, to “do the work of interpreting their stories.”

In the rogue world, context is everything. The story of all rogues, then, is the coagulation of hard work and its recompense, loss and regret and misunderstanding, but ultimately a celebratory disfigurement, a disruption of wholeness, and a beautiful alienation, material or textual.

These essays in dialogue with one another form a section of this issue of *Text Matters*. The other papers—in “(Sub)versions and (Re)visions,” “Negotiating Traumas” and “Liminal Spaces”—amplify this discussion in other directions, addressing issues of resistance, metaphor, correction, and the echoes of both orthodoxy and refiguration. What is richest about these works is how reading and writing between the spaces enables not only unruly reading, but peace, healing, and to some extent, a resolution of trauma, both major and minor, the small trembling of all our limbs, those that we hold close and that we lose.

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## A Wild Roguery: Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* Reconsidered

# ABSTRACT

This article revisits, analyzes and critiques Bruce Chatwin's 1987 bestseller, *The Songlines*,<sup>1</sup> more than three decades after its publication. In *Songlines*, the book primarily responsible for his posthumous celebrity, Chatwin set out to explore the essence of Central and Western Desert Aboriginal Australians' philosophical beliefs. For many readers globally, *Songlines* is regarded as a—if not the—definitive entry into the epistemological basis, religion, cosmology and lifeways of classical Western and Central Desert Aboriginal people. It is argued that Chatwin's fuzzy, ill-defined use of the word-concept "songlines"<sup>2</sup> has had the effect of generating more heat than light. Chatwin's failure to recognize the economic imperative underpinning Australian desert people's walking praxis is problematic: his own treks through foreign lands were underpropped by socioeconomic privilege. Chatwin's ethnocentric *idée fixe* regarding the primacy of "walking" and "nomadism," central to his *Songlines* thématicque, well and truly preceded his visits to Central Australia. Walking, proclaimed Chatwin, is an elemental part of "Man's" innate nature. It is argued that this unwavering, preconceived, essentialist belief was a self-serving construal justifying Chatwin's own "nomadic" adventures of identity. Is it thus reasonable to regard Chatwin as a "rogue author," an unreliable narrator? And if so, does this matter? Of greatest concern is the book's continuing majority acceptance as a measured, accurate account of Aboriginal belief systems. With respect to Aboriginal desert people and the barely disguised individuals depicted in *Songlines*, is Chatwin's book a "rogue text," constituting an act of epistemic violence, consistent with Spivak's usage of that term?

**Keywords:** Chatwin's *Songlines*, Aboriginal desert people, nomadism, economic basis and typology of walking, authorial roguery.

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter rendered as *Songlines*.

<sup>2</sup> As Colette Mrowa-Hopkins discovered on the Linguee website, in relation to the English word "songline" (<https://www.linguee.com/english-french/search?source=auto&query=songline>), attempts to translate this term into the French language have rendered it even more problematic. Mrowa-Hopkins offered the following commentary: "One entry offers the following usage of 'songlines' as: 'les chants qui se rapportent aux sites sacrés' & 'Les anciens chants des pistes de la musique traditionnelle aborigène' and another entry defined it as 'les pistes ['tracks'] chantées du Rêve' ['dream,' 'dreaming,' or even 'fantasy'], or 'Temps du Rêve' ['Dreamtime' or 'Dream-time' or 'Dream Time'], which I didn't like. I prefer the idea of 'parcours' ['path,' 'route,' or 'course'] to 'piste' ['track'] and I didn't like the reference to 'chants' ['songs,' 'chants,' 'singing'] since I think it's larger than that."

*To live in one land, is captivitie,  
To runne all countries, a wild roguery.*  
John Donne, "Elegie III: Change" (1633)

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In early 1982, I began working as a linguist at Lajamanu, a remote Warlpiri (Aboriginal) settlement in the Tanami Desert of Central Australia. Later that year a journalist friend working for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) contacted me, acting as an intermediary on behalf of British writer Bruce Chatwin, asking me to host the author. Chatwin wished to conduct research into a book about Australian Aboriginal desert people. Chatwin requested accommodation in my house at Lajamanu for several weeks in 1983 whilst carrying out his investigation.

In the early 1980s the majority of Warlpiri people at Lajamanu were living in humpies (makeshift shelters comprised of wood, leaves, and corrugated iron or other scrap metal). At that time the housing situation in remote Aboriginal communities was extremely tight, as remains the case today.

At any rate, my workload at Lajamanu was onerous: I had been employed to support the local Warlpiri people's aspiration to establish a bilingual education program in the local school. An English-only program had been in place since the school opened c. 1956–58. The older people had become extremely concerned that their children were losing proficiency in their mother tongue, Warlpiri. Prior to the advent of the bilingual education program in 1982, Warlpiri schoolchildren were caned or otherwise punished if caught inside the school grounds speaking their natal tongue.

Owing to Lajamanu's extremely remote location (see map) to have acquiesced to Chatwin's request would have meant that for me there would have been no alternative but to interact with him—a total stranger—day and night. That would also have interrupted my efforts to learn Warlpiri, as older Warlpiri people came to my home every night to talk. At that time many did not speak English, or only a little.

Declining Chatwin's request was unwittingly prescient. It transpired that Chatwin's major "research" modus operandi was to bombard white people working with Aboriginal people with multiple questions. This involved speaking over others, rather than interacting with and directing his enquiries to bona fide Aboriginal knowledge-holders. Most of the young white people whom Chatwin used as "informants" were working in the Aboriginal Land Rights movement as lawyers, linguists, anthropologists or as health care workers. Many were employed by Aboriginal organizations. That they were knowledgeable about the local Aboriginal people's life-



ways—exponentially more so than Chatwin—is not in question. Rather, it is Chatwin’s fast-track method of acquiring knowledge that is one subject of this critique—he was a man skilled at taking intellectual shortcuts in ways that were somewhat morally compromising. At a personal level he had much to gain from that approach.<sup>3</sup>

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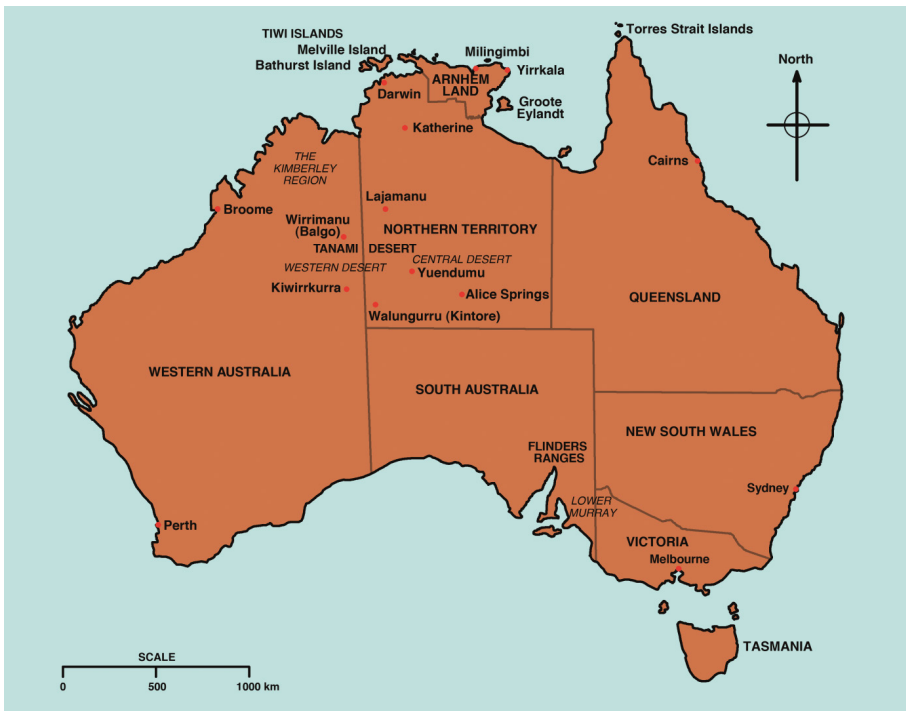


Fig. 1. Map of Australia, showing location of Lajamanu, the Tanami Desert and other Warlpiri sites in the Central and Western Deserts, Christine Nicholls, 2003; updated by Clinton Ellicott, with the permission of Wakefield Press Adelaide, 2019.

This is not only starkly evident in *Songlines*, but is confirmed in Nicholas Shakespeare’s detailed biography of Chatwin, where there are many allusions to the latter’s unorthodox “research methodology,” if that is not a total

<sup>3</sup> By the time Chatwin embarked on his *Songlines* project, his approach to attaining knowledge had been well honed. Chatwin’s quick fix pathway to knowledge acquisition was a rapid route to self-advancement. This almost always served to enhance *his* reputation, rather than that of the others on whom he had leaned. For more on Chatwin’s modus operandi while working at Sotheby’s as a young man and “researching” while in Patagonia, see Shakespeare.

misnomer in this context. Shakespeare states that Chatwin used as his primary “sources . . . the anthropologists and lawyers who had spent the necessary time with Aborigines” (412). To put it bluntly, Chatwin did not put in the hard yards necessary to come to more than a superficial understanding of the ideas with which he was putatively grappling. The information he obtained had already been channelled via people whom, by comparison with Aboriginal desert people, had very different sociocultural backgrounds. By the time Chatwin sourced his material it had thus been distorted through two prisms: his own archetypally British assumptions, and then through the more reliable lens of the non-Aboriginal Australians upon whose knowledge he drew.

By 1983, when Chatwin arrived in Central Australia to undertake his *Songlines* project, he had developed a long-established, one-size-fits-all, conceptual framework on human walking (Shakespeare 14, *inter alia*). Chatwin's grand narrative involved a blend of “nomadic” travel with song. His over-weaning fascination with, and dilettantish philosophical musings on the primacy of nomadism, along with his essentialist conviction about Homo sapiens' relationship to walking had been long-term obsessions. This also provided Chatwin with a justification for being away from his wife for long periods of time.

So, when Chatwin made the first of two short trips to Australia's Northern Territory, he did not set out to test his theory: like Minerva, who had emerged fully formed from her father Jupiter's head, Chatwin arrived in Central Australia with an *a priori* schema that would become central to *Songlines*. Moreover, Chatwin was not one to let contradictory evidence get in the way of an *idée fixe*.

He did not ask Aboriginal desert people whether they agreed with his notions. For the most part, Chatwin spoke to white men *about* Aborigines, rather than *with* local Aboriginal people. Aboriginal voices barely register in *Songlines*; it is largely comprised of White noise. At no point did Chatwin question his *modus operandi* or his subject positioning as a public school educated and, in many respects, conservative, Englishman. The British colonization of what is now known as Australia has obvious ramifications for his interactions with Aboriginal and, to some extent, non-Aboriginal Australians. His approach was tantamount to what Carol Johnson has described in a different context as a “denial of the legitimacy of difference.”

The balance of this article will be devoted to further critique of Chatwin's immensely popular book, the unfortunate influence of which continues into the present day (see, for example, Morrison's “Bruce Chatwin's Book as Popular as Ever”). Many of the weaknesses in *Songlines* are attributable to Chatwin's essentialist understandings informed by his own borrowed and prefabricated philosophizing, ideation and his use of

under- or undefined key concepts, including “nomadism” and “songlines.” His tendency to overgeneralize extended to his ideas about the intersections between gender, race and social class.

### CHATWIN’S *GRANDE IDÉE*—THE CENTRALITY OF WALKING AND NOMADISM IN HUMAN LIFE

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Before writing *Songlines* Chatwin had written about “nomadic” groups in other parts of the world. In 1969 Chatwin pitched an idea for a book on nomadism to the Jonathan Cape editor Tom Maschler. As a result, Chatwin was contracted to write a book provisionally titled *The Nomadic Alternative*. Eventually a disappointed Maschler turned the manuscript down as unpublishable (Shakespeare; Shakespeare and Chatwin).

*Songlines* was published in 1987, almost two decades after Chatwin had failed to find a publisher for *The Nomadic Alternative*. In this new book on Australian Aboriginal desert people’s travel, Chatwin set out to demonstrate the symbiotic relationship of his well-rehearsed nomadism *thématique*, merging it with Aboriginal song cycles. He proposed an eidetic relationship between walking and song, with nil clarification of the specific nature of that relationship. Although Chatwin claimed that his “reason for coming to Australia was to try to learn for myself, and not from other men’s books, what a Songline was—and how it worked” (*Songlines* 12), in the book itself there is no evidence that he clarified this concept, despite reaffirming his aim to do so several times.

Chatwin had borrowed the term “songlines” from Theodor Strehlow, an anthropologist and the son of a German Lutheran missionary. While Chatwin acknowledged Strehlow in *Songlines*, he made no mention of another Australian anthropologist, Robert Tonkinson, whose ideas he also apparently borrowed. Several years before *Songlines* was published, Tonkinson had written that

Songlines Singing is an essential element in most Mardudjara ritual performances because the songline follows in most cases the direction of travel of the beings concerned and highlights cryptically their notable as well as mundane activities. Most songs, then, have a geographical as well as mythical referent, so by learning the songline men become familiar with literally thousands of sites even though they have never visited them; all become part of their cognitive map of the desert world. (Tonkinson 104)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Mardudjara people’s traditional homelands extended across the Great Sandy Desert, which is part of the Western Desert located in the Pilbara region of Australia. Today their language is mainly rendered in written form as “Martu.”

It is clear from this passage that Tonkinson does not offer a totalizing account of Aboriginal travelling and song. Tonkinson also makes it clear that Aboriginal people became aware of places that they had never visited relying only on song, but he does not state that such knowledge is guaranteed to offer a fail-safe traveller's guide into distant country. By using terms like "in most cases" and "cryptically" Tonkinson, who is infinitely more experienced in this field than Chatwin, leaves room for exceptions, steering clear of definitive pronouncements.

My own understanding of classical Aboriginal travel, gleaned from Warlpiri "first contact" people who had first encountered the white colonizers in early adulthood, is that their foot-walking mostly entailed systematic rotational navigation on an annual basis. This was premised on the likelihood of the availability of edible flora and fauna at specific times of the year in particular locations, but, most importantly, on the fundamental need to source potable water.



**Fig. 2.** Twin rockholes at Wakurlpu on Warlpiri country known as Miri-jarra ("Two Shield Handles"). The late Kay Napaljarri Ross drinking from one of the two rockholes, late 1970s/early 1980s. Photograph: Mary Laughren.

On occasions, including during years of drought or flash flooding in particular parts of their estates, people had to be flexible. Droughts presented obvious problems for survival. Knowledge of the location of

permanent water and/or normally reliable water sources was essential. Crucial to this was Warlpiri and other desert people's finely-tuned knowledge of country. It was never a case of aimless travel, because in the desert regions death would have been the result. The bottom line was *always* survival.

As has been indicated, by the time Chatwin arrived in Australia for his project he had for years nurtured an overarching fascination with human walking. This culturally restricted, essentialist and quasi-religious *idée fixe* is reflected in his reference to the filmmaker Werner Herzog as

the only person with whom I could have a one-to-one conversation on what I would call the sacramental aspect of walking. He and I share a belief that walking is not simply therapeutic for oneself but is a poetic activity that can cure the world of its ills. (Chatwin, *What Am I Doing Here* 139).

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Chatwin summed up his position in a definitive pronouncement: "Walking is virtue, tourism deadly sin" (*What Am I Doing Here* 139).<sup>5</sup> Chatwin's use of the word "sacramental" is telling: language specific to the Christian religion often enters his discourse. It also seems that Chatwin had no appetite for complexity but rather favoured single-cause analysis, arising from implicit ethnocentrism.

This struck me in 1987 when I first read *Songlines* while living at Lajamanu. Chatwin's reliance on Christian doctrine became more apparent in recent re-readings of his book. It came as no surprise to discover while reading Shakespeare's biography that when Chatwin was close to death he had converted to Greek Orthodox Christianity. To believe in God is to believe that the world was created, a form of essentialism that was one of Chatwin's essentialist beliefs. While Christian belief (or any other religious belief) is not inherently problematic, it can become so when projected onto the belief systems of others based on the assumption of its universality.

In *Songlines*, Chatwin's "mythical referent" is Christianity. His book resonates with the trope of the sacred, solitary journey into the desert, which heavily inflects Judeo-Christian religious traditions. Journeying alone into the "wilderness" brings into play the symbolic landscape of the desert as a means of integrating the self with that symbolic landscape, thereby purifying the soul, giving rise to some form of epiphany. Moses' encounter with the burning bush at the base

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<sup>5</sup> Herzog and Chatwin had a shared interest in Aboriginal Australia. In 1984 Herzog's film *Where the Green Ants Dream* ("Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen") was released. Later the pair collaborated on Herzog's film *Cobra Verde* (1987, based on Chatwin's book *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, first published in 1980).



of Mount Sinai is just one example. Ultimately this is a journey of self-discovery, in which that “self” is conceptualized as an individual self, not as a collective “self.”

Chatwin preferred solo walking, in itself a powerful Christian mythos and a significant element inflecting Chatwin's legendary but tendentious status as a credible interpreter of Aboriginal travel and song. Chatwin simply transposed his substrate belief system onto Australian Aboriginal people living in desert regions. What is astonishing in *Songlines* is Chatwin's staggering lack of self-reflexivity, in spite all of his well-documented solo travels to exotic parts of the world. The cliché about travel broadening the mind is, in many instances, a *furphy*.<sup>6</sup>

Early Christianity's relationship with the desert was geographically based, but this theme has been taken up and interpreted by Anglo-European Westerners as part of Judeo-Christian tradition, regardless of their location. “Singing our way through the wilderness' is Old Testament rhetoric,” notes Andrew Palmer (313). The desert is now conceived as a locus facilitating spiritual awakening, and where people, including New Agers, go to seek a contemplative life, self-knowledge and transformational experience (e.g., St Jerome and John the Baptist).

Chatwin's approach is discussed in Palmer's article “In the Shade of a Ghost Gum.” Under the subheading of “God and Darwin,” Palmer writes that

[i]n Western literature, conflicting discourses—the Darwinian and the religious—make tracks across the desert. In *Songlines*, Chatwin draws on both to develop a thesis about, or a vision of, our innate natures. At the heart of the book is an evolutionist argument in which desert landscape figures prominently as the progenitor of human nature. (312)

Continuing in this vein, Palmer writes that “[this] evolutionist discourse is interwoven with a very different rhetoric derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition. For the Old Testament prophets, the desert figures as a place of harsh journeying that purifies the spirit.” (312)

He then cites Chatwin's Biblical references: “The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea were nomadic revivalists who howled abuse at the decadence of civilization. . . . The prophets looked to a Day of Restoration when the Jews would return to the frugal asceticism of nomadic life” (312). According to Palmer, the interweaving of these two “conflicting discourses—Darwinian and religious” in *Songlines* draws

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<sup>6</sup> A “furphy” is Australian slang meaning a misleading, non-factual piece of information that is widely believed to be accurate.

on Aboriginal discourses to destabilize that binary opposition. Chatwin's representations of the desert therefore challenge hegemonic ways of seeing. This challenge arises out of a subject position made discursively complex by Chatwin's sexuality and illness: *The Songlines* was completed by a man who knew he was dying and is driven by a search for the path to a "right death." (311)

This passage strongly implies that Chatwin was on a Christian quest, for which the ostensible study of Aboriginal desert people and their desert country acted as surrogates, legitimating his own sojourns. It may explain why so many readers in the Western world, primarily of Christian faith, applaud this book.

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Propos of Palmer's article, one can fully accept that Chatwin's homosexuality was undoubtedly a complicating factor informing his life and virtually everything he wrote. This was especially so because he was, in the view of many, at least on the surface, a happily married man whose American wife remained in England during almost all of his travels. Shakespeare touches on this a number of times in his biography of Chatwin. On the other hand, in terms of Chatwin's "representations of the desert" that "challenge hegemonic ways of seeing" one could argue that his sexuality had almost nil effect, except possibly as a factor instrumental to a possible desire on his part for redemption.

### VOICE AND LOCUTORY STYLE IN CHATWIN'S *SONGLINES*

After the publication of *Songlines*, when a company was seeking film rights to it, Chatwin declared the book to be fiction (Ash; Shakespeare). This needs to be understood in relation to Chatwin's earlier *oeuvre*, which included travel writing and novels. Chatwin's admission unsettles the status of all of his previous books.<sup>7</sup>

It is no easy matter to disentangle whether *Songlines* is fiction, non-fiction, or a mix of both. One reason for this is that two "Bruces" are deeply imbricated in the telling of this story. The first "Bruce" is the narrator (B1), who takes the third person or impersonal voice. The second "Bruce" (B2) appears as a character in the book and discusses ideas and views with others. Both "Bruces" hold opinions apparently indistinguishable from those of Chatwin. The "Bruce" (B2) who uses the first person, acknowledging himself as "Bruce," is an almost exact avatar of the "real" Bruce Chatwin:

<sup>7</sup> Before *Songlines* Chatwin had written a number of travel books, including *In Patagonia* (1977) and *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (1980), which had received a degree of critical acclaim.

an avatar in both the original Sanskrit and the populist sense of the word. This “real Bruce,” reinforced by consistent use of the first person singular pronoun throughout the book, discusses Aboriginal people with other (mostly white) people in the book, and in almost all cases his predominant conversational style is competitive rather than cooperative.

Chatwin's second-string protagonist in *Songlines*, “Arkady Volchock,”<sup>8</sup> an Australian of Ukrainian heritage, is also Chatwin's chief interlocutor. While both Bruces (B1 and B2) regard Arkady as something of a sage, B2 Bruce's conversational style sometimes results in the pair's exchanges hovering on an almost combative edge. The B2 Bruce character always equals or trumps his most erudite and articulate interlocutors. Bruce consistently engages in an incisive and clever fanfaronade of one-upmanship, even when he is replying to Arkady's explanations with a question.

Throughout the volume Bruce and Arkady engage in serious conversation about desert Aboriginal people. Bruce (B1, the omniscient narrator) often paraphrases the words of Arkady and others, putting his own spin on the information that he has just acquired. This has the effect of destabilizing the subject positions of his “informants” because Chatwin's twin voices almost always override them. Chatwin's use of narrative voice as impersonal *and* personal, conveyed by his use of the first and third person forms, ultimately provides him with total narrative control.

Chatwin's narrative approach also generates a degree of cognitive confusion on the part of readers. This authorial *aporia* provided Chatwin with a great deal of space for in(-ter)vention and subversion of other voices and ultimately his appropriation of the voices of others. To supply but one example of this disingenuous approach that ensures Chatwin himself becomes the central figure in the book, an excerpt of one conversation with Arkady follows, beginning with the apparently all-knowing authorial voice stating that:

Every Wallaby man believed he was descended from a universal Wallaby father, who was the ancestor of all other Wallaby Men and of all living wallabies. Wallabies, therefore, were his brothers. To kill one for food was both fratricide and cannibalism.

“Yet,” I persisted, “the man was no more wallaby than the British are lions, the Russian bears, or the Americans bald eagles?”

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<sup>8</sup> There is no question that Toly (Anatole) Sawenko was, and is, knowledgeable about the lifeways of Aboriginal people. At the time he first met Chatwin, Sawenko had worked with Aboriginal desert people for a considerable length of time, in areas including health, education and Aboriginal land rights claims. Chatwin's too clever-by-half verbal exchanges simply serve to emphasize his intensely competitive approach to knowledge and rivalrous conversational style.



“Any species,” [Arkady] said, “can be a Dreaming. A virus can be a Dreaming. You can have a . . . rain Dreaming, a desert-orange Dreaming, a lice Dreaming.” (Chatwin, *Songlines* 12)

At this point B2 Bruce, the self-declared polymath, chips in with, “[a]nd the Welsh have leeks, the Scots thistles and Daphne changed into a laurel” (12–13).

Throughout the book, the impersonal narrator and the more transparent Bruce figure both have a tendency to bring conversations about Australian desert Aborigines back to a default Anglo-European *point de repère*. While Chatwin had earlier claimed that he did not want to learn about the songlines concept from “other men,” it *was* his use of other men’s voices in *Songlines* that informed this book, although it is clear that Chatwin’s understanding was limited. This was also a result of his tendency to apply Anglo-European knowledge systems as the benchmark test, rather than genuinely grappling with desert Aboriginal people’s legitimate difference. This militated against any deep or empathetic understanding on his part. Chatwin’s central subject positioning in *Songlines* greatly contributed to his later celebrity status.<sup>9</sup> His fame was cemented soon after its publication, owing to his well-publicized death from AIDS. His post-mortem status as an iconic, trailblazing gay man is ironic in terms of how he had conducted such a compartmentalized life.

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### ON THE RELATIVE ABSENCE OF REPRESENTATIONS OF THE DESERT IN *SONGLINES* AND DIVERGENT VIEWS IN RELATION TO IDEAS ABOUT THE “DESERT”

*Songlines* is strangely devoid of any genuine attempt to describe or represent the desert itself, other than fleetingly. It seems that the arid and semi-arid landscapes of the desert regions into which Chatwin ventured were of

<sup>9</sup> More recently, Chatwin’s seemingly endlessly replicated celebrity has extended to luxury merchandise. In 2015 under the imprimatur of the prestigious London-based Burberry fashion house, the company released a limited edition set of Chatwin’s books, clothbound and selling for £495.00 per set. Burberry’s design CEO also released a menswear collection including shirts and travel bags “inspired” by Chatwin and clearly pitched at affluent young gay men. This followed Burberry’s successful marketing of an earlier clothing line based on David Hockney’s artwork. The success of the Chatwin collection is underscored by celebrity endorsements including one by David Bowie, who placed *The Songlines* as one of his 100 “favourite” books. (<https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/fashion/fashion.../burberrys-ode-to-bruce-chatwin/>; Six-Piece Bruce Chatwin Book Set | Burberry | WishList | Burberry, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/390054017720026881/>, 7 Jun. 2019. See Mulshine.

scant interest to him. Rather than engaging with the Australian Central desert as a unique space, he seems to wrestle only with his own ideas about nomadism and singing. It was as if he conceptualized the desert simply as a platform for the actors, while Aboriginal people conceptualize their country as more or less the reverse of that. In fact Chatwin's understanding of desert country contradicts Aboriginal understandings. In her book *Nourishing Terrains*, the anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose has written that "[from an Aboriginal perspective] country is synonymous with life" (10) and also that "[p]eople say country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy" (7).

When, for over a decade, I lived at Lajamanu in the northern Tanami Desert, over time numerous visitors who arrived from overseas or from large Australian cities, for example Sydney or Melbourne, came to stay with me. Some commented on their initial, sometimes continuing and profound disorientation in what they perceived to be a vast, drab, empty space. In places close to Lajamanu it is possible to take a three hundred and sixty degree view of sparsely distributed flora, anthills and ochre-red earth (see fig. 3 and 4). It was perhaps a similar experience for early navigators sailing the world's oceans.

As an example, when an American Summer of Institute of Linguistics (SIL)<sup>10</sup> missionary arrived in Lajamanu in the early 1980s, she found the open terrain disturbing. Having lived in New York for most of her life, the seemingly endless panorama comprising miles of spinifex grass on the red earth, punctuated by small bushes and large red anthills (termite mounds) deeply affected her. While only living there for a relatively short length of time, there seemed to be no diminution of the young woman's anxiety. In contrast to her former life lived entirely in a New York apartment, in which she said she "didn't even have a pot-plant," she commented that for her the desert flora was evocative of "outer space."

Others too experienced dread at the openness of the country, including a young Japanese woman who visited her friends, a Japanese film crew already in Lajamanu, where their group was engaged in making a film about traditional Warlpiri hunting and gathering. This was the mid-1980s, and the young woman's kenophobia caused her to have a panic attack that I witnessed.

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<sup>10</sup> SIL is a mostly Protestant, US-based, global missionary body specializing in Bible translation in the third world. All SIL are also co-members of Wycliffe Bible Translators.

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**Fig. 3.** View from my Toyota 4WD troop carrier on the rough bush track, close to Lajamanu, c. 1982. Photograph: Christine Nicholls.



**Fig. 4.** View from my Toyota 4WD troop carrier on the rough bush track on the almost 700 kilometre single vehicle width “road” between Lajamanu and Katherine, c.1982. Photograph: Christine Nicholls.

While Chatwin had previously spent time in desert areas on other continents, there were important differences. Genuinely “nomadic groups” live in parts of Africa and the Middle East. Further to this, Chatwin revealed nil understanding that desert people, including the Warlpiri among whom I lived, regarded the so-called “desert” as their economic base, requiring continuous rigorous labour on their part. As Aboriginal people did not travel with herds of animals that constituted their major economic base, the land itself was their economic foundation.

Moreover, their travelling practices were light-years away from the form of aimless wandering Chatwin evokes in *Songlines*, represented as either “nomadism” or “man’s restlessness.” Desert people did not walk for pleasure or to mitigate innate restiveness: Aboriginal walking was *work* that they depended on to stay alive.

### THE ECONOMY, BABY

To elaborate more fully on the latter, at the time Bruce Chatwin jetted into Australia, many Aboriginal people, in the desert or elsewhere in Australia (Rose 43–65) had had their land usurped by colonial incursions. Arriving in Alice Springs, Chatwin could not have failed to notice that Land Rights had become a major issue for Aboriginal people.

There is no mention in *Songlines* that the land that many of the desert people had previously owned had been for eons their major means of production. This land was owned by specific groups of Aboriginal people. Land was Aboriginal people’s foundational means of production and thus of survival. It was from their own land that they extracted food and water.

Frederick Rose (1915–91), a London-born, Cambridge educated anthropologist and zoologist who migrated to Australia in 1937 to conduct anthropological fieldwork in a classical Aboriginal society, elucidated on this matter. A Marxist, Rose was among the first non-Aboriginal persons in either of the latter disciplines to recognize the land as the basis of Aboriginal people’s economies, regardless of their location on the island-continent. Rose arrived at the understanding that classical Aboriginal kinship structures and relationships were superstructure founded upon this substrate economic base at a time when most of his fellow anthropologists believed that the aforementioned kinship structures and interactions were the foundation of Aboriginal sociocultural practice. In addition, Rose recognized considerably earlier than the majority of his peers that his colleague and fellow ethnographer, Frederick McCarthy, was correct in stating categorically that, “contrary to popular concept, the Aborigines conserve food when possible, particularly for large gatherings, for trade and

for the time when the raw product is no longer available” (McCarthy qtd. in Rose 57). Rose also draws the conclusion that “[c]onservation of food by the Aborigines was a part of their economy that has not been given the attention it deserves,” flagging the fact that later he intended to extrapolate on McCarthy’s view that Aboriginal people planned for the future via their food preservation techniques (Rose 57).

While it is clear that in pre-contact days the extreme heat of the desert hindered food preservation particularly in the hottest months (once in mid-summer the thermometer I had placed in a shaded area outside my Lajamanu house rose to 57° Celsius, or 134.6° Fahrenheit), Warlpiri people who had grown up in the bush were adept in food conservation in which heat played an important part in some cases, as the following example demonstrates.

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A Warlpiri artist and friend, the late Cecil Johnson Japangardi, in presenting me with a painting of his wanakiji or ngayaki (synonyms for the Australian bush tomato, *Solanum chippendalei*), discussed how in the “old days” Warlpiri would collect fresh wanakiji, thread them through skewers and take those with them while traversing their country. While the wanakiji dehydrated in the heat, transforming them into sun-dried tomatoes, they retained protein and calcium, and were also an excellent source of dietary fibre. In his artwork (fig. 6), in which wanakiji and the turlturpa (“skewers”; see fig. 5 and 6) are depicted, Cecil Japangardi has also represented numerous gender-neutral people as u-shapes sitting on the ground, facing one another, possibly consuming wanakiji. For a portrayal of a Warlpiri child’s depiction of turlturpa, see Jillian Dixon Nakamarra’s painting (fig. 5).

The method used is explained in the Warlpiri dictionary:

“Miyi wanakiji kalu pantirninjarla kirlka-mani. Pantirnilu, pantirnilu, yangka kalu watiyarlalku yirrarni. Rdilypirr-rdilypirr-yinja-yanilki. Kirrirdimpayirla—watiyarla.” “They pierce open the bush tomatoes and clean them out. They go on piercing, piercing, they put them on a stick. They thread them one by one onto a skewer. Onto a long thin stick.” (Laughren, Hale and Warlpiri Lexicography Group 1201)

These lightweight carrying sticks used as skewers, called pinarlingi or turlturpa, were quickly fashioned from thin, strong sticks, making them easy to transport on foot. Sun-dried tomatoes, which were often cleaned out with emu bones before being skewered, provided energizing snacks for Warlpiri while en route across their lands (Japangardi). At the same time, Cecil explained how sometimes the wanakiji would be placed in the sun until dry, then mashed up with water until it became a kind of paste, which was then consumed.





**Fig. 5.** *Young initiated Warlpiri man with kangaroo meat threaded on turlturpa, which he gives to his family when re-uniting with them* (painting by Jillian Nakamarra Dixon assisted by younger Lajamanu school children, 2001). Reproduced from Molly Napurrurla Tasman and Christine Nicholls, *The Pangkarlangu and the Lost Child, A Dreaming Narrative*, Sydney: Working Title, 2002. Reproduced with permission from Harper Collins Australia Pty. Ltd.

Not long after Cecil told me this, I found out that the conservation of kangaroo meat, involving a similar method, was also a Warlpiri practice, particularly useful in the cooler months, providing people with an excellent source of protein with little fat. As the linguistic polyglot Ken Hale (1934–2001)<sup>11</sup> explicated in the Warlpiri dictionary, “*Kuyu-rlangu-jala kalu turlturr-pantirni—marlu-rlangu kujakalu kanyi watiyarlu yangka watiya kirrirdirla, yirmmilki, ngula kalu turlturr-yinyi. Turlturr-pantirni. Yikarla yangka kanyi ngurrju-katu—kulalpa-jana katikarla. Watiyarlalku yangka yikalu turlturr-yinyi marlu—yirmmi.*” The English translation reads:

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Locke Hale, an American linguist of legendary status, worked at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He specialized in and mastered an extraordinary range of mostly endangered and/or previously undocumented indigenous languages, including Navajo and Warlpiri.

It's meat that they put onto a skewer—as when they carry kangaroo meat by means of a stick—like on a long stick—when the meat has been cooked, and they put it on a skewer. Skewer it. So one can carry it better, he doesn't get weighed down by it, as it's on a stick that they skewer the kangaroo meat with. (Laughren, Hale and Warlpiri Lexicography Group 1247–48)

Such practices illustrate one instance of Chatwin's flawed view of Australian Aboriginal people as "nomads." Warlpiri did not take leisurely strolls through the desert, wandering here and there, relying opportunistically on finding sufficient food to eat and water to drink. Central Australian Aboriginal people's approach was rigorous. Their expertise in sourcing and conserving food where possible, along with necessarily disciplined route taking, belie such characterization.

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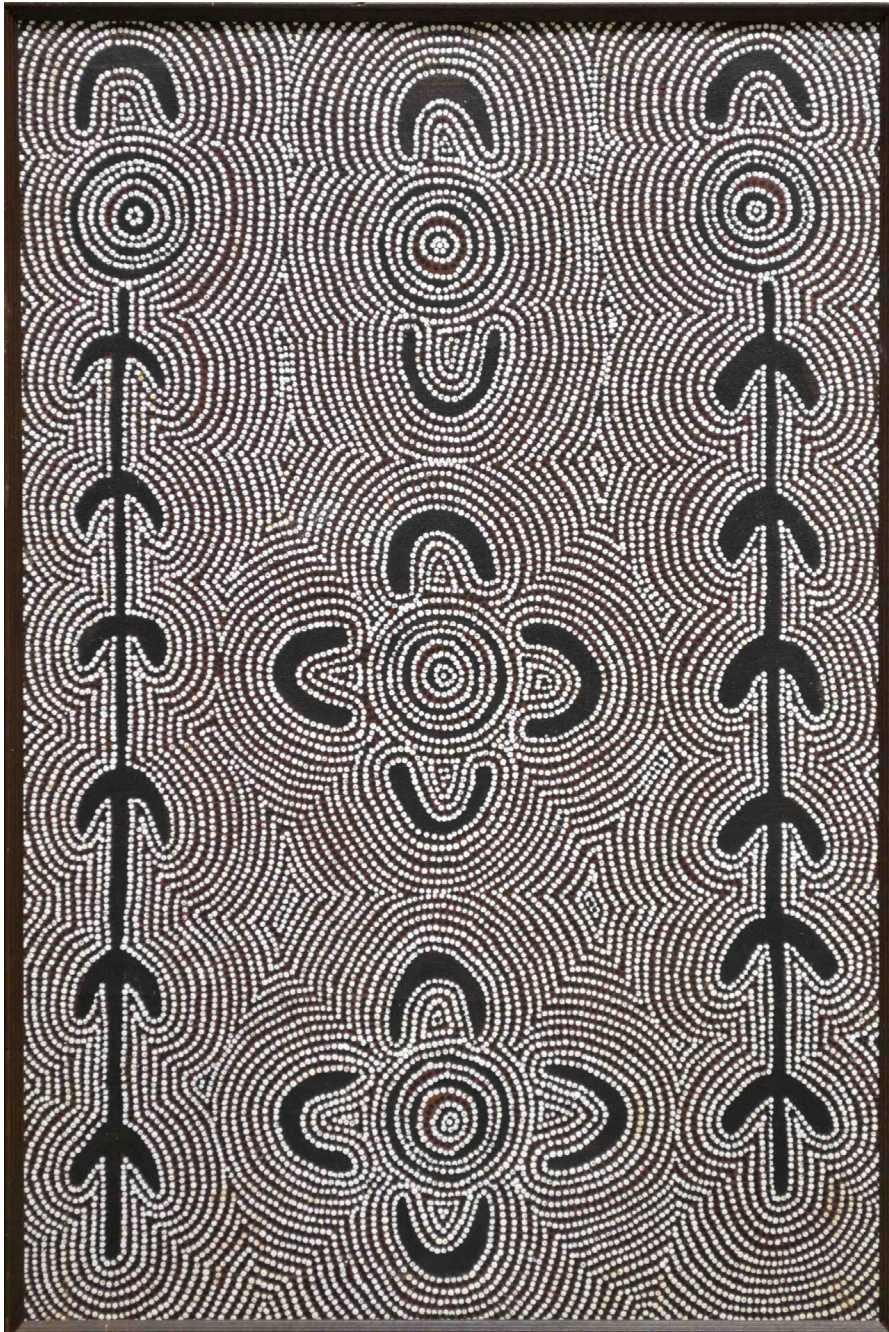
Chatwin was the one who could afford, in all senses of the word, to go on "walkabout" wherever and whenever he felt so inclined, at any pace. This was a non-essential luxury and line of action that Aboriginal people in desert regions simply could not afford. Loss of life would have been the result. Unlike Chatwin, desert people did not go on lengthy walks electively. This view will be developed in the section that follows this one.

What else is wrong with Chatwin's theory about Aboriginal "nomadic" travel, as he applies it to the Central Desert Aboriginal groups represented in *Songlines*? The short answer to this is "a great deal." To begin, Australian desert people (and other Aboriginal groups) are in fact *not* nomads. The primary definition of "nomad" cited in Oxford English dictionary online reads as follows: "A member of a people that travels from place to place to find fresh pasture for its animals and has no permanent home."

The term's origin, according to the Oxford Dictionary Online, is stated as being from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century: from French *nomade*, via Latin from Greek *nomas*, nomad: "roaming in search of pasture," from the base of *nemein*: "to pasture." Chatwin's loose, populist understanding of nomadism apropos of Aboriginal people is misleading. That this misinformation has confused some readers, including John Verlenden, becomes obvious in the following passage. Verlenden, writing an article apropos of *Songlines*, stated that:

The [Australian] aboriginals [sic], of course, were nomadic. They drove their stock around their given plots of land following rigidly constructed topographic surveys composed of songs. Instead of being honored for coming up with a system of aesthetic and mathematically sophisticated world-knowledge, they were marginalized. (Verlenden, n.pag.)





**Fig. 6.** The late Cecil Johnson Japangardi, Warlpiri, Lajamanu, NT, *Wanakiji* or *Ngayaki Jukurpa* (“*Bush Tomato*” or “*Wild Tomato*” *Dreaming*), c. 1988, acrylic on canvas, 92 x 60 cm; © the artist’s estate Lajamanu, permission courtesy of Warnayaka Art, Lajamanu.



Given what Chatwin wrote in *Songlines*, Verlenden's interpretation is valid, and his use of the phrase "plot of land" (also from Chatwin's book) is equally telling. The word "plot" in relation to land derives originally from Old English and into Middle English, meaning a "small parcel or piece of land," and applies to agricultural societies, not hunter-gatherers.

Equally, there is no evidence that Australian Aboriginal people, over a period of occupancy of this island-continent of more than 65,000 years prior to colonization by the British, ever "drove stock" around "given plots of land following rigidly constructed topographic surveys composed of songs." While the same dictionary defines a secondary, more recent, populist usage of a nomad as "[a] person who does not stay long in the same place; a wanderer" ("Nomad"), this describes Bruce Chatwin himself, rather than Australian Aboriginal people. Australian Aboriginal people were hunter-gatherers, typically travelling light, accessing water, harvesting fruits and vegetables and hunting game.

O'Dea et al. write that the "successful survival [of Aboriginal people as hunter-gatherers] depended on a comprehensive knowledge of the flora and fauna of their territory" (233). Further to this, as Lewis writes, Aboriginal prowess in terrestrial navigation was premised on the fact "that there is no such thing as a featureless landscape" (37) and that "[m]oreover, in *physical* orientation, the *spiritual* world, manifested in terrestrial sacred sites and Dreaming tracks, would appear to be the primary reference" (37). This was flagged earlier, when Chatwin's undefined conceptualization of "nomadism" and walking praxis was compared with that of classical Aboriginal people.

So, rather than regarding Chatwin's irreconcilable belief systems as a form of creative dissonance that "*challenge[s]* hegemonic ways of seeing" (Palmer 311), a central point in his otherwise convincing argument, from my secular, eighth generation Australian perspective, Palmer's account begs the question. While one can accept the significance of Chatwin's substrate Englishness and the formative role that Christianity played in his early socialization, it seems apparent that he was unable to step aside sufficiently to accept the genuine otherness of Aboriginal belief systems.

Chatwin's heavily inflected Christianity overrides any of the superstrate titbits of knowledge about Aboriginal people that Chatwin may have acquired mostly from white men while on the hop during his two short visits to Central Australia. Judging by his sense of entitlement, underpinned by economic and social capital, demonstrable in a myriad of ways, Chatwin never found it possible to transcend this background. While the hegemony of the British Empire with respect to the colonies had waned by the time Chatwin was born, the male public schools in Britain continued to espouse similar colonial attitudes, class hierarchies and ideas to those that had informed the colonial era.

While Bruce Chatwin and Salman Rushdie were travelling together in the Northern Territory, the former discussed his songlines concept with his friend. Rushdie would later inform Nicholas Shakespeare that

[w]hile he [Rushdie] responded to the metaphor, Rushdie distrusted Bruce's anthropological accuracy. "Bruce's vision is that this is a continuous song disgorged while walking through a landscape whose creation it describes; if you walk at 6 m.p.h. the song will describe what you see. If you think about this for five minutes, it's the longest song ever, much longer than *The Iliad*. It's true, the song tells of the creation myth in a few verses, but it doesn't create an exact relationship. He was trying to make it more exact than it is. I asked him, 'What happens when the stories cross? Is there a grid?' He didn't have the answer." (Shakespeare 435)

To conclude this section, Palmer may have put forward a more convincing argument had Chatwin never before "gone into the desert" prior to writing about Australian Aboriginal people. As noted earlier, Chatwin had done so in Africa and the Middle East for lengthy periods on occasions prior to his quest to understand the terrestrial navigation prowess of Central Australian Aboriginal people.

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#### CHATWIN ON WALKABOUT: OCCIDENTAL INDIVIDUALISM AND RAMBLING ON

Chatwin's *raison d'être* for walking solo had virtually nothing in common with classical<sup>12</sup> Aboriginal walking in the desert. The foremost differences are economic. Flowing on from that, walking is conceptualized very differently by people in economically privileged "Western" societies and those of hunter-gatherer desert Aborigines, a matter to be expanded upon further.

Central and Western Desert Aboriginal people were hunter-gatherers. As O'Dea et al. write, Aborigines derived

their diet from a wide range of uncultivated plant foods and wild animals. The composition and diversity of the food supply, and the relative proportions of plant and animal foods, were greatly influenced by the season of the year and the geographic locations. (234)

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<sup>12</sup> In this article I deliberately use the word "classical" in contradistinction to "traditional" because "classical" has for the most part been restricted to the context of the achievements and high art of Western cultures, notably Latin and Greek accomplishments. The word "traditional" has also been discussed by Hobsbawm and Ranger as largely "invented," in that in the western world much of what is regarded as "traditional" is in fact very recent. See Hobsbawm and Ranger.

The authors add that “[s]urvival depended on an intimate and detailed knowledge of the land, and the impact of the annual cycle of seasonal changes on the flora and fauna of their territory” (White; Hiatt and Jones; Kirk qtd. in O’Dea et al. 234). While O’Dea et al. underestimate the extent of the Aboriginal food storage economy, which has more recently been a greater focus of research (see, for example Pascoe’s *Dark Emu*, despite Pascoe’s possible overgeneralization of the extent of this practice by focusing on a particularly well-watered and relatively cool geographic area). O’Dea also points out that food collection was undertaken by smallish extended family groups or bands of Aboriginal people. Only in exceptional circumstances did desert people walk alone.

Solitary walking—and also, more recently, driving alone into the desert regions—was, and still is, a rarity from the perspective of Aboriginal desert people. Unaccompanied walking in the desert regions is considered dangerous and Warlpiri people who do so are thought to be “warunga” (mad; deranged) either temporarily or permanently for doing so (Jeannie Napurrurla; Valerie Napanangka). Napanangka was specifically commenting on an occasion when a middle-aged Warlpiri woman disappeared for several days, after walking alone into semi-arid country near Lajamanu. This alarmed the entire community.

It needs to be made clear *why* Central and Western Desert people “foot-walked” (to use their Aboriginal English term) their country—arid or semi-arid estates that extend over vast tracts of country in Australia’s interior desert region. This resulted from sheer economic necessity. Far from wandering aimlessly or looking for enlightenment, as implied by Chatwin’s elective “nomadism,” Warlpiri and other desert people (and elsewhere) were obliged to travel in annual cycles over their country to procure seasonally available flora including bush fruit and vegetables, and most importantly, water.

In this they were dependent on their pre-existing comprehensive knowledge of the times and places where fauna would likely come into season during the annual cycle. This was underpinned by complex kinship systems via which people developed specialized expertise in botany and zoology, including detailed knowledge about specific species and subspecies, understanding the properties of the latter, identifying and conserving them. Kinship rights and obligations also apply to land ownership, from which intellectual copyright over songs and narratives flowed; they were not sung as a kind of post-hoc libretto to accompany the musical notation of a specific tract of land, as implied by Chatwin’s notion of songlines, but developed over eons of knowledge acquisition acquired experientially, the bottom line of which was survival in harsh country. The songs were mnemonics reflecting the people’s economically-underpinned travels—and more.

In "Travel as Performed Art" American-born sociologist Judith Adler proposes that "the reproduction and modification of distinctive travel styles be examined in terms of the social worlds of their producers" (1373). She notes that

[t]ravel undertaken and executed with a primary concern for the meanings discovered, created, and communicated as persons move through geographical space in stylistically specified ways can be distinguished from travel in which geographical movement is merely incidental to the accomplishment of other goals. (Adler 1368)

I would further argue that distinctive travel styles to a greater extent reflect the *economic* realities and worlds of their producers, which in turn bring to bear *secondary*, flow-on effects on people's *social* worlds. While somewhat more than incidental to the books he published on his exploits, Chatwin's modus operandi in relation to his long treks, his aforementioned "elective nomadism," meant he could take breaks when he felt so inclined. Chatwin's major focus on "the meanings discovered" in his globetrotting jaunts is as dissimilar as it is possible to be from the Warlpiri or other desert people's daily necessity to walk: apropos of the latter group, they had no other options. The history of British walking and relatively recent research about specific walking practices also illuminates social class differences within Chatwin's own sociocultural and economic demesne.

The British cultural geographer Tim Edensor makes the dual points that "the rise of excursive walking in the [British] Romantic era is part of the development of modern corporeal reflexivity" ("Walking" 82), and that this superseded the idea of walking as the dominant form of transportation, which gave way to walking as a leisure activity.

Chatwin's "travel style" was attributable to his conservative-leaning, middle-to-upperclass English background and public school education, but most of all, to the economic advantage that gave him the wherewithal for these excursions. His travels were also greatly enabled by his marriage to Elizabeth Chanler, an American from "old money." In the course of Chatwin's walking adventures, as the stay-at-home wife and farmer, Elizabeth Chatwin bailed out her husband financially and in other ways.

Chatwin's walking adventures included multiple, mostly brief, sexual encounters with men (Shakespeare; Shakespeare and Elizabeth Chatwin). Chatwin's walking was not the result of poverty or political persecution, nor was it economically underpinned migration; and it was not an economically-based decision compelling him to join an army or mercenary group. It was entirely voluntary. It licensed Chatwin's adventures of sexual identity. While Chatwin justified this freely made choice as being the

essential *raison d'être* underpinning “man’s” restlessness, it enabled him to exercise a significant part of himself that he did not wish to disclose to his immediate family or certain friends: his homosexuality.

This does not imply criticism of Chatwin’s sexuality per se, nor disapproval of his decision to hide it from specific persons. At that time, this revelation undoubtedly shook others greatly, including his pious Catholic wife who may have been aware of his sexuality but not about the extent of his adultery, when this came to light via mass media announcing his premature death from AIDS in 1989 (Shakespeare).

While Judith Adler does not reference Chatwin in any articles, she throws considerable light on his ambulatory praxis in her observations that walking of any kind in the western world was originally an almost exclusively male activity, although over time it became the province of rich, leisured persons of both genders (see Adler’s “Youth on the Road”).<sup>13</sup> In a later article Adler elaborated on walking in the western world as a “performative” practice among those with economic capital, which the walkers are able to transform into a form of social capital, although this is inferred rather than stated explicitly:

Non-repeatable encounters with strangers more easily serve metonymic functions delivering unambiguous exemplificatory knowledge of “the Frenchman,” “Italy,” “the Third World,” or even “humanity,” than the multiplicity of open-ended and complex contacts of life in a home territory. Observations and experiences occurring only once in a lifetime, or even only once every year, gain in intensity and (like “important” cultural texts) function as relatively abstract signifiers open to changing interpretation and use. Paradoxically disorientation and lack of knowledge pertinent to a travel site only further free encounter to be seized as the stuff of private dream and enacted myth. (Adler, “Travel as Performed Art” 1383)

England has a particularly extensive travel history, inclusive of the colonization of distant places (for example Australia) that made up the British Empire. That long-term British history stretches back to before the Middle Ages. “Rambling” is another phenomenon that Edensor describes as “collective walking.” Edensor believes that concept of rambling entered common usage c. the 1920s or 30s (personal communication with the author). Edensor also points out that rambling in a group is regarded as a markedly different—and inferior—pursuit vis-à-vis solitary walking,

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<sup>13</sup> In this article Adler makes the point that both walking and tramping were overwhelmingly male-dominated activities up until relatively recently, with the advent of cultural tourism in the western world and beyond.

pointing out that “[t]hose who advocate solitary walking place it above these communal [collective walking] values” (“Walking” 89). On the same page he notes that solitary walking is a practice that hints at “the development of a refined bodily disposition, a claim that becomes more explicitly status-oriented when solitary walking is more crudely promoted as superior in contrast to collective walking practices.”

The radical individualism that Chatwin demonstrated in his solo walks is highly valorized in the Western world. Tellingly, such ventures are only accessible to the relatively wealthy—or mega-wealthy. Solo sailing around the world, ascending Mount Everest, golf championships, marathon individual walks, these are the playthings of members of affluent societies. In the context of the Western world, and increasingly elsewhere in the developed world, this concept also applies to solo concerts and other performances, including art exhibitions of individual artist’s works, which are regarded as superior to group shows.

Such pursuits are the cultural products of socio-economic premises that differ greatly from the “corporate” cultures of classical Aboriginal people in which the group is recognized as being more significant than the individual. Chatwin’s ethnocentrism, which seems to have remained intact despite his travels, proved a disabling block to his developing any real understanding of this defining cultural difference.

45

## MISOGYNY AND CHATWIN

In a number of encounters with non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal women, Chatwin expresses curmudgeonly misogyny that exceeds the aforementioned ethnocentrism. A couple of examples relating to his representation of Aboriginal women will suffice here. In Katherine, a violent colonial town in the Northern Territory in the 1980s, largely defined by its racism, Chatwin entered the rough tin-shed pub in the main street, a pick-up joint where white men paid as little as \$5.00 for fleeting sexual encounters with Aboriginal prostitutes. These took place at night while patrons were standing outside in the shadows of its almost unlit beer garden—at the back of the premises.

Chatwin recalls that “a black whore pressed her nipples against my shirt and said, ‘You want me darling?’” (*Songlines* 37). Further to this, when visiting a place called “Skull Creek Camp” with Arkady, the pair parked under some ghost gum trees, and found that “[t]wo full-bosomed women, one in a loose green smock, lay asleep on the porch. ‘Mavis,’ Arkady called. Neither of the fat snoring creatures stirred” (*Songlines* 86). Later the same day, continues Chatwin: “Mavis heaved herself to

her feet and went off lumpily to wake her husband. She needn't have bothered" (*Songlines* 87).

Chatwin's description of the woman in the pub as a "whore" and the others as slothful, bovine creatures reveals just how little he grasped the existential circumstances of peoples whose economic foundation had been thoroughly usurped by the colonizers, leaving them with no recourse but to enter the cash economy by any means whatsoever. Neither is there any consciousness on his part as to why Aboriginal men and women (both genders) might gain a lot of weight. This was a direct result of their enforced sedentarization and diaspora brought about by colonial land theft, notwithstanding pressure from a minority of enlightened missionaries and non-Aboriginal people, whose concerns about the ill-effects of colonization on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people were largely ignored by the authorities. Compounding this was the fact that the stores in the outback settlements mostly sold flour, sugar and sweet drinks, with little or no fresh fruit and vegetables available. The white shopkeepers, and beneficiaries of the "Aboriginal dollar" tendered as their main excuse the cost of transportation of healthy food over distances that were sometimes in excess of a thousand kilometres.

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## CONCLUSIONS

In a 2007 article, I referred to *Songlines* as "inferior and overrated" (Nicholls 96), a position from which I do not resile. In fact, the subsequent impact and global influence of Chatwin's under-researched populist account has hardened that earlier view. As Pfister wrote more than two decades ago, "there is surprisingly little critically incisive writing on Chatwin" (253). This, for the most part, remains so today.

In *Songlines*, Chatwin was rehearsing his long-term theories about walking and nomadism. He regarded these views, self-interestedly perhaps, as universal in application. In universalizing this he is not the first or only person to become captive to an essentialist theory purporting to explain everything. So blinded was he by his own cultural presuppositions and precepts that he seemed incapable of understanding that the urge to walk is not based on a single, homogenous, innate causal factor. There are various explanations for its aetiology, all of which are entirely dependent on the economic and social worlds of the walker. Apropos of the latter, he failed to comprehend the broader social, economic and political situation of the Aboriginal people that he encountered.

The book is a testament to that mis-recognition. Chatwin also compresses an entire epistemology into the "Songlines" concept that he



appropriated from others. In *Songlines* he fails to expand on or develop this core concept, leaving it largely undefined. One could argue that *Songlines* not only represents a form of epistemological violence apropos of those Aboriginal people represented, but is also a reflection of Chatwin's overly hasty and erroneous assumptions. In the end *Songlines* sheds more light on Chatwin himself: others act as exotic backdrop, or scenery. The book is an expression of Chatwin's ontological position, and the hierarchical nature of the culture that shaped him, rather than a masterful unveiling of "the truth" about the Aboriginal people in Australia's Central Desert, and their *raison d'être* for walking and singing.

Does this matter? Yes, in my view, because this book continues to mislead millions of people, including those who have never encountered an Australian Aboriginal person and have no means of accessing more accurate accounts. They rely on *Songlines* as speaking truth to power. And they've been conned. Chatwin's "wild roguery" in life and in art, as he "ranne" (past tense of the Middle English verb "runne") *all countries*, might make for a cracking light read, but it does not succeed in enlightening its readers about desert people's core concepts or life-ways.

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Of Grim Witches  
and Showy Lady-Devils:  
Wealthy Women in Literature and Film

# ABSTRACT

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Imagining super rich women in the real and fictional world has long been a struggle. Those few depictions that do exist are scattered across time periods and literary genres, reflecting the legal restrictions that, at different points in time, would not allow women to accumulate assets independent of the patriarchal forces in their lives. The scarcity of extremely wealthy women in literature and film is confirmed by *Forbes* magazine's list of the fifteen richest fictional characters that features forty different fictional men and only nine women, with never more than two female characters nominated in a single year.

This article explores the depiction of three exceptionally wealthy women: Cruella de Vil in *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1956) by Dodie Smith, Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* (1861) by Charles Dickens, and the figure of the stepmother in various adaptations of "Cinderella." I demonstrate how the protagonists' wealth allows them to manipulate others and disconnect themselves from patriarchal and societal expectations. Further, I argue that these affluent antagonists are "rogued" by their respective narratives, highlighting their perceived anti-feminine and emasculating behaviour resulting in a mode of narration that greedily gazes at and shames their appearances and supposed unattractiveness. While this genealogy of rich rogues reiterates the narrow scope of imagining wealthy women on the page and on the screen, there are moments in the narratives that disrupt stereotypical depictions of these wealthy characters who defy the labels imposed on them.

**Keywords:** wealthy women, rich rogues, Cinderella, Miss Havisham, Cruella de Vil.

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“What a strange name *de Vil* is,’ said Mr Dearly. ‘If you put the two words together, they make *devil*. Perhaps Cruella’s a lady-devil” (Smith 14). The lady-devil that features so prominently in Dodie Smith’s *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* has become the embodiment of the villainous wealthy woman, so wealthy in fact that she is thought to be one of the nine richest female characters ever created. This article investigates female characters who are not just wealthy but possess such enormous riches that they are considered to be among the wealthiest people imagined in literature and film. *Forbes* magazine have published a list detailing the fifteen richest fictional characters since 2002. What is compelling about these “Fictional 15,” as they are called by the magazine, is that over the years the list has featured 40 different fictional men but only nine women and no more than two female characters were nominated in a single year.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, only one woman is among the wealthiest fifteen people in 2019 (Dolan and Kroll). While there is an abundance of literature concerned with women and wealth from Antiquity through the Middle Ages to studies of the gender-related financial difficulties women face nowadays, very little attention has been paid thus far to representations of *extremely* wealthy women in literature and film. One might partly attribute this to their scarce appearances which see them scattered across multiple centuries and several genres, both on the page and on the screen.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In order for a character to qualify for the *Forbes* “Fictional 15,” they have to be an authored fictional creation, a rule which seeks to exclude mythological, folkloric and magical characters, and most importantly, she or he must be known, both within their fictional world and by their audience, for being rich. In a desperate attempt to create some sort of gender balance, the Tooth Fairy, whose gender remains disputable, was added to the list venturing into (anglophone) folkloric territory. Once a character’s pronounced wealth is established, their assets are based on an analysis of their source of income and are valued against known real-world commodity and share price movements (Ewalt). Through this mode of assessment the following women (in order of appearance) can be found on the *Forbes* lists over the last ten years: Cruella de Vil (*The Hundred and One Dalmatians* by Dodie Smith), Jo Bennett (TV series *The Office*), Lady Tremaine (“Cinderella”), Lara Croft (video game *Tomb Raider*), Lisbeth Salander (*The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson), Lucille Bluth (TV series *Arrested Development*), Mom (TV series *Futurama*), Princess Toadstool (*Super Mario Bros.* video games), and the Tooth Fairy.

<sup>2</sup> The texts and film adaptations discussed in this article are naturally influenced by and reflect the historical circumstances of their times that would allow women access to wealth only to varying degrees. These legal and societal limitations also had an impact on how wealthy women were imagined at different points in time and across different parts of the world. An excellent more comprehensive overview on women and wealth is provided, for example,

The “*Forbes* 15” and the lack of female contestants is merely a symptom of a much more fundamental problem which is “a small pool of candidates. For some reason authors, screenwriters, directors, and comic book artists haven’t been creating many ultrarich female characters” (Howard). What transpires thus from the “Fictional 15” and its real-world equivalent is that wealth is not just a gendered issue but one that is even more deeply racialized. The distribution of wealth, in the real and fictional realm, is deeply symptomatic of a system that not only privileges whiteness but also constantly reproduces it. All fictional women found on the *Forbes* list, and the three characters discussed in this article, are white women who benefit from their whiteness. While there is no doubt that from a gendered perspective, women find themselves in an infinitely more disadvantaged position in comparison to their male counterparts in all walks of financial life, white women still stand an infinitely better chance to acquire wealth overall, if predominantly through their connections to rich white men. This still holds true in 2019 when not a single non-white billionaire of either sex can be found among the world’s ten richest people.

In this article, I want to explore the depiction of three exceptionally wealthy female rogues whose (male) source of wealth is no longer a focal point in the narrative: Lady Tremaine in various adaptations of “Cinderella” (1698, 1812, 1950, 2015), Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* (1861) by Charles Dickens and its two TV adaptations (2011, 2012), and Cruella de Vil based on Dodie Smith’s *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* which was later adapted by Disney (1961, 1996). The women’s perceived roguery seemingly manifests itself in their mere existence, as their wealth allows them to creatively manipulate others and disconnect themselves from male and societal expectations to a large extent. This perceived anti-feminine and emasculating behaviour is met with anger and disdain by other characters, and the wealthy women’s attributed roles as villains become central to their depiction, resulting in a mode of narration that greedily gazes at and shames their appearances. While this genealogy of rich female rogues partly reiterates the narrow scope of imagining wealthy women on the page and on the screen, there are moments in these narratives that disrupt stereotypical depictions of these wealthy characters who defy the labels imposed on them and instead lend themselves to a proto-feminist reading of female prosperity. While Cruella de Vil and Lady Tremaine make multiple appearances in the “Fictional 15,” one of the most

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by *Women and their Money 1700–1950: Essays on Women and Finance* (2009), edited by Anne Laurence, Josephine Maltby and Janette Rutterford, containing particularly relevant contributions for the historical circumstances surrounding all three texts.

widely recognized prosperous literary figures, Miss Havisham, narrowly misses the list every time, since there is doubt whether “she really [is] the Victorian equivalent of a billionaire” (Noer). While the selection of texts and protagonists is disparate, covering an array of genres and time periods, it also reveals an astonishingly similar narrative treatment of wealthy women. Their relegation to the realm of children’s literature and folk talks, for example, reiterates their inconceivable existence, be this for the historical circumstances that, in the Western world, would often deny women the right own of property or the patriarchal structures that would bar women from taking up roles of power.

This article focuses on the ways in which the protagonists are “rogued” by their respective texts rather than being intentional rogues. All narratives discussed, except Dodie Smith’s, were penned by men, *Great Expectations* and *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* also feature male narrative voices, and the film adaptations were all directed by men. I thus read the characters as projected rogues since it is the texts’ masculinist disposition that exasperates the women’s villainous, untrustworthy, and undesirable qualities brought about by their exceptional wealth that sees them freed from some of the societal pressures of their times. Throughout this article, I follow Kirsten Backstrom’s understanding of the rogue as a woman outside patriarchal expectations. She explains that

[w]hen men determine the standard . . . any independent woman is a rogue. Any feminist, any lesbian, any woman of color is some sort of rogue. . . . A rogue is a woman who challenges assumptions. Any rigid definition is dangerous. If you can’t change, you won’t survive. . . . Her uniqueness arises from contradictions; she is not always right. Her motives are selfish and selfless. She is more than the sum of her parts. (Backstrom qtd. in Overall 54)

It is the room that is given to ambiguity that is particularly striking in this passage, an ambiguity that I argue is purposefully obscured in the rather one-sided depiction of the affluent female antagonists. As will be illustrated in the subsequent discussion, there are recurring narrative patterns in the texts and film adaptations “rogueing” the wealthy women along three major axes.

Firstly, the prosperous protagonists subvert the patriarchal structures of marriage which they manage to bend to their own advantage or substitute with a life of self-determined spinsterhood. This conscious rejection is met with an almost obsessive fixation on their bodies and faces, highlighting their masculine and unmotherly features in an attempt to undermine their independence and present them as undesirable women.

While Cruella's husband plays a very minor role in Smith's original novel, her marital status is completely erased in the subsequent two Disney film adaptations, Miss Havisham has remained unmarried all her life after an unlucky almost-wedding, and Lady Tremaine is widowed at least once and even after her second marriage she is imagined alone. In a brief exploration of wealthy characters, Daphne Merkin eventually comes to the conclusion that "[w]hat is absent, it seems to me, from our sense of the wealthy, is an understanding of their flesh-and-bloodness." It is telling that this conclusion is reached after only male characters were taken into consideration, given that the three wealthy women studied in this article are unable to escape the narrative infatuation with their "flesh-and-bloodness."

Secondly, the narratives emphasize the dichotomy between income and wealth and therefore between activity and passivity. "Wealth and income are sometimes related," Mariko Lin Chang points out, "but they are not the same [since] income refers to the amount of money received by an individual or household during a specific period of time [whereas] wealth, or net worth, refers to the total value of [a person's] financial and nonfinancial assets minus debts" (3). In the texts, the protagonists' source of income remains largely obscured, leaving these rich women to occupy the position of passive owners of vast fortunes instead of showing them either managing their assets or acquiring them through hard and skilled labour. This reflects of course the legal limitations that women, such as Lady Tremaine and Miss Havisham, faced in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century England that made it almost impossible for them to accumulate assets outside of patriarchal relations. Equally wealthy men with similarly acquired riches are granted a much more nuanced description in the narratives, underscoring the historical implication that women *are* rich rather than capable of *acquiring* wealth through skilled labour.

Finally, the narratives feature at least one figure of the anti-rogue: a female character who incarnates the ideal image of a woman, within the text and its time, and serves to not only amplify the rich female protagonists' womanly shortcomings but also to incur their wrath, confirming their witch-like and irrational nature.

One of those wrathful characters features prominently in the "Cinderella" tale's version that is most commonly known today—the good-natured Cinderella who is abused by a cold-hearted stepmother and marries the prince against all odds—dates back to a French tale written by Charles Perrault in 1698, although the story itself has a long history with the earliest known version dating back to 9<sup>th</sup>-century China. Even in that earliest configuration, the stepmother is so cruel that she eats the pet fish Cinderella sought comfort in after the passing of both her parents (Cullen 57–58). Through the centuries, the figure of the evil stepmother

has gained momentum; she has become meaner, more manipulative, richer, and most importantly, she has gained significant narrative space in the Western version of the fairy tale since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Perrault's rendering of "Cinderella" also formed the basis for the 1950 cinematic Disney adaptation that would "eclipse" all other versions of the tale (Cullen 57) and in many ways continues the Victorian tradition of using fairy tales to pursue pedagogical goals by promoting conservative, heteronormative and anti-feminist notions of family life, relationships and women's rights — a frequent site of criticism (Byrne and McQuillan 1). While the unnamed stepmother does not feature prominently in Perrault's version or the later, also immensely popular, retelling by the Grimm Brothers, she functions as the archetype of the jealous woman who sets Cinderella up for a life of misery she eventually triumphantly manages to escape. The stepmother's quiet overshadowing of the tale results in a disembodied version of the wealthy matriarch ultimately providing Disney with the opportunity to reinvent the character as the raging rogue.

Perrault opens his tale with the introduction of an unnamed widowed gentleman who took "the proudest and haughtiest woman who had ever been seen" (130) as his second wife. The reader does not learn about her background, but it can be assumed that by the time of her second marriage to Cinderella's wealthy father, she must have accumulated significant assets. After securing the status of wife, the stepmother "gave free rein to her temper" (Perrault 130), revealing her deceitful nature which is portrayed to stem from a deep hatred of Cinderella who is said to make her and her daughters look "even more detestable" (Perrault 130) in comparison. The stepmother's rage is one of the most direct expressions of disdain at the character of the anti-rogue and the ideal of female submissiveness. The stepmother is absent in the narrative thereafter but remains indirectly present since her two daughters "resembled her in everything" (Perrault 130). While their physical attributes are never addressed, the narrative juxtaposes Cinderella's rundown exterior and her kind and gentle disposition with the sisters' lavish dresses and rotten character. With the arrival of "Aschenputtel" by the Grimm Brothers in 1812, the figure of the stepmother becomes increasingly brutalized, referring to her stepdaughter as "this terrible and useless thing" (69), and later encouraging her own daughters to mutilate their bodies by cutting off parts of their feet in order to fit the glass slipper. Similarly to Perrault's version, the two sisters are described as having "beautiful features but proud, nasty, and wicked hearts" (Grimm Brothers 69) and the juxtaposition of the good and obedient anti-rogue Cinderella and later on the Fairy Godmother with the unmotherly matriarch takes precedent once more.



Disney's twelfth animated film is based on Perrault's "Cendrillon" but in many ways channels the much more forceful nature of the stepmother as imagined by the Grimm Brothers, paving the way for the wealthy Lady Tremaine, "a woman of good family," who has since become an iconic representation of the evil stepmother figure in modern times. Lady Tremaine is a cold, confident and calculating woman who seems fully aware of the patriarchal mechanisms operating within her society and has learned to manipulate them in her favour. Widowed twice in the film, her only objectives are to further extend her power and grow her wealth, which she hopes to achieve by strategically marrying off her daughters. In this quest, Cinderella presents an obstacle since her hyperfeminine presence highlights the Tremaine women's more masculine and awkward features that are exaggerated in the film to a breaking point. In her article on transgendered villains in Disney films, Amanda Putnam asserts that "dramatic and daring, the villains often outperform their heterosexual rivals, setting up a transparent comparison between 'normative' and 'deviant' gendered behaviors, but also connecting the villains' transgenderism with sarcasm, selfishness, cruelty, greed and brutality" (151). She further comments that Lady Tremaine especially is "distanced from femininity" underlined by her facial features whose sharp edges alongside her grey skin colour and menacing eyes should communicate her unmotherly, and thus unfeminine, tendencies which are further highlighted by her fierce rule over the three young women in her household for whom she displays little empathy. While Lady Tremaine does not use physical violence, the pressure she puts on those around her is significant. The gap, however, between Cinderella as the anti-rogue and Lady Tremaine and her "flat-chested and boyish" (Putnam 153) daughters as the unsexed and unattractive rich heiresses becomes the defining narrative focus also in the Disney film. The former's ultra-feminine features are soft and correspond with traditional Western ideas of beauty and throughout the film Cinderella conducts herself gracefully without ever complaining, stoically accepting her fate regardless of the humiliations she endures daily. Lady Tremaine, in contrast, embodies a type of woman whose background is just as privileged as Cinderella's but who, instead of stoic acceptance and complicity, takes on the role of the patriarchal force. In line with Disney's streamlined portrayal of the heterosexual, hyperfeminized and obedient woman that lasted well into the 1990s, Cinderella is eventually rewarded for her conformist behaviour by entering into a marriage with the prince, ultimately fulfilling her destiny of a life of privilege. The 2015 live-action remake, starring Cate Blanchett as Lady Tremaine, shows a significant modernization in the way in which the character is portrayed. Even though she still embodies the abusive and power hungry socialite, she has lost her masculine features and is instead depicted

as a woman of great beauty who is also exceptionally well-dressed and teaches her daughters that “all men are fools.” Overall, however, Disney’s *Cinderella* poses as a rags to riches story, creating an artificial dichotomy between the apparently poor, hard-working and cheerful Cinderella and the rich and cruel Lady Tremaine who does not seem to display any significant skills. Her rogue behaviour is portrayed as her main occupation, but overall it is attempted to depict her as a passive character: she is hardly ever shown running her household or managing her fortune, in fact, we encounter her frequently still in bed when Cinderella is serving her breakfast, thus reiterating the stereotypical passivity of the female recipient of wealth. The woman who has learned to bend the pervasive patriarchal structures in her favour is ultimately punished for her unruly and unwomanly behaviour when she is humiliated by her stepdaughter’s ultimate success, paving the way also for *Great Expectations* and *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* that see their rich rogues disciplined at the end.

Miss Havisham, Charles Dickens’s famous unmotherly rich spinster, also abuses the young people in her care and finds herself frequently “filed away under ‘weird spinsters: various’ [and] retrieve[d...] periodically in her yellowed bridal dress, the light of day shut out from the decaying feast chamber in which she sits. If she is not sitting when we conjure her up, she is burning; a flaming figure” (Thornton 79). Miss Havisham’s ultimate painful death to which is alluded here, evokes, of course, the age-old story of the unruly woman being burned at the stake. Throughout the narrative, parallels are drawn between the prosperous protagonist and her stereotypically disorderly physical appearance and her unkempt hair which makes her appear like “the Witch” (Dickens 77) of her rundown estate in the eyes of the orphan Pip who becomes the playmate for Miss Havisham’s adopted daughter Estelle. It is relatively late in the novel that the reader is informed about Miss Havisham’s past: one learns about her spoiled childhood, her very rich and very proud father (Dickens 164), the jealous half-brother who felt himself tricked out of a large part of his inheritance and set his sister up with a man who left her on their wedding day. Miss Havisham had never been able to move on from the traumatic events of that day, leading her to remain in her wedding dress, a sight so peculiar that Pip scrutinizes her appearance during their first encounter:

She was dressed in rich materials,—satins, and lace, and silks,—all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about. She had not quite

finished dressing, for she had but one shoe on,—the other was on the table near her hand,—her veil was but half arranged, her watch and chain were not put on, and some lace for her bosom lay with those trinkets, and with her handkerchief, and gloves, and some flowers, and a Prayer-Book all confusedly heaped about the looking-glass. (Dickens 52)

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The attention that is given to Miss Havisham's body—from head to toe—becomes a dominant focus in Pip's narrative and thus also how the reader is made to perceive her character. Fully aware of her memorable appearance, Miss Havisham keeps checking her image in the looking-glass which has been interpreted as a sign of her loss of identity (Ciugureanu 353), a notion I disagree with. I read her continuous inspection of her image in the mirror, as well as her firm invitation for others to look at her too, as a crucial moment of transgression: Miss Havisham is neither afraid of nor embarrassed by her ageing face. Her body is a testament to her endurance and the hardship and isolation she has faced throughout her life. Like the two other characters studied in this article, Miss Havisham exhibits typical anti-feminine traits and as “the Witch of the place” (Dickens 77) she is depicted as cold-hearted, unpleasant and lacking substantial maternal instincts. Her unruliness is shown in a general rejection of exchanging pleasantries where she refuses to emanate the womanly warmth and kindness that have so often been denied to her by others, pushing against “the dangerously self-sacrificing model of Victorian womanhood” (Levine 105). She takes particularly unkindly to flattery, especially when it relates to her looks since she rejects the notion of needing to look desirable for the sake of others: “I do not [look well]. I am yellow skin and bone” (Dickens 78) and when she is asked for a favour she immediately declines, asking “Who am I. . . Who am I, for God's sake, that I should be kind?” (Dickens 329). Dickens's novel, similarly to Dodie Smith's narrative, relies on the adolescent Pip as narrator and provides a projection of Miss Havisham through his eyes and at times his “‘topsy-turvy vision’ leads him to read the world in reverse” (Levine 103). While one can definitely find evidence of the male gaze that is ever so present in this Victorian text, it also becomes evident that the relationship between Miss Havisham and her spectators is reciprocal at times. Like Cruella de Vil and Lady Tremaine, Miss Havisham is used to the attention that is paid to her and the power her wealth grants her over others. While she is acutely aware of and disturbed by her visitors' curious gazes, she has already picked out the table “where [she] will be laid when [she is] dead” and everyone “shall come and look at [her]” (Dickens 77). Even though she has chosen a life of solitude, living the life of a recluse at her estate, she refuses to conceal the pain she has endured in the past or accept people's voyeuristic curiosity.

Miss Havisham's atypical behaviour is further highlighted in the novel, just as it is in *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* and "Cinderella," with the introduction of the figure of the anti-rogue. In *Great Expectations*, we are confronted with a "typology of pure and impure women" (Hartog 248) that serves to underscore Miss Havisham's, Mrs Joe's and Estella's predatory behaviour that translates as them lacking "the capacity to love [and] becom[ing] destructive to themselves and men" which is why "they must be held firmly, even violently in check" (Hartog 248). *Great Expectation's* anti-rogue Bidley is described as "the most obliging of girls" (Dickens 66), "never insulting, or capricious" (Dickens 57), as well as "smart" and similarly, the reader witnesses another anti-rogue, Clara, who is "so natural and winning . . . loving, and innocent . . . gentle . . . needing protecting" while remaining "modest" (Dickens 255). The anti-rogues' exemplary behaviour is rewarded with marriage whereas Miss Havisham is completely abandoned and annihilated by fire.

Much of Dickensian criticism concerned with the study of *Great Expectations* has focused on the parallels between Miss Havisham's ageing and failing body and the failing economy at the time. Susan Walsh, for example, notes that "[h]er history as an unmarried heiress conjures up mid-century debates about women's changing roles and financial commitments" while also upholding a certain Victorian "conservationalist nostalgia" (74) for which Donald E. Hall sees Dickens's "defenses regarding effective feminist challenges to patriarchy . . . paying close attention to changing social circumstances allowing gender roles to metamorphose" (185). Along those lines, Miss Havisham, a rich and independent self-determined spinster, is not allowed to succeed but "illustrates a significant sort of female failure" who "refuses to sponsor her male relatives, . . . blocks her financial capital from circulating within the proper channels of investment and trade, thus rendering it economically barren" (Walsh 90). It is above all Miss Havisham's wealth that allows her to choose that life of perceived failure without having to worry about suffering consequences that could seriously impact her chances of survival—for her, money is the cause for her position as a rogue but it also enables her to continue to be that rogue of her own volition. Miss Havisham defies conventions of how a rich female character ought to present herself since her run-down exterior hints at a grandeur that is of the past.

In the 2011 BBC adaptation, Miss Havisham is portrayed by actor Gillian Anderson and the character starts out as a slightly odd, yet attractive middle-aged woman who is presented with perfectly formed curls in her crisp wedding dress. In the course of the three episodes, her gradual mental and physical demise is communicated to the audience by the rapid unravelling of her once carefully looked after hair, leaving it in a state of complete disarray.

The connection between the condition of a woman's hair and virtuousness is, of course, an old one. Karen Stevenson notes that a woman's hair has always been associated with femininity and feminine beauty, and has also been regarded as a sign of virtue, especially as public marker to distinguish a woman from a man, and more importantly, from other less virtuous women such as witches who were usually depicted with wild und unkempt hair (140). The causality between Miss Havisham's messy looks and her rogue behaviour is also reflected in her equally disordered surroundings covered in dust where money seems to be scattered in dirty envelopes around her house, subtly hinting at her assumed financial inaptitude. Crucially, in the BBC adaptation Miss Havisham commits suicide by setting herself on fire while the 2012 adaptation with Helena Bonham Carter presents a much more vulnerable version of Miss Havisham who is desperately begging for Pip's forgiveness when her dress accidentally catches fire and the viewer is presented with a close-up of her burnt and disfigured body echoing Dickens's novel that also saw her stripped of her last wish to have her body displayed with dignity.

Fire also plays a central role in *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* in which Cruella de Vil holds an intense fascination for fire which is used to introduce her early on as a woman with abnormal desires: "Make it blaze for me," she instructs her husband and screams "[l]ovely, lovely" while "clapping her hands with delight" (Smith 14). Dodie Smith's novel intended for a young audience was first published in 1956 and then very successfully adapted by Disney in 1961, bringing about Smith's almost complete erasure as the creator of the popular children's story, which is also reflected in the fact that the first scholarly article concerned with her novel was only published in 2018.<sup>3</sup> Her famous creation of Cruella de Vil, an extremely wealthy woman with a love of fur and a disdain for the animals that provide it, has since become a Disney icon who has served as a model for many female villains. *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* follows the lives of Mr and Mrs Dearly, their two Dalmatians and Cruella de Vil who wants to skin the Dalmatians' puppies and have their fur made into a coat. After the Dearlys refuse to sell the puppies, Cruella hatches a plan to have the dogs kidnapped and after a tumultuous search, they are safely returned to their rightful owners leaving Cruella ridiculed and in voluntary exile. The book and its two most famous Disney adaptations, the 1961 animation and 1996 live-action remake, demonstrate both a regression and an evolution in the portrayal of a rich female villain.

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<sup>3</sup> See Timothy C. Baker's "‘Oh, my dog owns me’: Interspecies Companionship in Dodie Smith and Diana Wynne Jones." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 41.3 (2017): 344–360 (article became available in 2018).

While generally very little information is revealed about Cruella de Vil's past and personal circumstances, the reader does discover that her rogue behaviour can be traced back to her childhood when she was expelled from school for drinking black ink and that she once had wealthy ancestors. The focus on her insubordination and her disregard for societal norms remains a central concern throughout the narrative and is demonstrated when she is first introduced disrupting the narrative when its "peace [is] shattered by an extremely strident motor horn" and a loud and "showy" woman emerges (Smith 8). The narrative heavily relies on simplistic binary descriptions of the characters as they are narrated to the reader through the eyes of the male Dalmatian Pongo who embodies the masculinist voice throughout the children's tale. I argue that one can read the choice to use Pongo's phallogocentric viewpoint as a tool to lay open some of underlying misogynistic undertones of the 1950s. In *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* this becomes especially apparent in the representation of rich individuals when the hypocrisy of the gendered description of wealth is revealed right at the beginning:

Mr Dearly, who had an office in the City, was particularly good at arithmetic. Many people called him a wizard of finance—which is not the same thing as wizard of magic, though sometimes fairly similar. At the time when the story starts he was rather unusually rich for a rather unusual reason. He had done the Government a great service (something to do with getting rid of the national debt) and, as a reward, had been let off his income tax for life. Also the Government had lent him a small house on the Outer Circle of Regent's Park—just the right house for a man with a wife and dogs. (Smith 4)

Mr Dearly's "unusual" richness is not mentioned thereafter in the book, while we never learn of Cruella de Vil's source of wealth or her income, leaving an air of suspicious mystery. The supposed contrast between the two sets of characters is further emphasized by a simplistic binary description putting Mr and Mrs Dearly and Cruella and Mr de Vil at diametrically opposing ends: the former live in a "small house" (Smith 4) whereas Cruella owns "a big house [Hell Hall]" (Smith 8). In the two Disney film adaptations, this contrast between the characters is further heightened by Mr Dearly's, then called Roger Radcliffe, occupation as an impoverished musician and video game animator resulting in a mode of narration that seeks to single out Cruella de Vil as even more cruel, ruthless and corrupted by money. Along with the same gendered stereotypes, the narrator seeks to further highlight Cruella's unruly character by presenting Mrs Dearly as the anti-rogue, the prototype of the ideal woman: "very pretty" (Smith 6) and "very truthful" (Smith 10). Cruella's apparent

physical shortcomings and lavish presentation become a defining force in how she is perceived by those around her who assess her from head to toe:

She was wearing a tight-fitting emerald satin dress, several ropes of rubies, and an absolutely simple white mink cloak, which reached to the high heels of her ruby-red shoes. She had dark skin, black eyes with a tinge of red in them, and a very pointed nose. Her hair was parted severely down the middle and one half of it was black and the other white—rather unusual. (Smith 8)

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Cruella's "unusual" appearance is noted time and again in the narrative as a way to underline her "showy" character. Her confidence in her own appearance is a sign of the freedom and power her richness can offer her since she could not care less what those around her think of possessions she proudly shows off at every opportunity. Even more striking, however, is Cruella's hair which is parted in the middle and half black and half white emblematic of the black-and-white behaviour of women presented in the narrative which leaves very little room for them to occupy positions of ambiguity. Even though Cruella is clearly painted as the rogue of the story, she is given a much more vibrant personality, whereas the reader learns very little about Mrs Dearly who is consistently only mentioned by her married name and only ever seems to make an appearance with her husband. Cruella, in contrast, when asked by Mrs Dearly about her married name informs her that "[her] name is still de Vil" since "[she is] the last of [her] family so [she] made [her] husband change his name to [hers]" (Smith 8). This proto-feminist stance in Smith's book version is removed in the two film versions in which Cruella's status as a rogue spinster declares her unfit for marriage. The theme of marriage and naming more generally is one of the overarching concerns in the original narrative. Cruella's wealth grants her the freedom to name herself and others, clearly establishing her dominance which becomes even more palpable when it is implied that she had only married her husband, who "was a small, worried-looking man who didn't seem to be anything besides a furrier" (Smith 9), for his professional skills. This imbalance in gendered power makes Mr Dearly, who "isn't exactly handsome" himself (Smith 8), highly uncomfortable, repeatedly expressing his sorrow for Mr de Vil (Smith 11), a sentiment that is echoed by two cats at the end of the narrative who "feel quite sorry for him" but eventually come to the conclusion that the only difference between him and his wife is that "she's strong and bad and he's weak and bad" (Smith 176).

Smith's narrative's often ironically deployed sexist undertones become an extreme and regressive reality in the 1961 Disney animation *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* in which women, rather crudely, are



likened to dog breeds and seem to come in three categories: too short, too old, and too young. Cruella has lost her distinguishing jewellery, as well as her husband, portraying her as the ultimate spinster gone rogue. The misogyny reaches its climax when Mr Dearly, now an impoverished musician called Roger Radcliffe, breaks into song declaring that Cruella de Vil is “an inhuman beast who ought to be locked up and never released,” presenting a simplistic reading of Smith’s much more nuanced description and laying open the male protagonist’s misogynistic desire for a madwoman in the attic storyline. Pushing against the outdated gender stereotypes of the 1961 animation, the 1996 live-action movie *101 Dalmatians* starring Glenn Close continues the storyline of the unmarried spinster but presents Cruella De Vil as the successful head of a global fashion empire, making explicitly visible for the first time the character’s source of income and rebranding her as a self-made business woman.

“A rogue is a woman who challenges assumptions,” Kirsten Backstrom reminds us, returning to her positioning of unruly women, which certainly holds true for Lady Tremaine, Miss Havisham, and Cruella de Vil. Their depictions are mediated by multiple male narrative voices and, as Backstrom points out, “when men determine the standard . . . any independent woman is a rogue” (qtd. in Overall 54). Money and its circulation make hyper-visible the patriarchal structures operating in the accumulation of assets and the power attached to it. Women still only own a small fraction of the enormous funds possessed by the richest individuals; in 2016, there were ten times as many male billionaires as there were female ones, and within those ten percent only 6 percent, 33 women, had actually made their own fortune (Scott). The scarce depictions of wealthy women in literature and film seem to be relegated to genres that allow readers to imagine the unimaginable. Much like the retellings of “Cinderella” as a fairy tale at the hands of Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers in which the evil stepmother is pitted against obedient Cinderella and the Fairy Godmother, insinuating the stepmother’s witch-like qualities, *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* features supernatural elements such as the speaking animals, and *Great Expectations* displays “ahistorical fairy tale motifs” (Walsh 74) reflected in Miss Havisham’s villainous portrayal alongside her decaying body. Embedding these rich rogues in fairy tales, stories aimed at children, or in semi-magical environments, effectively undermines women’s rightful claim to wealth. The negative exceptionalism that is attributed to these rich women further extends to the “Fictional 15” by *Forbes* magazine, in which we encounter rich women as caricatures in video games and animated films, high-functioning and emotionally disconnected alcoholics, sociopathic and violent criminals and eccentric spinsters. Nevertheless, the three rich rogues discussed in this article exhibit a hopeful display of proto-feminist



tendencies relative to their historical context, a freedom that money can buy: Lady Tremaine gets to forcefully head her own household, Miss Havisham can afford not to remarry and sustain her withdrawn lifestyle, and Cruella de Vil has the financial means to seek voluntary exile in a “warm climate” (Smith 180) and continue to be “busy peppering her fruit salad” (Smith 16).

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“You’ll never meet someone like me  
again”: Patty Jenkins’s *Monster*  
as Rogue Cinema

# ABSTRACT

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Film is a powerful medium that can influence audience’s perceptions, values and ideals. As filmmaking evolved into a serious art form, it became a powerful tool for telling stories that require us to re-examine our ideology. While it remains popular to adapt a literary novel or text for the screen, filmmakers have more freedom to pick and choose the stories they want to tell. This freedom allows filmmakers to explore narratives that might otherwise go unheard, which include stories that feature marginal figures, such as serial killers, as sympathetic protagonists, which is what director Patty Jenkins achieves in her 2003 film *Monster*. Charlize Theron’s transformation into and performance as Aileen Wuornos, and Jenkins’s presentation of the subject matter, make this film an example of rogue cinema. In addition, Aileen Wuornos is portrayed as a clear example of the rogue character. This character trope frequently defies social standards, suffers from past trauma, is psychologically complex, and is often exiled. As a prostitute and social outcast, Aileen Wuornos exists on the fringes of society and rejects the hegemonic power structure and later heteronormativity of society, which makes her a rogue figure. While there are several aspects to consider when analyzing Jenkins’s film, my intention is to argue that this film is an example of rogue cinema because of its content. In order to accomplish this task, I examine Theron’s bodily transformation and her performance as Wuornos. Furthermore, I look at how Jenkins handles the depiction of romantic love and gendered violence and argue that her treatment of this content renders this film rogue.

**Keywords:** lesbian, homosexuality, gender, violence, Hollywood.

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Film is a powerful medium that can influence audience's perceptions, values and ideals. As filmmaking evolved into a serious art form, it became a powerful tool for telling stories that require us to re-examine our ideology. While it remains popular to adapt a literary novel or text for the screen, filmmakers have more freedom to pick and choose the stories they want to tell. This freedom allows filmmakers to explore narratives that might otherwise go unheard, which include stories that feature marginal figures, such as serial killers, as sympathetic protagonists, which is what director Patty Jenkins achieves in her 2003 film *Monster*. Charlize Theron's transformation into and performance as Aileen Wuornos, and Jenkins's presentation of the subject matter, make this film an example of rogue cinema. In addition, Aileen Wuornos is portrayed as a clear example of the rogue character. This character trope frequently defies social standards, suffers from past trauma, is psychologically complex, and is often exiled. As a prostitute and social outcast, Aileen Wuornos exists on the fringes of society and rejects the hegemonic power structure and later heteronormativity of society, which makes her a rogue figure. While there are several aspects to consider when analyzing Jenkins's film, my intention is to argue that this film is an example of rogue cinema because of its content. In order to accomplish this task, I examine Theron's bodily transformation and her performance as Wuornos. Furthermore, I look at how Jenkins handles the depiction of romantic love and gendered violence and argue that her treatment of this content renders this film rogue.

While characters in literary texts and films can go rogue, so can filmmakers with their films. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, rogue can mean "[w]ithout control or discipline; behaving abnormally or dangerously; erratic, unpredictable" ("Rogue"). Some directors make precarious choices with their projects and create films that compel us to identify with characters who disrupt our definitions of good/evil and beautiful/ugly. Generally, mainstream films follow a familiar and formulaic structure, contain conventional plot devices, and feature characters who are easily labeled as either good/bad or beautiful/ugly. In rogue cinema, directors challenge our perception of these binaries, make risky decisions, and present us with stories that are often unpredictable. Also, in rogue cinema, characters oppose categorization and push us to gaze beyond these constructions while simultaneously forcing us to question and redefine them. By its very nature, rogue cinema defies labeling, but it is something we usually recognize when we see it. Jenkins's film *Monster* is rogue not only because of the subject matter but because it also required an actress to be stripped of her beauty and forced her to rely on her craft in order to accurately portray Aileen Wuornos.

Americans have a macabre fascination with criminal behavior, and movies about serial killers have captivated filmgoers for decades; however, many of those films still adhered to conventional plot devices with the line between good/bad clearly drawn. When Patty Jenkins's 2003 movie *Monster* was released, audiences flocked to theaters for a different reason. Jenkins's bio-pic focuses on the life story of infamous female serial killer Aileen Wuornos, who was "one of the few women killers to gain widespread fame and notoriety," and "was inaccurately dubbed "America's first female serial killer"" ("America's First"). Theron's performance as Aileen Wuornos disrupts common notions about beauty, romantic love and gendered violence. Furthermore, Jenkins's movie is rogue because it blurs two conventional constructions: beautiful/ugly and good/bad. By doing so, the film takes us into a nebulous area where these binaries are deconstructed. In addition, it humanizes a serial killer by showing her struggle for love and social acceptance. A compelling aspect of rogue cinema is that films in this category are often more complex and thought-provoking, and often reveal a truth that we immediately recognize but do not fully understand. In the case of this film, Wuornos is portrayed as a victim who longs to escape her circumstance as an abused prostitute and gain social acceptance. As Bryan J. McCann argues, "*Monster* invites audiences to sympathize with a woman for whom conventional wisdom says they should feel no sympathy, and to regard her violence as something other than anathema to the norms of civil (i.e. patriarchal, heteronormative, and capitalist) society" (5–6). Furthermore, the film "asked its viewers to consider the kind of world that produces an Aileen Wuornos" (McCann 2). Also, Jenkins's film is successful because it depicts a "criminal case that raised potent questions about gendered violence" (McCann 3). While the film follows and adheres to a traditional storytelling structure, it can be argued that it is an example of rogue cinema because of the subject matter it tackles and the issues it raises.

### FEMALE BEAUTY AND PHYSICAL TRANSFORMATION

The relationship between Hollywood and feminine beauty is complicated and problematic. Hollywood producers and directors have defined and standardized ideals of femininity and female beauty. For decades, actresses altered their appearances to uphold a criterion of beauty that only exists in the fantasy world of Hollywood. Women have been objectified and criticized if they fail to meet and uphold these physical ideals. It is no secret that aspiring actresses are not only judged for their looks but are often advised to alter their physical appearances to make

themselves employable. Gorgeous actresses, such as Marilyn Monroe, soon realized that their roles in films were only meant to entertain the male gaze. Monroe, who often played the striking, dumb blonde trope, yearned to be taken seriously as a talented actress. When audiences see only one type of actress, the beautiful, attractive one, then that is how they define and measure beauty ideals.

Margaret E. Gonsoulin claims that

it is well understood that media images are not only representations of the ideals of gender, physical standards, and sexuality but are also one of the many active agents shaping these ideals . . . these ideals are intended to define the proper heterosexual, white, middle-class femininity. (1159)

Feminist scholars have argued that the female body is a site of political struggle, and that the female body is defined by and controlled by media influence. As Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury state in the introduction to their book *Written on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*,

the [female] body has, however, been at the center of feminist theory precisely because it offers no such “natural” foundation for our pervasive cultural assumptions about femininity. Indeed, there is a tension between women’s lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences. Historically, women have been determined by their bodies; their individual awakenings and actions, their pleasure and their pain compete with representations of the female body in larger social framework. (1)

As with other forms of art, when the female body is depicted in film, it becomes objectified and stereotyped. Laura Mulvey argues, “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness . . . she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire” (837). The female body has commonly been displayed for the pleasure of heterosexual male viewers. As Jennifer F. Chmielewski and Megan R. Yost argue, “[n]early all women face pressure to present an idealized image of female beauty (Wolfe, 1991), and women are judged as successful in various life domains based on their ability to live up to these appearance and thinness ideals” (224). The female form, especially when it is projected onto the big screen, is trivialized, vilified and deconstructed, and feminist scholars ask questions such as what is a woman’s body, who defines it, and what “cultural meanings” are inscribed on these bodies. In

Hollywood film, actresses, such as Charlize Theron, become the cultural model for the ideal female form.

Charlize Theron, a South African and American film actress, is internationally known for her natural beauty. She has won numerous awards, including an Oscar for her performance as female serial killer Aileen Wuornos. Before she was cast, though, Theron had starred in several Hollywood films, none of which truly showcasing her artistic talent. It took a female director to see beyond Theron's natural beauty and her status as a bombshell actress to offer her a role with real gravitas.

When *Monster* was released, film critics and reviewers emphasized Charlize Theron's physical alteration into Aileen Wuornos and remarked on her uncanny resemblance to the serial killer. As Patricia Thomson states, Theron had to be transformed into an "overweight downtrodden prostitute" and calls the makeover "startling" (101). Everything about Theron's appearance was altered. According to Tanya Horeck, "the shocking disappearance of this beauty and its transformation into abject 'ugliness' are the subject of great media fascination" (148). Helen Barlow states that "CHARLIZE [sic] Theron's Oscar-winning role in *Monster*, as real-life executed serial killer Aileen Wuornos, is one of the most transforming since Robert de Niro played Jake la Motta in *Raging Bull*" (23). Theron "gained nine kilograms, has bad teeth, bad hair, bad skin, a white-trash accent and is involved in a lesbian relationship with Christina Ricci" (Barlow 23). As Bryan J. McCann argues, "*Monster* became a text primarily about a beautiful actress's voyage into the macabre, rather than a broken Florida prostitute who murdered seven men while trying to build a better life for herself and her female lover" (2). The overwhelming attention that film critics paid to Theron's physical transformation suggests that American culture's obsession with female bodies and feminine appearance overshadowed Theron's talent, as well as the underlying message of the film.

Theron underwent a bodily transformation that, Tanya Horeck argues, "has been described as 'one of the most startling transformations in cinematic history'" and is a "beauty-to-beast transformation" (147–48). Horeck states that the movie is "worth watching for the physical transformation alone—the preposterously beautiful Theron assumes an uncanny likeness of Wuornos" (142). Theron's makeover required that filmgoers disregard her beauty and focus on her as Aileen the overweight, unattractive streetwise prostitute. Bryan J. McCann claims that Theron's performance has the power to "disrupt patriarchal readings of the female body" (15). Theron's transformation was fetishized to the point that it upsets, challenges, and questions ideals of beauty. When Theron became Aileen, she established herself as



a serious, award-winning actress, which suggests that going ugly, for a Hollywood starlet, means going rogue because it is an unpredictable career decision. Theron's makeover into Aileen took center stage; however, once Theron became Aileen, the attention shifted from her physical transformation to her ability as a talented actress. Theron's metamorphosis into Aileen required that filmgoers forget about Theron the beautiful, attractive actress and focus their attention on Aileen the overweight, unattractive street prostitute who longs for love and acceptance, so the film's message is not lost.

Early in the film, Aileen is in a dirty gas station bathroom where she spends time grooming herself. At one point, she examines her reflection in the mirror and remarks, "you look good." At this point in the film, Aileen's attention on her appearance reminds the audience that she does not conform to Hollywood defined beauty standards. As Kristen Holm states, "[t]he intent of the film is to show Wuornos as a person in all her contradictions: flawed, loving, unrepentant, hopeful . . . the movie does show Wuornos as human, making decisions that eventually undermine her humanity and lead her to a dark, monstrous place" (83). The film's tight shots draw attention to Aileen's apparent unattractiveness and her unique mannerisms. Theron's portrayal of Aileen is so intense that "there's the uncanny sensation that Theron has forgotten the camera and the script and is directly channeling her ideas about Aileen Wuornos. She has made herself the instrument of this character" (Ebert). Throughout the film, there are several times when there are close-ups of Aileen's face, which highlight her unattractive appearance. These scenes "contribute to her monstrosity and demonstrate the degree of her anguish; they also present her face as a 'text' to be read" (Horeck 144). Furthermore, they remind film audiences that Theron the beautiful actress has vanished, and Aileen the streetwise prostitute and serial killer has emerged. Victoria L. Smith states that "Jenkins's relentless close-ups of Wuornos's face . . . suggest disjuncture between what we see and what is" (135). In addition, they also personalize audiences' connection to Aileen and make their filmgoing experience more intimate. Aileen is no longer a distant, dangerous character, but a person who experiences hardships and longings that many viewers can relate to and understand.

Clearly, Jenkins did not intend to feature Theron's natural beauty in this film. Instead, she created a rogue film that refuses to follow a traditional Hollywood film narrative where the beautiful actress is used as a prop and only present to entertain the male gaze. Both Jenkins and Theron take a risky and unpredictable path with this film and their careers by debunking the myth that beautiful actresses are not skilled in their craft.

## HOMOSEXUAL LOVE

While Theron's bodily transformation garnered much critical attention, the film also disrupted notions of romantic love and gendered violence. Throughout filmic history, romantic love was frequently reserved for beautiful, heterosexual couples. *Monster* emphasizes the love between Aileen and Selby (Christina Ricci), which devolves into a destructive relationship and ultimately ends in betrayal. The portrayal of this relationship is problematic and complex because, while it highlights the love Aileen has for Selby, it also suggests that lesbianism leads to violent, monstrous behavior. According to Kirsten Holm, this film,

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joins a long line of films depicting lesbians and lesbian affairs as inherently unhealthy and dangerous. The relationship between the two women was overtly blamed for the "choice" that Wuornos made to continue to work as a prostitute, and subtly blamed for her descent into a darker side of herself. (84)

Horeck states that the film,

ultimately suggests that Lee [Aileen] is executed because of her great love for Selby whose demands were what pushed her to commit the string of murders in the first place. The excessive demands of queer love, as presented in *Monster* lead to death and destruction. (158)

Even though the film appears to present their relationship as a catalyst for Aileen's destructive behavior, it also effectively showcases the social obstacles and difficulty that lesbians often encounter when coming out and forming relationships.

In one early scene in the film, Selby and Aileen discuss the reason why Selby left Ohio. Selby reveals that it was because a girl in her church accused her of trying to kiss her, so her parents

basically disown[ed] me and I decided to come down here to try and figure some things out then this happened [she points to the cast on her arm] before I could get a job . . . my dad had to pay my medical bills so I made a deal with him that I would go back, which you know is probably for the best because maybe it'll work, maybe he'll be able to save my soul and all that.

This scene reveals that they are rogue figures because they reject the status quo and embrace their difference.

In another scene, Selby and Aileen are at a local skating rink and the announcer calls out that it is couples-only skating, so Selby attempts

to leave, but Aileen stops her. In this sense, Selby is aware that they cannot publicly be a couple because they are not heterosexual; however, Aileen insists that they can skate because they both love the song, so she takes the lead and guides Selby around the rink. Aileen kisses Selby, and afterwards Selby anxiously glances around to see if anyone notices. After they leave the skating rink, they are in an alley and begin passionately kissing as a group of teenagers stare on in disbelief. Selby is fully aware that lesbianism is unacceptable in a predominately heterosexual society. Aileen, on the other hand, is accustomed to her status as an outsider and does not exhibit the same fears that Selby has about their budding relationship. Selby's fears and anxiety stem from her relationship with her family and their inability to accept her sexuality. In one sense, Aileen has already embraced her status as a social outsider and realizes that she is a monster in the eyes of the heteronormative society. As Victoria L. Smith claims, "Wuornos is quintessentially outside and an outsider" (135). Selby, on the other hand, realizes the risks associated with accepting her difference. However, in the end, Selby does risk difference and embraces her outsider status, which is made evident by her decision to become romantically involved with Aileen.

Selby and Aileen's initial meeting occurs in a gay bar, with Aileen insisting that she is "not gay." As the night progresses, they continue talking and Selby invites Aileen back to the house where she is staying. Further in the film, we discover that Selby lives with an extended family. While this domestic space offers Selby a physical dwelling and protection from dangers, it is not her home. Aileen, on the other hand, is homeless and keeps her personal belongings in a storage unit. Jenkins's film reveals that there is no safe domestic space for lesbians and it also shows an underrepresented but real part of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) culture. Not every LGBT couple is an affluent white gay male pair with homes like those featured in *Southern Living* or conventionally attractive femme lesbians with children and a white picket fence. As film critic Lizzie Seal notes, Jenkins's film "is notable among Hollywood films for its representation of Aileen's precarious existence on the margins of society" (291). Bryan J. McCann argues that when Aileen enters into a lesbian relationship with Selby it is "an act of refusal that breaks with the heteronormativity and masculine violence that had come to define her life" (6). Aileen and Selby rely on each other for an escape from their respective realities. As both displaced loners and outsiders, Aileen and Selby are rogue figures who refuse to subscribe to their prescribed gender roles and accept heteronormativity as their only option.

## GENDERED VIOLENCE

Shortly after Aileen and Selby meet, Aileen is working the streets because she needs to earn money for her impending date with Selby. Aileen picks up her last “John” (Lee Tergesen) for the day, who turns out to be the man who violently rapes, sodomizes, and tortures her, which results in her psychotic break. In this pivotal scene, the car becomes a space where the “John” exerts his dominance and control and Aileen is rendered powerless. When Aileen refuses to do more than they had initially agreed on, he offers her more money and then punches her, knocking her unconscious.

74 The film cuts to Selby standing on a street corner waiting for Aileen and then reverts back to the car scene between Aileen and her “John.” Aileen awakens to discover that she is tied up and her head is bloody. When he demands to know if Aileen is awake and she fails to respond, he sodomizes her with a metal pipe yelling, “I knew that would wake you up!” and continues to thrust the pipe. Then he kicks her and orders her to “scream. Let me fucking hear it.” Next, he says that he is going to clean her up because “[they] have some fucking to do” and he pours a bottle of solution, presumably rubbing alcohol, on Aileen’s backside, which leaves her writhing in pain. As a result, she frees her hands, reaches in her purse, pulls out a gun, and shoots him about six times at point blank range. This entire scene is built around a gendered power structure with the male quickly assuming the masculine role of physically and psychologically dominating the female. However, Aileen refuses to submit to his demands, which suggests that she refuses to be victimized any longer. As Bryan J. McCann argues, the film has the potential to challenge “hegemonic notions about gender and violence. In casting Aileen Wuornos in a sympathetic light . . . the film offered viewers an opportunity to trouble prevailing discourses of female violence as an anathema to more properly masculine enactments of violence” (2–3). Furthermore, the violent attack that Aileen suffers results in her psychotic break with reality, and it is at this instant that her monstrous behavior surfaces. She abandons his body in the woods, cleans up his car, and steals his clothes. Her actions imply that she has regained the power that was stolen from her. When Aileen kills this “John,” it is at this moment that she challenges us to consider her as a victim and not a cold-blooded killer. One aspect of rogue cinema is that these films require us to see beyond the binary structures, as well as question them. It is at this point in *Monster* where the lines between good and bad, and right and wrong are blurred, which makes it an example of rogue cinema.

Aileen, still running on adrenaline from the killing, drives to Selby’s house to explain why she did not meet her earlier. In contrast to Aileen’s homelessness and nomadic life, Selby, who is living with an aunt, occupies

a controlled domestic space. This space is policed by Donna (Annie Corley), who at some points in the film functions as Selby's surrogate mother. When Donna discovers that Selby brought Aileen into her home, she chastises her like a mother does a child: "You cannot bring people like that here . . . we have no business with people like that." Donna reinforces the class structure and exercises her role as the voice of the patriarchy. Aileen's presence and occupation as a prostitute disrupts Donna's definition of heteronormative behavior for women. According to Pearson, "[i]n the United States, prostitution has always been viewed as detrimental to the white heterosexual family unit, the female body of the prostitute a reservoir of contagion and infection" (263). Furthermore, Donna views it as her duty as the maternal figure of the household to keep the domestic space protected from outsiders. For Donna, Aileen is a "monster" because she does not fit the "spatial and gender norms configured around white familial intimacy" (Pearson 258). Donna recognizes the danger that Aileen poses to her and her white, middle-class family life. Donna and her family govern the domestic space that Selby resides in, and as a result, Selby is afforded little freedom, so when Selby meets Aileen, she realizes that this is her opportunity to escape the watchful, prying eyes of Donna and her family.

Finally, Aileen and Selby rent a room at a local hotel. Aileen tells Selby that she has earned enough money for them to get a place and "party" for an entire week. The women spend a week together and it becomes apparent that Aileen assumes the dominate, masculine role as provider and takes pride in being able to supply beer and food for Selby. Selby, who is child-like, becomes dependent on her. By adopting a masculinized role as the head of the household, Aileen structures her relationship with Selby based on a heteronormative model because it is familiar to her. Gonsoulin maintains that "lesbians are women raised in the very same heterosexist and patriarchal society as other women," so they are not immune to the social norms that are projected onto heterosexual women (1160). Selby, who has been indoctrinated with the expectation that women remain subservient to and dependent on men, adopts the role as the dependent female. However, Selby's dependency and demands to be supported are motivated by her own selfish desires.

Even though she is a rogue figure, Aileen's desire for normalcy is apparent throughout the film. While they are still living in the hotel, Aileen announces that she plans to quit prostitution. Aileen says: "I've got everything going for me, so I'm gonna do it up royal. This time I'm doing it up royal." Selby responds: "Alright, but what are you going to do about work?" Aileen enthusiastically replies: "I'll get a job. I'll go clean. . . . House, car, the whole fucking shebang." When Selby inquires about the kind of job Aileen is going to get, Aileen replies: "I'll be a veterinarian," and Selby tells her that job requires a degree. Aileen's comment reveals that she is

psychologically aware of what is socially acceptable behavior and roles for women and what is not. Aileen dreams of a better life and escaping her reality. For Aileen, her budding relationship with Selby is something that she believes will give her a second chance and the opportunity to start over. Unfortunately, she cannot achieve this reality because of her lack of education and her need to immediately provide for Selby.

76 Later in the film, Aileen rents a house because she seeks to offer Selby a stable home. Her desire for a home implies that she longs for normalcy in her life and hopes that the relationship she has with Selby will enable her to achieve that goal. Aileen's "relationship with Selby becomes an act of refusal that breaks with the heteronormativity and masculine violence that had come to define her life" (McCann 6). On the day they move into their rented house, Aileen carries Selby over the threshold, which indicates that she is the male figure who expects to support her lover. In this sense, their domestic space has become gendered and mirrors heterosexual constructions of masculine and feminine behavior, which is the only frame of reference they have for romantic relationships. However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that their relationship is unstable, doomed, and one-sided. Aileen is emotionally invested in her relationship with Selby, but it becomes obvious that Selby is selfish, ungrateful and restless. These are two women who exist on the fringes of society and are heading for a collision.

As their relationship spirals out of control, Selby eventually turns Aileen in to the authorities for the murders. Selby's actions reveal that she can no longer maintain her relationship with Aileen and decides to protect herself from incarceration. In a heart-wrenching scene that echoes many romantic melodramas, Aileen and Selby are on the phone and after a few minutes into the conversation, Aileen realizes that the phone line is tapped, and that Selby has betrayed her, which leaves Aileen with a sense of hopelessness and the awareness that she has been deserted by the one person she loved and trusted. Generally, rogue figures are often loners, and even though Aileen attempts to fit in and build a life for herself and Selby, she remains an outsider. It is at this point in the film where Aileen comprehends that she is alone and can only depend on herself.

The final scenes of the film are set in a courthouse with Aileen in an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs. In this space, she is once again powerless and governed by the hegemonic system. In the end, Aileen is portrayed as a woman who is "beyond redemption" and whose only desire is to be loved and accepted (Picart 1). Her murder of white, middle class men suggests that she "is accused of preying upon familial and communal logics, which it is assumed she is not entitled to claim" (Pearson 265). Aileen's refusal to subscribe to heteronormative gender behavior renders her rogue. Her

behavior stems from her desire to exert her own power and risk difference. However, Aileen's self-sacrifice indicates that she truly loved Selby, and her desire to save Selby humanizes her.

When Jenkins's film was released in 2003, American culture was experiencing an increase in political activism from both the feminist community and the queer community. Jenkins's film is challenging for feminists because it depicts Aileen's first murder as self-defense; however, it also suggests that Aileen gains power from that first murder and that she murdered more men as an attempt to gain more power in a society that denied it to women of her status. As Lizzie Seal points out, "this dreadful event acts as something of a catalyst for Aileen, who realizes that she can gain money (from theft) and power (from frightening her victims) through killing" (291). For the queer community, Jenkins's representation of Aileen is equally difficult because it depicts her as a rogue lesbian who kills members of the patriarchy to gain power. It also suggests that Selby knew that Aileen was murdering men, but she did nothing to discourage it. Instead of questioning and pressing Aileen for the truth, Selby seemed to be content with Aileen having enough money to support her.

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## CONCLUSION

Throughout her life, Aileen was a victim of violence. From a young age she was raped and victimized. From the opening scene which depicts a suicidal Aileen sitting under an overpass with a gun and narrating her life, to her final murder, Jenkins's film shows that Wuornos was not inherently violent but that her life and circumstances made her so. The real power of this film lies in its ability to make us question our assumptions about male power and female violence. Generally, films which portray violent women do so in one of two ways, either as "victims of male aggression and/or the women themselves as reactive aggressors as in the 'rape-revenge' film" (Heathcote 203). While it is easy to argue that Jenkins's film presents Aileen as both a "victim of male aggression" and that the film is a "rape-revenge film," the violence that is depicted in the film is much more complex and resists simplistic categorization. When Aileen kills the "John" who rapes and tortures her, she unleashes a series of guttural screams, which suggest that "this moment is also a reaction to the gendered violence imposed on the younger Aileen . . . in turning gendered violence back on itself, Aileen, for the first time, resembles a monster—albeit a seemingly sympathetic one" (McCann 7). It is at this moment that Aileen unleashes her rage and subverts our assumptions about male and female violence, and compels us to consider that she was not born violent but made violent. Furthermore, we



also must question our social constructions of masculinity and femininity, and violence. Socially, men have been allowed, and even at times expected, to exhibit violent behavior. In contrast, women were expected to control any violent tendencies that they might experience. Aileen's reaction to being raped and tortured suggests that she refuses to suppress her rage any longer. When she unleashes her rage and becomes violent, she subverts our ideas about male and female violence, which makes her story and this film an example of rogue cinema.

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Jenkins's film is perplexing on several levels, and it is important to acknowledge that it is more than a story about a female serial killer and her female lover. It is a film that challenges conventional heteronormative beliefs about female beauty, same-sex love and gendered violence. Although the movie primarily focuses on Aileen's unconditional love for Selby and the time they spent together, it presents her as a victim of male-inflicted violence that began in her youth and that set the trajectory of her life. Jenkins's film does not ignore the fact that Aileen committed several homicides; however, it does suggest that the murders are a result of the violence that she endured at the hands of men throughout the course of her life. Aileen's childhood was anything but happy. As a child, she was abused by the adult men in her life. While the abuse that she suffered during her youth certainly influenced her life, she continued to dream of a life free from violence. However, this film requires a careful unravelling of the layers to reveal its center, which is for us to see Aileen not as a villainous monster, but rather as a victim longing for love and acceptance. As David Rooney claims, "Jenkins' intention is not to coax sympathy or construct a feminist martyr. Without downplaying the horror of Wuornos' crimes or the abrasiveness of the woman, the writer-director humanizes Wuornos by focusing less on the killings than on the surrounding circumstances." By presenting Aileen as vulnerable instead of as a heartless serial killer, Jenkins allows viewers to identify with Aileen. Even though Jenkins does not dwell too much on Aileen's past, she offers us a glimpse into her childhood and it is just enough to expose how the abuse Aileen suffered as a child affected her life. The realization that Aileen desires a sense of normalcy, which includes a stable relationship with Selby, a safe domestic space, and a job that enables her to be accepted as a productive member of society, forces audiences to question their judgment of her as "America's first female serial killer" (Seal 291).

Aileen Wuornos is a social outcast because as an overweight, aging, unattractive female, she exists outside of the norm; however, Jenkins's film encourages viewers to perceive her as a woman who will sacrifice anything for love, including her life, even if her relationship is an unorthodox one. Theron's performance "finds not only the toughened harshness and anger but also the damaged vulnerability, sadness and need in Wuornos, making

her work here thoroughly convincing and empathetic” (Rooney). Theron’s ability to portray Aileen as sympathetic and identifiable is what makes this “one of the greatest performances in the history of the cinema” (Ebert). Theron’s nuanced performance humanizes Aileen, the monster. When Aileen utters the words “you’ll never meet anyone like me,” it echoes the transformative power of rogue cinema. Like Aileen, the film is rogue because it defies traditional Hollywood ideals of female beauty, romantic film narratives and female violence. Jenkins compels audiences to disregard the spectacle of Theron’s physical transformation and concentrate on Aileen the rogue figure and her unconventional love story.

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# The Outlaw Machine, the Monstrous Outsider and Motorcycle Fetishists: Challenging Rebellion, Mobility and Masculinity in Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* and Steven Spielberg's *Duel*

## ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the ways in which Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and Steven Spielberg's *Duel* (1971) draw on and challenge selected road movie conventions by adhering to the genre's traditional reliance on cultural critique revolving around the themes of rebellion, transgression and roguery. In particular, the films seem to confront the classic road movie format through their adoption of nomadic narrative structure and engagement in a mockery of subversion where the focus on social critique is intertwined with a deep sense of alienation and existential loss "laden with psychological confusion and wayward angst" (Laderman 83). Following this trend, Spielberg's film simultaneously depoliticizes the genre and maintains the tension between rebellion and tradition where the former shifts away from the conflict with conformist society to masculine anxiety, represented by middle class, bourgeois and capitalist values, the protagonist's loss of innocence in the film's finale, and the act of roguery itself. Meanwhile, Anger's poetic take on the outlaw biker culture, burgeoning homosexuality, myth and ritual, and violence and death culture approaches the question of roguery by undermining the image of a dominant hypermasculinity with an ironic commentary on sacrilegious and sadomasochistic practices and initiation rites in the gay community. Moreover, both *Duel's* demonization of the truck, seen as "an indictment of machines" or the mechanization of life (Spielberg qtd. in Crawley 26), and *Scorpio Rising's* (homo)eroticization of a motorcycle posit elements of social critique, disobedience and nonconformity within a cynical and existential framework, hence merging the road movie's traditional discourse with auteurism and modernism.

**Keywords:** independent film, avant-garde and experimental film, road movie, masculinity, *Scorpio Rising*, *Duel*.

## INTRODUCTION

The paper analyzes the ways in which Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and Steven Spielberg's *Duel* (1971) draw on and challenge selected road movie conventions by adhering to the genre's traditional reliance on cultural critique revolving around the themes of rebellion, transgression and roguery. Interestingly, both works are generally credited with revolutionizing the road movie's narrative fluidity. In this context, *Scorpio Rising*, seen as "the jewel of the avant-garde's surrealist school" (Lounsbury) and a sexualized biker gang film that culminated in the rebel image of *Easy Rider*, probes a malignant sector of American society by featuring marginal subcultures and new rebels of 1960s America. Meanwhile, *Duel* is structured around the open road serving as "the domain of the monstrous outsider," which typically coincides with 1970s quest and outlaw road movie aesthetics permeated by a sense of disillusionment, cynicism and irony rather than freedom, romanticism and visionary rebellion (Hammond 17). In particular, both films appear to confront the classic road movie format through their adoption of nomadic narrative structure, focus on driving sequences and engagement in a mockery of subversion where the focus on social critique is intertwined with a deep sense of alienation and existential loss "laden with psychological confusion and wayward angst" (Laderman 83). Alongside narrative strategies, this effect is also achieved through a skillful use of montage, including collage, low-key lighting, seamless editing, and a rock music soundtrack (*Scorpio Rising*), as well as fluid camera movements, interior car shots or menacing low- and high-angle moving shots (*Duel*).

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## SCORPIO RISING

It seems that *Scorpio Rising*'s reputation as a landmark and profoundly influential experimental picture, as well as one of the most representative and commercially successful films of the 1960s American underground and art cinema, is deserved. Not only did the film confirm Anger's major talent as an artist and director, but it also remains the most frequently rented title in the Filmmakers' Cooperative's repertoire to this date (Suarez 115). Widely considered a cult classic due to its transgressive, subversive and often obscene imagery, the film pays tribute both to avant-garde cinema, particularly Bunuel's, Eisenstein's and Bruce Conner's legacy, and various forms of pop vernacular targeted primarily at American youth of the 1950s and 1960s (see e.g., Allison 462). The former influence is mostly evident in the film's adoption of some typically

avant-garde themes and stylistic traits, including the use of collage technique or preoccupation with technology and utopian possibilities of mass culture artifacts (Suarez 115). Meanwhile, the latter trend manifests itself in Anger's celebration of astrological and cosmological phenomena, namely the dawn of the Age of Scorpio and the downfall of the ascetic reign of Christianity, as well as his incorporation of popular imagery of the period associated with the motorcycle cult.

Interestingly, Anger's appropriation of this kind of iconography marks a departure from the first phase of his filmmaking largely devoid of pop culture references or historical and socio-political contexts. On the other hand, *Scorpio Rising* continues the early works' reliance on self-conscious irony, duality, homosexual desire undertones, excessive *mise-en-scène* or fascination with masquerade, appearances and style (Suarez 117). Although the film's focus is on depicting the lifestyle of the neo-Nazi New Jersey bike gang and the gay subculture, the artist is far from offering a traditional reading of these phenomena. Lowry argues that

Anger's manipulations of the culturally overloaded imagery of Nazism, sado-masochism, and the occult finally result in a film which refuses to conform to any dominant, edifying reading whatsoever—an almost unparalleled achievement which should earn *Scorpio Rising* an enduring place in the artistic annals of the 1960s, a decade remembered for the challenges it posed to ruling ideology. (41)

Indeed, the narrative, though dominated by a homoerotic plot and gay perspective, is seen as highly ambiguous in its juxtaposition of violence and eroticism that clearly resonates with “gay desublimation of mass culture” (Suarez 116). Suarez discusses this trait further by suggesting that the picture's ambiguity results from “the confluence of . . . two contradictory paradigms of mass culture: modernist condemnation, and pop celebration of its expressive potentials” observed in Anger's simultaneous attempt to “glamorize the marginal group's rebelliousness” and seemingly decry its “self-destructive behavior” (115–16). A similar effect is achieved with the film's peculiar composition structured around thirteen segments scored to some pop songs with explicitly heterosexual lyrics. Released between 1962 and 1963 and authored by artists such as Elvis Presley, Ricky Nelson or Martha and the Vandellas, the soundtrack “mounts a dialectical collision between images and music to reveal the strains of romanticized violence, morbidity and homoeroticism” (Lowry 41) and, with its deliberately unnatural selection of music and non location sync-sound recording, qualifies as “ontologically Other” (Brothy 310).

## MACHO ON THE ROAD? THE FETISHES OF MOBILITY AND (HOMO)EROTICIZATION OF THE MACHINE

Except for its engagement with marginal milieus and mass culture, *Scorpio Rising* can be considered emblematic of the broader trend of the 1960s archetypal road movies best exemplified by *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Easy Rider*, particularly in the way it borrows from *The Wild One* and echoes certain sensibilities of countercultural paranoia. Suarez enumerates a number of narrative motifs common to Anger's work and the aforementioned mainstream films:

All of these films sympathetically depicted the adventures of a group of outsiders and outlaws who end up being destroyed by repressive social forces: *Easy Rider* and *Bonnie and Clyde* are two cases in point. They signaled the breakthrough into mainstream filmmaking of young actors, directors, and sensibilities close to the counterculture. Both films depict the outlaws' aggressive marginality, estrangement from "straight" society, and subcultural values—associated with the drug world in *Easy Rider* and with crime in *Bonnie and Clyde*—in stories which culminated in their heroes' demise. They were self-conscious genre films which often commented on and revised the traditions they were reworking. . . . Their attitude toward their popular sources was analogous to *Scorpio Rising*'s: they partook of zest for rebellion encoded in mythologies and images from the media and popular culture, and of the paranoia that viewed destruction as the endpoint of difference and marginality. In this respect, these films were simultaneously an homage and an elegy to popular myths. (131)

Similarly, Mills notes that the film

coincides with a full-scale paradigm shift in the road story between 1964, when CBS's television series *Route 66* went off the air and Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters filmed their road trip to the East, and 1969, when *Easy Rider* rocked Hollywood studios with the profitability of the rebel image. The metamorphosis of the road story accelerates in the 1960s, traveling through mainstream audiences and marginal subcultures, picking up along the way new rebels to feature and new market niches to satisfy. (110)

Simultaneously, *Scorpio Rising* seeks inspiration from the 1950s and 1960s Beat spirit (Sterritt 210) or what Mekas referred to as the new wave of art films known as the Baudelairean Cinema and characterized by explicit homosexual content and the language of "disengagement and new freedom" (85). According to Dyer, the latter trend focused on adventurous sexuality, initiated by the Beat movement and understood as



a manifestation of the mobility of identity or ambisexuality broadly defined as openness to all kinds of sexual practices and objects (118). At that time, however, these tendencies were not considered part of the gay liberation movement, but rather of a more personal and diaristic cinematography concerned with exploring “the exhilarating instabilities of the necessary fiction of identity” (Dyer 173). Likewise, as noted by Mills, Anger’s work reveals a queer double consciousness and destabilizes identity by drawing on binary oppositions, such as Hollywood versus underground film, macho biker versus male homosexual, Hollywood rebels like Dean and Brando versus pop artists like Nelson and Presley, individual rebellion versus containment, or emblems of Jesus versus those of Nazism (112). Mills further contends that

the most transgressive message of *Scorpio Rising* is that a text cannot hold its meaning steady when a viewer invests it with desire, and what we have seen so far and will continue to find is that viewers continuously revitalize the road story with private and communal fantasies that are also historically specific. (114)

Although *Scorpio Rising* cannot be classified as a road movie per se, it clearly embraces some of the conventions of the genre, particularly the emphasis on driving, which becomes the crux of the plot, and the motif of a journey, as undertaken by motorized rebels, which provides the film with a distinctive framework. However, it seems that apart from encompassing the representation of travel as an explicit and implicit critique of American society and pop culture, the picture opposes the genre’s iconic features by challenging its linear, open-ended plot and character structure, as well as use of the interstate highway system and vast landscape heightened with “pit stops” like diners, bars, sundry detours, motels or gas stations as the central *mise-en-scène*.<sup>1</sup> Somewhat in contrast to Laderman’s argument that the road movie’s “deliberate rebellious impulse is conveyed primarily

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<sup>1</sup> The road movie, as defined by Corrigan or Cohan and Hark, presents technological means of transportation as “self-descendant of the nineteenth-century train” (Corrigan 144) and traditionally places them at the center of the narrative: “The significance of technology in the road movie, differentiating its quest narratives and wandering protagonists from those of the Western, has as much to do with representing modernity, its historical achievements as well as its social problems, as it does with reiterating masculinist fantasies of escape and liberation” (Cohan and Hark 3). Laderman further suggests that “while often preserving from this literary tradition a focus on the learning experiences of the traveling hero in an unfamiliar setting, road movies rearticulate the quest motif in the ‘increasingly mechanized’ framework of automobile modernity” (13).

through two narrative pretexts: the quest road movie (descending from *Easy Rider*) and the outlaw road movie (descending from *Bonnie and Clyde*),” *Scorpio Rising* inclines toward neither of these two narrative modes (20). Although transgression and liberation are clearly linked with mobility, Anger distances himself from adhering to the motif of roaming or driving away from the crime as a means of self-discovery and pursuing freedom. Instead, the filmmaker presents the viewers with a complex and contradictory narrative “built around the ironic interaction of thirteen popular songs with the same number of schematic episodes in the life of a motorcycle gang,” particularly their preparations for the Halloween party and final motorcycle race of the year (Sitney 102), and based on “specific myths or mythological figures to convey a new cosmology or typography of universality among its contemporary characters and settings” (Verrone 119).

Interestingly, akin to *Easy Rider*, the theme of automobility and conventional car use are replaced with that of riding and the bike itself or, as advertised in the 1960s by Harley-Davidson, the “outlaw machine” that more explicitly expresses the gang’s outsider status and addresses the cultural tensions of the day. Here, the motorcycle is not juxtaposed against a romanticized image of American wilderness, but against the fetishes of mobility and bourgeois commodities, including the bikers’ leather and denim clothes, and hence becomes an object of sexual desire and gay fantasy, as well as an emblem of the rebel spectacle rather than of evocative road travel. Anger calls this measure “a definite eroticization of the automobile, in its dual aspect of narcissist identification as virile power symbol and its more elusive role: seductive, attention-grabbing, gaudy or glittering mechanical mistress paraded for the benefit of his peers” (qtd. in Sitney 125). Similarly, Mills pinpoints that “Anger’s caressing pan shots foreground the sexual aspect of the motorcycle’s mechanical power and mobility, emphasizing the ritual nature of both bike culture and homoerotic fantasy” (114).

### EISENSTEIN’S MONTAGE AND THE SUBVERTED MALE GAZE

In terms of editing, *Scorpio Rising* refrains from the use of some typical 1960s and later road movie conventions, such as flash-forward scene transitions, rapid back-and-forth montage sequences or traveling, tracking, zoom, low-angle, frontal and rear shots, whose aim is to aesthetically convey “the unleashing of spiritual energy through a politicized driving” and “the sensation of freewheeling mobility” (Laderman 70–71). Instead, Anger seeks inspiration from Eisensteinian montage in his synthesis of surreal

framing, lighting, imagery and fictional re-creation with documentary and found footage, which, according to Verrone, might serve as “a prime example of an avant-garde adaptation through appropriation” (119). As noted by Osgerby, Eisensteinian montage is particularly evident in the way the artist “intercuts the visceral images of motorcycle subculture with a catalogue of media allusions, a jarring collision that climaxes with the blasphemous juxtaposing of Hitler and Christ” (128). To create such abstract compositions, mostly in the form of jagged montage sequences rife with images of pop culture icons, the filmmaker combines occasional seamless editing and pans with close-ups and broader shots that imply both spatial, as well as temporal continuity and the subverted male gaze seen through the lens of mysticism and homoeroticism (Verrone 119). Below, Sitney comments on Anger’s rapid montage, including horizontal and vertical pans, collage, low-key lighting or steady and slow camera movements that expose the film’s mythographic nature:

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From the very first shots—the unveiling of a motorcycle in a garage, then a series of horizontal and vertical pans of bike parts, lights, shining chrome fenders, young men oiling gears—it is clear that the texture of the film is unlike anything Anger has done before. This is a film almost without superimposition, filtered lights, or isolated figures in blackness. Anger still uses the coordination of the offscreen look, especially in collaging foreign material. The low-key lighting makes possible a lush pastel view of motorcycle cushions, lights, and portions of chrome with stars of light reflecting off them. As usual the camera movements are steady and slow, but the rhythm of the film as a whole is much quicker than anything Anger had ever made before. (104)

It seems then that such a choice of editing aims to play with notions of myth, ritual and the occult, particularly evident in the portrayal of Scorpio as a rebellious Christ-, Hitler- and Devil-like figure with a dialectical personality, rather than to invoke the idea of travel or transcendence. Sitney refers to *Scorpio* primarily as a mythographic film since

it self-consciously creates its own myth of the motorcyclist by comparison with other myths: the dead movie star, Dean; the live one, Brando; the savior of men, Christ; the villain of men, Hitler. Each of these myths is evoked in ambiguity, without moralizing. From the photos of Hitler and a Nazi soldier and from the use of swastikas and other Nazi impedimenta, Scorpio derives ecstasy of will and power. (106–07)

Anger confirms this interpretation himself by describing his work as a “conjunction of the Presiding Princes, Angels, and Spirits of the Sphere

of mars, formed as a 'high' view of the Myth of the American Motorcyclist. The Power Machine seen as tribal totem, from toy to terror" (qtd. in Sitney 103).

Likewise, whereas a skillful montage of found footage and a rock and roll music soundtrack "weaves an ironic 'blasphemous' critique of modern culture" (O'Pray 56) and ultimately serves as "a death mirror held up to American Culture" (Anger qtd. in Cott), road movie iconography rests on the homoerotic outlaw formula where, however, a largely fragmented motorcycle journey does not represent the genre's conventional quest for personal fulfillment and sexual freedom. Instead, while exploiting "the alternative sexuality of homosexual riders," *Scorpio Rising* offers "overtly sexual images of homoeroticism largely divorced from the act of riding itself" where

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the toughness and virility associated with the motorcycle was transferred onto hard-bodied, hypermasculine males posed in spiked leather and chains, iconography of the leatherman who became a staple of gay culture in the bars of New York and London and eventually a character in pop music's Village People. (Alford and Ferriss 143)

Except for a motorcycle drag race sequence, a sense of traveling and movement is symbolically conveyed in the recurrent motif of a queer erotic quest, "revolving itself in sado-masochistic subsection to the desired but terrifying Other" (Baker 452). It is also expressed in the opening scenes of unveiling, polishing and fitting the motorcycles, which reflect American culture's obsession with "fetishised icons of chrome and steel, violence and speed (velocity and amphetamine), leather and rubber," then replicated in the gang's clothing (Baker 452). In his analysis of the role of mythological systems in *Scorpio*, Rowe links the machine with a symbolic representation of death on the highway, which partly coincides with the late 1960s politicized and rebellious road movies' narrative closures "where the road rebels are martyred by the forces of conservative society" (Laderman 81):

The machine (now a motorcycle) is totemized into a tool for power: the "charioteer" is Death (the ultimate "dream lover" by Romantic standards). Violence replaces the poetic extension of personality and violent eroticism is combined with the tragic death of the highway hero ("the last cowboys"). (Rowe 21)

On the other hand, however, *Scorpio's* ending is clearly devoid of a sense of romanticism and martyrdom as intertwined with the symbolism of the open road; as one of the cyclists crashes in the race, the film culminates in death seen as a sacrifice demanded by *Scorpio* (Sitney 106).

It appears then that Anger himself repudiates his heroes, who ironically embody the archetypal characters of the motorcycle and drive-in biker film, and hence deconstructs the myth of the American motorcyclist whose rebel image becomes appropriated by the gay community.

### *DUEL*

In contrast to *Scorpio*, *Duel* is a ninety minute low-budget quest road movie based on a short story and screenplay by Richard Matheson (originally published in *Playboy*) and directed for Universal television.<sup>2</sup> The first theatrical feature and directing debut of the soon-to-be-auteur Steven Spielberg, the film received generally favorable reviews from studio executives, critics and audiences and is often hailed as one of the greatest TV movies of all time, as well as a masterpiece of suspense, editing and camerawork. Along with *Sunday Express* and *Jaws*, it is classified as part of the director's early work concerned with creating "a sense of energy, obsession and pending doom" rather than exploring notions of childhood and fatherhood, which would become a crucial theme of his later movies, such as *E.T.*, the *Indiana Jones* trilogy and *Hook* (Le Gall and Taliaferro 38). According to Spielberg, while partly inspired by his own teenage experience of highway phobia, the script "was almost a once-in-a-lifetime story . . . In all the years that I've been making movies, I have not found anything as potentially fraught with suspense and tension as *Duel*" (qtd. in Bianculli 23). Gordon notes that the picture "partakes of elements of both the Hitchcock and the horror film," which aims to engage the viewers and allows them to identify with the protagonist, widely considered an allegory of Everyman:

Like most Spielberg films, *Duel* is a carefully calculated roller-coaster ride, programmed for thrills—although it also has a certain psychological profundity. . . . The film is filled with surprises. The apparently psychopathic truck driver (or perhaps the truck itself) toys with the hero David Mann in a sadistic cat-and-mouse game, applying gradations of violence to initiate him into the code of the duel, gradually stripping away his civilized restraints until he is ready to kill or be killed. Similarly, Spielberg plays with his audience, tricking and shocking by gradually building suspense, momentarily slackening it, fooling us when we are off guard, and then screwing the tension to an almost unbearable level in the climax. (14)

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<sup>2</sup> *Duel* was shot in just sixteen days and edited in less than two weeks (Spielberg qtd. in Fonda 2).

Indeed, Spielberg himself referred to his work as “a statement about American paranoia” and “an exercise in paranoia” where the fear of the unknown and David Mann’s sense of isolation and anxiety are greatly enhanced by an evocative imagery, Billy Goldenberg’s eerie score and minimal dialogue (qtd. in Taylor 78). Unsurprisingly, this trend renders the film an easy fit for the context of the 1970s postclassical, countercultural and depoliticized road movie permeated by a defeated, detached and ironic tone, as well as devoid of a sense of purpose or excitement.

### EVERYMAN ON THE ROAD: FROM CAR ANXIETY TO MASCULINE ANXIETY

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In many 1970s road movies, cultural and socio-political critique is often replaced with individual existential and psychological concerns influenced by the postwar European cinema’s auteurist and modernist approach to filmmaking. On the other hand, Klosterman argues that *Duel* “eliminates the idea of a road trip as some sort of spiritual quest” and instead “it exclusively ties its story to the most fundamental elements of the genre: vehicles, people, and the nonmetaphorical physicality of the earth itself” (135). Similarly, Lynes notes that Spielberg’s “dramatic technique of never revealing the driver of the tanker truck to the audience” deliberately dehumanizes and mystifies the offender, hence not only obscuring his motive, but also literally drawing the viewers’ attention to road travel in one of its most simplistic forms: that is, structured along vehicular culture, violence and survival, which still remains an essence of the genre (21).

According to Laderman, most pictures produced during this particular decade<sup>3</sup> are “laden with psychological confusion and wayward angst, . . . [and] adopt a nomadic narrative structure” in which “driving on the open road becomes an allegory of a personal search through life’s meaningless landscape,” hence invoking “a forlorn mood of wandering” and “a deep sense of alienation” (83–84). Though the tension between rebellion and tradition can still be detected, “the genre’s core conflict with conformist society has been internalized, ‘rebellion’ thus becoming an amorphous anxiety about self”:

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<sup>3</sup> Some landmark titles that reflect this trend include *The Rain People* (Coppola, 1969), *Five Easy Pieces* (Rafelson, 1970), *Two-Lane Blacktop* (Hellman, 1971), *Vanishing Point* (Sarafian, 1971), *Badlands* (Malick, 1973), *Scarecrow* (Schatzberg, 1973), *The Sugarland Express* (Spielberg, 1973), *Paper Moon* (Bogdanovich, 1973), *Thieves like Us* (Altman, 1974), *Road Movie* (Strick, 1975) and others.

Often exuding a deeply antisocial mood, these films nevertheless minimize overtly rebellious gestures against society; that is, the rebellion here is filtered through an enigmatic dramaturgy of apathy. This apathy in turn inflects both the movement of the narrative and the development of characters, producing a paradoxical sense of “standstill” while moving. (Laderman 83–84)

Laderman lists particular traits of the early 1970s road movies, which also resonate with Sontag’s “aesthetics of silence,” with their obscure introspection and psychological dissolution: “(1) a more pronounced dramatization of the genre’s fusion of the human and automobile; (2) consequently, a more ‘mechanized’ (dehumanized, ‘empty’) development of character; (3) a more fragmented, aleatory narrative structure; (4) a road trip symbolic of emotional malaise” (84). Elsaesser further argues that such films may be distinguished by a self-reflexive storyline centered around an unmotivated hero’s journey and the expression of a “pathos of failure” rather than “goal-oriented moral trajectories,” which stems from “a post-rebellious lassitude” reflected in a more cynical attitude toward the American values (13–15).

Following such narrative and character development, *Duel* focuses on the relationship between the human and the automobile on a road trip while employing a strongly linear and segmental structure in which every action is a self-contained and semi-independent unit within Mann’s journey (Buckland 72). According to Morris, despite a slim plot and lack of dialogue, the theme of rebellion and roguery, evident in the protagonist’s rising (suburban) frustration, is already connoted in the film’s opening scene:

Speeding, the unseen motorist, ignores a “STOP” sign. Ensuing events suggest he has become complacent, cocooned in his ordered existence, about venturing into a competitive and alienated society, particularly—as hinted retrospectively—while angry. This equally connotes rebellion, a will to push boundaries and behave lawlessly. *Duel* does not endorse his suburban frustrations, which it arguably satirises. Rather, in withholding information about precise motivations and frequently adopting the pursuing tanker’s position, it sadistically delights in testing both the protagonist’s reasonableness and his resolve. It also becomes an attack on the spectator who, knowing little, is unable to judge with certainty—yet who, because unawareness removes potential obstacles, is facilitated in projecting conflicts onto the scenario. (21)

Although most scholars propose a psychological interpretation of the picture, which hints at the hero’s paranoia against the truck driver, women and his state of masculinity or repressed homosexuality, the opening sequence



clearly shifts the viewers' attention to the recurrent motif of mechanization of life, which is mirrored in the primal confrontation between man and the machine (also considered the Thing), Plymouth Valiant and the oil tanker and, finally, suburban and rural America. Indeed, some critics read *Duel* as "the apotheosis of the car-chase movie" or "a pure highway pursuit" (Aldiss 175) where Mann, who represents bourgeois values, is challenged to a duel, seen by Spielberg as an indictment of machines and a manifestation of late 1960s and early 1970s technophobia: "And I determined very early on that everything about the film would be the complete disruption of our whole technological society. . . . And specially, where the truck was concerned, I wanted it to be the true, perfect, perpetual-motion machine" (qtd. in Crawley 26). As implied in a 1978 interview with Dave Pirie, the director's intention was also to express his critical view of American suburban life: "The hero of *Duel* is typical of that lower middle-class American who's been insulated by suburban modernization . . . [and] that never expects to be challenged by anything more than his television set breaking down and having to call the repair man" (105). Similarly, in his essay "The Complete Spielberg?," Auty suggested that the picture's major theme "is not primarily the story of Everyman's escape into the never-never. It is suburban life in all its contradictions, as a kind of mysterious lake of social and libidinal possibilities which have no direction in themselves" (277).

On the other hand, it seems that the film's focus on road travel and its narrative attention to mobility create what Orgeron calls "the seductive illusion of motion by locking the viewer's gaze into the three elements that make up the road film—subject, vehicle, and landscape":

Seduced by motion, the road movie viewer actively agrees to be passive—to be a passenger—and is liberated in his/her identification with the presumably liberated on-screen road traveler. The viewer figures into the equation as "passenger" and is left "riding along" wherever the subject(s) of the road film takes him/her. (104)

It can be argued, then, that, in line with some of the genre's visual tropes, many shots are based on the viewer-as-passenger schema (Musser 38), which intensifies sensual illusions produced by an almost palpable spectacle of motion and dramatizes the act of visual appreciation. Murphy purports that, due to its reliance on these and related modes of representation, *Duel* may be considered exemplary of the highway horror sub-genre defined as

an offshoot of the wider American horror film tradition that has certain similarities to the road movie genre but which also dramatises its own

culturally and historically specific set of concerns explicitly related to the societal impact of mass automobility and the creation of the Interstate Highway System (IHS). (2)

Murphy further elaborates on how the highway horror film explores the relationship between a road journey and the American landscape:

In the Highway Horror film, journeys made via the highway inevitably lead to uncanny, murderous and horribly transformative experiences. The American landscape, though supposedly “tamed” by the highways, is, by dint of its very accessibility, rendered terrifyingly hostile, and encounters with other travellers (and with individuals whose roadside businesses depend upon highway traffic) almost always have sinister outcomes. (2)

Moreover, Spielberg’s work follows the highway horror film’s incorporation of a clear-cut structure, a resolution or at least a considerable degree of narrative closure, as well as tendency to envision journeys westward where the road provokes anxiety or imprisons the characters and is often linked to “the theme of transformation of identity” (Ireland 476). Particularly, Murphy notes, *Duel* employs the Highway Nemesis narrative in which “the American highway becomes a nightmarish no-man’s land in which the conventional rules of law, order and polite society hold no sway” and which “almost always comes down to duelling versions of American masculinity, usually coded as middleclass (the protagonist) and working class (the antagonist)” (40). Hence, the act of rebellion and roguery not only takes the form of a deadly cat-and-mouse race where an average law-abiding citizen is confronted with a blue-collar truck driver or a monstrous adversary; it also illustrates a broader phenomenon in which “the anonymity and lack of external authority of the highways encourages homicidal aggression towards fellow road users” (Murphy 39). Murphy interprets *Duel* as “a portrait of a contemporary America” where a fight for survival between a persecuted middle class protagonist and a homicidal antagonist reflects the cultural and political crisis of the late 1960s, particularly the public reception of Nixon’s policy of “Vietnamisation” (46). On the other hand, the film simultaneously depoliticizes the genre and maintains the tension between rebellion and tradition in which the former shifts away from the conflict with conformist society to masculine anxiety. The latter is expressed in the picture’s finale and the loss of innocence of the protagonist who has finally triumphed over a faceless menace, yet at the cost of becoming an oppressor himself, which also marks “the return of the sunbelt man to raw nature” (Wasser 50).

## TRAPPED IN NO MAN'S LAND: POVS, FRAMES AND MIRRORS

To intensify the drama of the depicted events and settings, *Duel* exploits road movie aesthetics to an almost unprecedented extent, which is already evident in the film's opening sequence whose theatrical version begins with

a fixed, low-angle point-of-view shot from the bumper of the car as it pulls out of the garage of a middle-class home and, through a series of dissolves, drives through a suburban neighborhood, into downtown Los Angeles, and eventually out to the highway, thus visually reinforcing the character's departing the safety of suburbia and entering the wilderness, which is characterized by the isolation of David's car on the highway and the barrenness of the mountain landscape. (Kendrick 30)

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This measure not only establishes the narrative as plausible by implying the inauthenticity and conformity of Mann's complacent suburban existence, but it also literally engrosses the viewers in the Los Angeles urban landscape and the open roads of California Highway 14. To achieve such an effect, Spielberg draws upon a series of lap-dissolved shots, diegetic sound, voiced-over internal monologues and phantom ride conventions. Interestingly, the latter are invoked by positioning the camera in front of the car to provide the spectators with the automobile's point of view rather than driver's, who still remains unseen at that point, thus setting up "the triumph of the sunbelt sprawl over the traditional city as the car leaves the crowded streets of Los Angeles" (Wasser 49–50). Meanwhile, in the remaining sequences, the filmmaker relies primarily on montage and "chains of point-of-view-shots," which enable the spectators to closely align with the driver (Derry 254). Morris makes a similar observation by noting that "this point-of-view—the angle events are seen from—largely coincides with the metaphoric point-of-view, in the sense of opinion or judgment, implied by the invisible, absent narrator" (22).

Interestingly, when filming the hero inside the car, Spielberg utilizes front or side windshield and rearview mirror shots by placing the camera on the back seat and attaching it to the passenger's front door or locking it down on the hood, which might be indicative of entrapment and potential threat. Morris particularly emphasizes the role of mirrors and screens in reinforcing internal focalization, which, by definition, "implies metaphors of looking through a lens: consequently angle, distance, focal length, inclusion or exclusion, filtering, clarity or distortion" and consequently enforces an intense identification with Mann (25). Apart from the genre's common use of point-of-view shots, Spielberg relies on framing devices, such as long, deep-focus, aerial or side-by-side traveling and tracking shots with the aim of introducing sublime western scenery

and conveying “a visceral sense of traveling at a hyperhuman, modernized speed” (Laderman 15). McBride contends that both tension and suspense are effectively built on pacing, shot selection or rhythm and intensified by means of fast cross-cutting and shooting with multiple cameras from various angles, which creates a classical *mise-en-scène* and is typically reserved for action and chase sequences (205). It seems, then, that the theme of rebellion is also connoted at the level of editing, which, while imposing the first person narrative, not only evokes the open road, but also a sense of entrapment, lack of security and impending danger.

## CONCLUSION

As seen, while addressing the genre’s traditional focus on cultural critique, transgression and roguery, *Scorpio Rising* and *Duel* both challenge and adhere to the postclassical road movie’s narrative paradigm and visual tropes. Following this trend, Spielberg’s film addresses rebellion by foregrounding car and masculine anxiety issues, represented by middle class, bourgeois and capitalist values, the protagonist’s loss of innocence, and the act of roguery itself. Meanwhile, Anger’s poetic take on the outlaw biker culture, burgeoning homosexuality, myth and ritual, and violence and death culture approaches the question of roguery by undermining the image of a dominant hypermasculinity with an ironic commentary on the sacrilegious and sadomasochistic practices and initiation rites of the gay community. Moreover, *Duel*’s demonization of the truck, seen as “an indictment of machines” or the mechanization of life (Spielberg qtd. in Crawley 26) and *Scorpio*’s (homo)eroticization of a motorcycle posit elements of social critique, disobedience and nonconformity within cynical and existential frameworks, thereby merging the road movie’s traditional discourse with auteurism and modernism. Whereas the former centers on car anxiety and portrays the automobile as a menace (Mottram 103), the latter, which also exemplifies “the transformative potential in the commodity,” depicts a motorcycle in a fetish form that “conflates a sexual with consumer seduction” and thus renders “the dominant society’s commodities the metanarrative of gay culture” (Moore 76, 80). In this sense, both pictures tend to personify the featured (outlaw) machines or related objects and, although they shift away from the activist spirit of the late 1960s road movies, they still retain elements of visionary rebellion by mocking stereotypical masculinity (*Duel*) and appropriating macho culture (*Scorpio*). Therefore, while occasionally relying on highly perceptive riding and driving sequences, which unfold passing landscapes as “a narrativized screen space” and convert them into objects of visual pleasure (Friedberg

184), *Scorpio* and *Duel* offer an alternative reading based on exposing commodity fetishism and remapping the image of a dominant male power substituted with that of a rebellious biker, being part of the gay collective, and a rebellious driver representing either submissive middle class (Mann) or excessive working class (truck driver) masculinity.

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## Roguish Self-Fashioning and Questing in Aleksandar Hemon's "Everything"

# ABSTRACT

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This paper examines self-fashioning in Aleksandar Hemon's "Everything," a story about a Sarajevo teenager's journey through ex-Yugoslavia to the Slovenian town of Murska Sobota. His aim? "[I]o buy a freezer chest for my family" (39). While in transit, the first-person narrator imagines himself a rogue of sorts; the fictional journey he takes, meanwhile, is clearly within the quest tradition. The paper argues that "Everything" is an unruly text because by the end of the story the reader must jettison the conventional reading traditions the quest narrative evokes. What begins as a comic tale about a minor journey opens out, in the story's final lines, into a story about larger historical concerns, namely, the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. By introducing contemporary history, Hemon points beyond the closed world of his short story, while rejecting the quest pattern he has established.

**Keywords:** Aleksandar Hemon, ex-Yugoslavia, quest, rogue, self-fashioning.

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Aleksandar Hemon's short story "Everything" was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 2005 as "Love and Obstacles." Later, the story relinquished its title to the 2009 collection *Love and Obstacles*, a series of stories that one can enjoy individually or that one can slot into the Künstlerroman tradition as it catalogues the life of a Bosnian-American poet looking back on the twists and turns of history that landed him permanently in Chicago. *Love and Obstacles* guides us through the Sarajevo-born narrator's years as a sullen teenager ("At sixteen I spent a lot of energy affecting boredom: the eye-roll; the terse, short answers to parental inquisition. . ." ["Stairway to Heaven" 6]), the start of his accidental life in Chicago ("My story is boring; I was not in Sarajevo when the war began; I felt helplessness and guilt as I watched the destruction of my hometown on TV; I lived in America" ["The Conductor" 61]), to a metafictional conclusion when the now-American finds himself at the American embassy in Sarajevo, chatting up an American novelist: "You may have read my story 'Love and Obstacles,'" I said. "It was in *The New Yorker* not so long ago" ("The Noble Truths of Suffering" 187). The stories are funny, full of irony and self-irony, as the narrator looks back on previous versions of himself, previous chapters in his life.

Reviewer Rachel Aspden, writing in *The Guardian*, accurately points out that, for all their playfulness, Hemon's tales are "more than just tricky metafictional vignettes"; they are imbued with an "acute moral sense that raises *Love and Obstacles* far above, as Hemon's narrator puts it, 'one of those brainy postmodern set-ups everyone likes so well because it has something to do with identity' [151]." Hemon's stories offer a series of identities, from a childhood wish to be "an American commando" ("American Commando" 155), to a story where "for some demented reason" the narrator is "introduced" to a group of Bosnian poets "as a philharmonic orchestra conductor" ("The Conductor" 62). In "Everything," which is the focus of this essay, a younger version of the narrator tries to construct a roguish identity for himself. He tries to turn himself into an outsider that willingly lives apart from the herd, in this case, his conventional family.

Hemon uses a cornucopia of traditional literary tropes and genres, most prominent among them, the quest or coming-of-age tale, the riddle, and, more generally, rogue literature. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines the last as a "genre concerned with the underworld and thus with criminal and quasi-criminal life and activities" (613). The focus on "quasi-criminal" life and invented roguishness is key here, for though "Everything" speaks of dirty deeds, nothing criminal actually occurs within the story. Every instance of roguery is playfully conjured through language, using familiar genre conventions while at the same time satirizing those conventions through overtness.

Set in 1984, before the breakup of Yugoslavia, “Everything” is about a seventeen-year-old who has been sent from Sarajevo to a small Slovenian town to buy a freezer for his family. On the way, he meets two criminals on a train and gets drunk in his destination town; this is at best minimal roguery, though not in the narrator’s mind. In other words, a trivial event is not experienced as such by the teenage narrator, even if the older narrator looks back on his younger self with bemusement. Ultimately, Hemon’s story steers to the existentially serious and away from the carefully constructed coming-of-age quest he has been guiding us through. “Everything” concludes, “When the war began in the spring of 1992, and electricity in the city of Sarajevo was cut, everything in the freezer chest thawed, rotted in less than a week, and then finally perished” (60). The emblemized and distilled history in the final sentence casts a dark shadow over the rest of the story. It trivializes the criminal, roguish behaviour and the social norms that determine that behaviour. In times of war, criminal and barbarous activity become the norm.

This paper argues that the narrator’s self-fashioning as a roguish individual journeying through an imagined “underworld” is made equally trivial. Hemon subverts genre and trope expectations as fantasy gives way to a grim historical reality. The paper focuses on self-fashioning of roguishness and on the traditional quest genre. At first, these aspects may seem worlds apart. However, roguishness and genre come together in the final paragraph of Hemon’s tightly-constructed story that leans heavily on genre expectations. “Everything” proves itself an unruly text because, ultimately, we cannot rely on conventional reading patterns to make sense of the quest narrative that Hemon writes. The final sentence moves us away from fictional narrative and points to a grim chapter in modern history. The narrator of “Everything” performs roguishness, and the story itself is roguishly unruly because it directs us away from the story’s apparent focus as it moves from personal story to larger history.

## ROGUES AND SELF-FASHIONING

In his seminal 1980 work *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Stephen Greenblatt argues that the 16<sup>th</sup> century saw “an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process” (10). To be clear, while it would be misguided to stamp Greenblatt’s theory onto a short story and author from another era—late 20<sup>th</sup>-century, post-Tito Yugoslavia is not Elizabethan England—one point of Greenblatt’s theory remains especially applicable to Aleksandar Hemon and his fiction: “Self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language”

(20). The narrator of "Everything" is conscious of the opportunities that travel, language, and awareness of a literary tradition offer for creating himself as a stranger in a land where his native language is not spoken (even if Slovenian is in the same linguistic family as his native Bosnian).

Self-fashioning is nothing new for Aleksandar Hemon, and much of his non-fiction mirrors his fiction. Having found himself in the United States when the Yugoslav war broke out in 1992, the Sarajevo-born writer turned to English. Starting from "insufficient English, devoid of articles and thickly contaminated with a foreign accent" (Hemon, "The Lives of a Flaneur" 104), Hemon progressed to become a leading stylist in his second language, often inserting autobiographical vignettes from his life in America into his fiction.

More rewarding than hunting down flashes of autobiography in Hemon, and of more interest for this essay, is the role self-fictionalization plays in his works, even as extra-literary reality and fiction come close to converging, as in "Everything." In *Nowhere Man*, for example, this fictionalization is playful, as Hemon impishly dances between the real and the performed. The Ukrainian-born, Sarajevo-raised Jozef Pronek finding himself in America, canvassing (as Hemon did) for Greenpeace. Each new door he knocks on gives Jozef, now known as "Joseph," the opportunity to act out a new version of himself. Each area of Chicago gets to know a different Pronek. As this passage shows—and as anyone who has lived abroad can attest—how we can and do fashion ourselves depends very much on the audience and on how much we can expect that audience to know about us:<sup>1</sup>

To a young couple in Evanston who sat on their sofa holding hands, Pronek introduced himself as Mirza from Bosnia. To a college girl in La Grange with DE PAW stretching across her bosom he introduced himself as Sergei Katastrofenko from Ukraine. To a man in Oak Park with chintzy hair falling down his shoulders, the top of his dome twinkling with sweat, he introduced himself as Jukka Smrdiprdiuska from Estonia. (Hemon, *Nowhere Man* 127)

"Mirza from Bosnia" and the absurd "Sergei Katastrofenko from Ukraine" are minor lies, since Pronek was born in what is now Ukraine and raised in what is now Bosnia. In the Ex-Yugoslav context, "Mirza"

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<sup>1</sup> Our audience is crucial to how we perform and fashion ourselves. If a Slovenian converses with another Slovenian in Slovenia, there are limitations to the stories he can make up about himself. If he speaks with an American, he has a blank canvas because his audience will not be familiar with his home country. Or, in the words of Luigi Gussago, "rogues are defined by the situation, the setting they live in or, at times, that from which they are expelled" (7).

is clearly a Bosnian name, though it is unlikely the young couple would appreciate that fact. Introducing himself as “Katastrofenko” is bolder: Pronek is sure that the college girl with “PAW” emblazoned across her chest would not pick up on the absurdity of the name.<sup>2</sup> The faux-Estonian name “Smrdiprdiuska,” meanwhile, derives approximately from the Bosnian for “smelly fart.” If Pronek seems to be mocking his audience, it is tempting to return to Hemon himself, whom America taught to “endure questions about Bosnia and Yugoslavia and their nonexistent relation to the nonexistent Czechoslovakia” (“The Lives of a Flaneur” 104). A secondary point is that names seem fluid and changeable: on the one hand, they are chosen and we are sometimes free to label ourselves as we please; on the other, seemingly stable political references (“Yugoslavia,” “Czechoslovakia”) can disappear overnight.

Like the fictional Pronek in Chicago and the non-fictional Hemon in the same city, the seventeen-year-old (nameless) narrator in “Everything” finds himself in a new place. For at least the length of the story he is a nomad striking out for strange lands, where the strange and unusual can happen. He takes a train-and-bus journey from Sarajevo to the Slovenian town of Murska Sobota in search of a freezer for his family; on the way, the young man is introduced into a world of roguish behaviour. Though fearful of this world that he encounters in a railway compartment, he adapts to it and dreams up his own counter-version of roguishness. He shares a compartment with two foul-mouthed men who claim to be former convicts. Soon the “budding poet” (Hemon, “Everything” 41) fashions himself as a societal outsider.

“Everything” begins with a combination of roguishness and containment as the narrator awakens in his railway compartment to find himself in the company of two criminals. They have frightening voices: “one of them was mine-deep and spoke with a southern Serbian accent; the other was mumbly and uttered words with the inflections of a Sarajevo thug, the soft consonants further softened, the vowels stuck in the gullet” (37). Hemon neatly plays with a double-audience (as he did with the pungent pun “Smrdiprdiuska”). The vast majority of *New Yorker* readers will not be able to identify “a southern Serbian accent,” and even the well-described inflections of the Sarajevan can only be translated as meaningless sounds if one does not know the language. In other words, few readers will be able to match the accents to anything they have ever heard. The reader co-creates, imagining some version of what such a character must sound like.

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<sup>2</sup> For Hemon’s own take on the meanings of “katastrofa” and his alter-ego (“Sergei Katastrofenko,” “an imaginary Slav, probably Ukrainian” that has the “voice of a Sarajevo street thug”), see “Katastrofa.”

The criminals' conversation is barely speech because the sentences are without grammatical subjects or auxiliary verbs. Rather, it consists of a list of states where the Serbian and the Bosnian are not wanted:

"France," the Sarajevan said.  
"Refused entry."  
"Germany."  
"Refused entry."  
"Greece."  
"Never went."  
"Refused entry."  
"Got me there," the Serbian said, and chortled. (37)

These syntax-poor lines show self-fashioning as the two brag about *not* being wanted. The Serbian and the Sarajevan are playing a verbal game of cards, aiming to outbid each other. For them, being "refused entry" is a badge of honour because it shows how wicked they are. The "Serbian" eventually admits defeat—in this rogue's world, the Sarajevan trumps the Serbian because he is the less desired, since more border guards have turned him away.

From the perspective of a North American reader, who might link Yugoslavia primarily with the wars of the 1990s, it is tempting to read this exchange as pure allegory—perhaps "refused entry" could be a foreshadowing of future displacement through war? Perhaps the bickering individual "Serbian" and "Sarajevan thug" are stand-ins for countries that will later be at war? Indeed, Hemon maps much of the territory of Ex-Yugoslavia and its individual republics. The narrator travels from Sarajevo in the company of a Serbian and of another Bosnian, disembarks in Zagreb (in present-day Croatia), and makes his way by bus to Murska Sobota (in present-day Slovenia). Hemon maps much of a state that no longer exists, and "Everything" is in part an "autobiographical reminiscence" that documents the "radical divorce between two times"—Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslavia (Longinović 150, 152). This radical divorce is, in narrative terms, that of the typical position in which "an external focalizer, usually, the 'I' grown older, gives its vision of a fabula in which it participated earlier as an actor, from the outside" (Bal 161). The narrator looks back on a naïve self who lived in simpler Yugoslav times.

More important for this article than focalization and reminiscences is the nomadism that was, as Bryan Reynolds writes (in reference to rogue culture in 16<sup>th</sup>-century England), "a decisive . . . characteristic of criminal culture" (58). The two criminals in "Everything" are in motion and, at least in the narrator's mind, outside the realm of laws. Still more important is



that, though we can assume that the two thugs actually are criminals, they linguistically perform roguishness through a series of tall tales or even lies as they recall their time in the same jail:

“Did you know Tuka?” asked the Sarajevan.  
 “No.”  
 “How about Fahro?”  
 “Which Fahro?”  
 “Fahro the Beast.”  
 “Fahro the Beast. His nose was bitten off?”  
 “Yes, that Fahro.”  
 “I didn’t know him.”  
 “Which cell block were you in?”  
 “Seven.”  
 “Rape?”  
 “Burglary.”  
 “Burglary was Six.”  
 “Well, I was in Seven,” the Serbian said, peevishly.  
 “I was in Five. Manslaughter.”  
 “Nice.” (Hemon, “Everything” 38)

The conversation is intimate and familiar. Even if the criminals are not particularly close, they are part of a criminal subculture that has much in common, including, it seems, a language of sorts.<sup>3</sup> They are, for example, fairly familiar with the layout and design of a particular jail, and they are equally familiar with a rogues gallery of seasoned criminals that include the nicknames “Tuka” and “Fahro the Beast.” This macho exchange, however, is also a performance put on for the young narrator. Perhaps they are embellishing their crimes, perhaps they are lying. Crucial is that their speech acts and self-fashioning terrifies the narrator: “It was not unreasonable to believe that they could smell my fear and were just about to cut my throat and take the money” (38).

Despite the catalogue of “rape,” “burglary” and “manslaughter” and the grisly possibility of having one’s nose bitten off, Yugoslavia was in fact a safe place that enjoyed low crime rates. Actually, it is entirely “unreasonable” to expect even convicts to murder an innocent child on the off chance he might have a stack of cash for a freezer when they have no chance of escape (the fun of *Murder on the Orient Express* is that it’s

<sup>3</sup> The first American dictionary of slang, namely, New York police chief George Matsell’s 1859 *Vocabulum; or The Rogue’s Lexicon*, had law enforcers in mind (Green 60). Matsell’s Preface argues: “The rogue fraternity have a language peculiarly their own, which is understood and spoken by them no matter what their dialect, or the nation where they were reared.”

hard to flee the scene of the crime). The narrator has been taken into their performed world, duped by a show put on for him. What the narrator sees and hears on the train works as a catalyst for his own performing of roles. The narrator, fashions himself another type of rogue, one who longs to move outside social norms, albeit not in the manner that hardened criminals do.

This poet-rogue-in-training has come prepared for his journey:

I equipped myself for the expedition: a fresh notebook; extra pencils; a book of Rimbaud's—my bible (*As I was floating down unconcerned Rivers / I no longer felt myself steered by the haulers. . .*); . . . and a single contraceptive pill I had gotten in exchange for *Physical Graffiti*, a double Led Zeppelin LP that I no longer cared about, as I had moved on to the Sex Pistols. (41)

Most salient here in terms of identity are the reference to the "contraceptive pill" and to Rimbaud, whose long poem "The Drunken Boat" permeates the story. "Everything" contains many quotations from the teenage French poet's long lines about a steerles boat drifting away to sea. If the narrator is fashioning himself, the choice of Rimbaud as a "bible" is not coincidental.

For a young and rebellious literary lad, the attraction of Rimbaud is evident: Rimbaud wrote virtually all of his heady, ground-breaking poetry when young. He was, by any standards, famously immoral, and perhaps possessed "diabolical powers of seduction" (qtd. in Schaffer 76). For those reasons, he is a model of roguishness for the narrator.<sup>4</sup> Referring to Rimbaud's works as his "bible" is not a mere cliché, since the narrator aims to supplant traditional morality with his own lascivious desires (in this case, to lose his virginity). The narrator understands his "expedition" to be a Rimbaud-like rebellion against his stable upbringing, for he longs to break away from the "banal, quotidian operations that constituted my parents' existence"—parents who "wanted me to join the great community of people who made food collection and storage the central organizing principle of their life" (Hemon, "Everything" 45). Like the criminals on the train, he wants to live as a rogue outside society.

The narrator links roguishness especially to sex, including an obsessive desire to lose his virginity as soon as possible. After escaping the criminals on the train, now on the bus from Zagreb to sleepy Murska Sobota, he sees a man "invested in a crossword puzzle . . ., fellating his pen" (44); as

<sup>4</sup> To quote Luigi Gussago again: "social outcasts and rejects aspire to a place among the great heroes of history" (13). The well-read young narrator of course picks Rimbaud as his type of hero.

he practices the “lines” he will utter on approaching the hotel reception, his “rehearsal quickly turn[s] into a fantasy in which a pretty receptionist checked me in with lassitude, then took me up to the room only to rip her hotel uniform off and submerge me into the wet sea of pleasure” (46); “diabolical powers of seduction” indeed. This particular fantasy is deferred, however, because it turns out that “the receptionist was an elderly man, hairy and cantankerous, his stern name Franc” (46). On seeing an American woman with her husband in the hotel, the narrator now imagines tempting her into infidelity:

I began imagining a conversation I would have with the woman, should we happen to share an elevator ride, while her unseemly husband was safely locked up somewhere in a distant reality. In my high school English, I would tell her that I liked her face flushed with pilgrimage, that I wanted to hold the summer dawn in my arms. We would stagger, embracing, to her room, where we wouldn’t even make it to the bed, et cetera. Her name, I chose, was Elizabeth. (47)

But for all of the narrator’s desires to move outside society in rascally ways—especially in the desire to take the married woman—the narrator’s performing of self is as one-dimensional as that of the thugs he meets on the train. Though his fantasies of travelling beyond Yugoslavia, “of simply going on, into the *infinity of lifedom*, never buying the freezer chest” but travelling “past Murska Sobota, to Austria, onward to Paris,” may have seemed lively to him, they are a commonplace teenage adventure (45–46); these teenage fantasies are a variation on the romanticized trope of escape, of drifting to sea, like a helmless boat drifting “into the wet sea of pleasure,” lines half-pilfered from Rimbaud’s poetic boat that moves from inland river to “le Poème / De la Mer” (“Le Bateau ivre”). In the context of picaresque fiction, these youthful dreams are indicative of the “fascination with incessant, aimless travel” that the narrator believes gives him space for self-fashioning (Gussago 4).

Furthermore, the narrator’s youthful desires to escape family confines mirror those of Edmund White, who, in the foreword to his 2008 biography *Rimbaud: The Double Life of a Rebel Hardcover*, sounds exactly like Hemon’s narrator: “Buoyed up by the sensual delirium of the long poem ‘The Drunken Boat,’ I would float off into daydreams of exotic climes” (1). White continues: “As an unhappy gay adolescent, stifled by boredom and sexual frustration and paralyzed by self-hatred, I longed to run away to New York and make my mark as a writer; I identified completely with Rimbaud’s desires to be free, to be published, to be sexual, to go to Paris” (1). White’s lines could easily appear in “Everything.” In each case

the autobiographical narrator looks back on his younger, more naïve self from a distance of many years. In other words, both the fictional narrator and the biographer White enjoy “the temporal and psychological distance from which the narrating self now reports the considerations and feelings which the experiencing self had at the time” (Stanzel 95)—a stance evident by the gushing vocabulary of “buoyed up by the sensual delirium” (White) and “flushed with pilgrimage” (Hemon). The narrator in “Everything” looks with benign bemusement on the younger self: “For I was a budding poet; I had filled entire notebooks with the verses of teenage longings and crushing boredom” (41). However, as an identity marker, Rimbaud is no more original than a mass-produced Kafka or Sex Pistols t-shirt. What Hemon offers the reader in “Everybody” is a performance of imagined roguishness that is generic, and it is to the matter of genre that the second part of this paper now turns.

#### GENRE AND THE ROGUE

“Everything” relies heavily on two genres or narrative trajectories: the riddle and the quest narrative. Each of these narrative patterns focuses especially on meaning, and in the case of Hemon’s story, the highlighting of a central riddle and the focus on a quest narrative set up the unruliness of the story’s conclusion. The ending of the story—against all expectations—offers none of the closure one expects from a riddle or a quest tale. For the book version of this story, Hemon highlights the riddle because “Everything” is provided as an ersatz-solution to the story’s central puzzle. In other words, titling the story “Everything” instead of the earlier *New Yorker* title “Love and Obstacles” directs our attention to the story’s central riddle. Fittingly for a popular form of literature, the riddle is told by the “Sarajevan thug.” Although he has been speaking to “the Serbian,” even if well aware that the teenager is listening in on his racy conversation about criminal misdoings, the Sarajevan now turns to the narrator. He asks him to “figure out this riddle”:

It has no head, but it has a hundred legs, a thousand windows, and five walls. It is never the same, but it is always almost the same. It is black and white and green. It disappears, and then it comes back. It smells of dung and straw and machine oil. It is the biggest thing in the world, but it can fit into the palm of your hand. (Hemon, “Everything” 42)

As Tom Shippey writes, “the point of a riddle is the contrast between misleading surface and hidden solution” (xxvii); as with many riddles, we may not know the answer, but we remain aware that “with a good riddle

there ought at least to be a single correct solution (even if, as is sometimes the case with the Old English riddles, no one is sure what it is)" (xxviii).

In communication and genre terms, the Serbian's reaction is fascinating. He understands the form a riddle takes yet seems unable to offer any logical response. The Serbian, cryptically, offers "house" and "elephant" as potential answers, before forcing his third solution on the riddle:

"Everything," the Serbian said. "It is everything."

"With all due respect, brother, that is probably not the correct answer."

"Who says?"

"Well, everything usually does not work as an answer to any riddle, and it does not disappear and come back."

"Says who?"

"Everybody knows that doesn't happen."

"I say it does."

"Everything cannot fit into the palm of your hand."

"I say it can," the Serbian said, and got to his feet, his fists clenched as tightly as ever. The Sarajevan stayed in his seat, shaking his head, apparently deciding against smashing the Serbian's face in.

"All right," he said, "if it is that important to you, it is everything." (43)

The exchange is a portrait of how riddle-solving does *not* work. Here, the logical solution to the riddle—the ever-satisfying solution that allows us to see the harmony of literal and figurative meaning coming together—is replaced by the threat of force and then consent. "The Serbian" appeals to the authority of strength and force ("fists as tightly clenched as ever"), a force that the Sarajevan counters. What should be an intellectual and logical struggle to find the answer to the riddle becomes a matter of agreement, as the Sarajevan uses passive aggression ("if it is that important to you. . .") to allow the illogical answer "everything" to take over his story. The answer is illogical because it is too all-encompassing to be the answer to a riddle.

This retreat from what should be the resolution means that the Sarajevan dispenses with the riddle form. He takes the riddle to an extra-textual realm and robs us of narrative closure by not giving us the meaningful ending "that, as humans, we are physically wired to want" (Sutherland 68). After setting up a form of narrative that necessarily implies neatness and closure, Hemon provides the randomness, chaos and perhaps tragedy of real life. In plain English, he doesn't tell us the answer. By withholding the solution (even as his new title focuses on it), Hemon uses the "Sarajevan thug" to go rogue on the riddle genre because, technically, it is not a riddle if no solution is provided.

Hemon's withdrawal from riddle conventions neatly foreshadows the major genre that Hemon employs: the quest narrative. The narrator tells us with comic bluntness that we are reading about a quest. "The truth was," explains the narrator, "my destination was Murska Sobota, I had a wad of money in my pocket, my mission to buy a freezer chest for my family" (Hemon, "Everything" 39). Using the word "mission" to describe a trip to buy a freezer is comic because, though "mission" may retain the etymological sense of "sending abroad," the word has too much gravitas for the purchasing of a freezer. The clash between "freezer" and "mission" is thus incongruous and therefore funny<sup>5</sup>—travelling to Murska Sobota to buy an emblem of domesticity is hardly a *Sir Gawain* journey or Franklin's quest to find the Northwest Passage.

The announcement of the quest in "Everything" is presented with pomp and ceremony when the narrator's father calls a "family meeting" in order to intone: "There arrives a time in the life of every family . . . , when it becomes ready to acquire a large freezer" (39). (In the original *New Yorker* version of the story, this line reads, more prosaically, "there comes a time. . ." In the book version, Hemon opts for the Latinate and thus more elevated "arrives" than the Germanic "comes.") The inflated language is lost neither on the reader nor the familial audience in "Everything." The narrator's mother "rolled her eyes at my father's rhetoric" and the audience-aware narrator says: "I made sure that I was visibly indifferent to all that was said" (39). Even at home he is performing his identity to his familial audience.

Regardless of how trivial the object of the quest may be, Hemon is consciously and comically working with a vital and fecund archetypal pattern. As Christopher Booker writes,

no type of story is more instantly recognisable to us than a Quest. Far away, we learned, there is some priceless goal, worth any effort to achieve: a *treasure*; a promised land; something of infinite value. From the moment the hero learns of this prize, the need to set out on the long hazardous journey to reach it becomes the most important thing to him in the world. (69, my emphasis)

Recognizing the importance of the quest tradition is crucial for understanding "Everything," including Hemon's final turning-away from genre tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> Hemon is, however, careful to point out that the freezer was "the biggest model available on the lousy market of socialist Yugoslavia" and the father "had somehow discovered that the best price was in Murska Sobota" ("Everything" 40). The object of the quest may be incongruous but it is not absurd or without motivation.

Throughout “Everything,” Hemon frolics with the language and diction of the quest tradition, and eventually the narrator, who had been “indifferent” to his father’s desire to freeze food, speaks amorously of this object in a shop in Murska Sobota: “In the window, a humongous freezer chest glowed as if in a heavenly commercial” (49). The *New Yorker* version differed slightly, highlighting the quest-object even more: “In the window an enormous freezer glowed like a treasure chest in a commercial” (Hemon, “Love and Obstacles”). The term “treasure chest” implies a venerable and archetypal object, while the “commercial” undercuts the treasure’s status because the goal is an object available for immediate purchase. Similarly, the near-oxymoron “heavenly commercial” yokes the divine with the earthly. However, as mentioned, the narrator’s goal on this quest is not merely to acquire a freezer for his family but to enter manhood by losing his virginity. In other words, there are two simultaneous quests: the stated goal of travelling to buy a freezer, and the narrator’s desire to enter manhood.

In his classic *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye observes that, unlike religious quest patterns,

in the secular quest-romances more obvious motives and rewards for the quest are more common. Often the dragon guards a hoard: the quest for buried treasure has been a central theme of romance from the Siegfried cycle to Nostromo, and is unlikely to be exhausted yet. (179)

Frye speaks further of the quest pattern’s adaptability—“Translated into ritual terms the quest-romance is the victory of fertility over the waste land. Fertility means food and drink, bread and wine, body and blood, the union of male and female,” while in “dream terms, the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment” (180). In “Everything,” the narrator’s father clearly states the point of the treasure-hunt: “The ice box in the fridge was no longer spacious enough to contain the feed—meat, mainly—for the growing children; the number of family friends was so large that the supplies for an improvised feast had to be available at all times” (39). The narrator, like any rebellious teenager, has no interest in domesticity and growing families.

The word “treasure” appears (again) in the story, this time referring not to culinary but to sexual appetites. The narrator describes his younger self, his true aim in travelling to Murska Sobota: “I needed to find places with a high density of youth, where comely Slovenian girls stood in clusters, steadily rejecting the clumsy advances of Slovenian boys, conserving their maidenhead for a pill-carrying Sarajevo boy, his body a treasure to squander” (Hemon, “Everything” 48). The narrating figure lampoons his



teenage self's nervousness through the language and trope of classical romance: "maidenhead" is an archaism plucked from the realm of a courtly love tradition. Though the narrator overcomes a few real and imagined obstacles on his quest to buy a kitchen appliance (e.g., the criminals in his train compartment), the real obstacles for him are those littering his imagined road to non-virginity, a road that in his mind is linked to roguishness and filled with potential dangers and possible adventures.

After a drinking session with a local drunk, the narrator feels elated at having experienced life just as his roguish idol Rimbaud surely had:

And as I stepped out on the vacant streets of Murska Sobota, a wave of euphoria surged through me. This was experience: I had possibly lost my head and experienced a spontaneous outpouring of strong emotion; I had just drunk with a disgusting stranger, as Rimbaud surely did in Paris once upon a time; I had just said Fuck the fuck off to the responsible life my parents had in store for me; I had just spent time in the underworld of Murska Sobota and come out soaked with sweat and tears. (52)

By equating himself with Rimbaud, by imagining that one drinking session in a sleepy down, which he refashions into "the underworld of Murska Sobota," constitutes saying "fuck the fuck off to the responsible life" of bourgeois society, the narrator slides from self-fashioning into self-delusion. Saying a few four-letter words is unarticulated rage; the teenager's Murska Sobota malaise is nothing compared to Rimbaud's errant ways. And yet, the vulgarity links the narrator to the criminals he met on the train. In a double-transgressing of conversational rules, the Sarajevan had asked the narrator: "Do you fuck?" (40). The rudeness breaks the conversational rules of polite society as the thug linguistically positions himself as an outsider; also, Hemon breaks with literary decorum by clearly announcing a central concern of the narrator. "Will he copulate?" appears to be the central question of "Everything." The choice of words links the narrator lexically to that *other underworld*, that of a "sexually indulgent . . . criminal culture . . . whose norms were vastly different from that of official culture" (Reynolds 62). The difference, of course, is that late-20<sup>th</sup>-century teenage randiness is not a great diversion from the norms of "official culture."

In a section of "Everything" that spoofs facile Freudian symbolism, the sexually frustrated narrator returns to his room, but "[t]he key would not enter the lock, no matter how hard I tried to push it in" (54). It is of course the wrong room; his sex drive has propelled him to the American woman's temporary abode across the hall. "She flashed a barely perceptible smile and I understood we were in it together now" (55). He has, of course, understood nothing, not least because he cannot communicate

with her in English and because “barely perceptible” is a synonym for absent. This is one final attempt at roguishness—engaging in sex but also luring the married woman away from her snoring husband. Of course, this is delusion: the narrator leaves his door “open, in case Elizabeth wanted to put her dull husband to sleep and then tiptoe over to my frolicsome den” (56)—it is a final attempt at a sexual tryst in a nomadic realm beyond the constraints of bourgeois society. Instead, it is not “Elizabeth” that comes to call but the hotel receptionist Franc, one of the few characters to be given the solidity of a real name. The narrator has, as Ed Pavlič writes in a *Quarterly Conversation* review, “to fend off a material, verifiable (if benignly paternal) attack from a Slovenian hotelier who has had it past here with our narrator’s delusional (if self-consciously Rimbaudian) mischief.” In other words, the would-be rogue escapes his family, only to run into another author figure, an ersatz-father.

The older narrator speaks almost kindly of Franc as he reflects on the beating he received in the “hotel ambitiously called Evropa” (Hemon, “Everything” 39). “He was a good, if unpleasant, man, Franc was,” he notes, adding: “He didn’t kick me in the face, as he could have done. He didn’t spit on me, but on the floor next to me” (57). Pavlič is correct to point out the paternal aspect. When Franc beats the narrator for his impudent and lustful behaviour towards Elizabeth, we are taken back to an earlier line in the story, where the narrator reflects on his youthful attempts at poetry: “My soul soliloquies often made Father regret that he hadn’t belted me more when I was little” (45). Franc and the narrator’s father are connected by a corrective urge—poetry and poetry-infused delusions are dangerous. By the end of the story, the narrator seems to have been brought back into the family fold: “When I arrived home, begrimed with having been away, breakfast was waiting” (60). As one reviewer writes, “[t]he tragicomic dénouement returns him, sadder, wiser, hungry—and still a virgin—to the comfort of home and breakfast” (Levy 66).

This review implies that “Everything” ends with domesticity, with a return to the normality and banality of family life, “food collection and storage” and maternal nourishment, which in a sense it does. However, “Everything” concludes with a short paragraph and a final sentence that trivializes the rest of the story—with its odes to self-fashioning and imagined roguishness:

The same day, Mother washed the denim pants I had worn in Murska Sobota, with the pill in the change pocket disintegrating—nothing was left except a nugget of foil and plastic. The freezer chest arrived after seventeen days. We filled it to the brim: veal and pork, lamb and beef, chicken and peppers. (Hemon, “Everything” 60)

The pill, which had represented the narrator's hopes, is destroyed. In structural and quest terms, the father's goal for his son has been achieved: a freezer has been purchased and delivered.

But Hemon's neat wrap-up of an archetypal pattern we all know is unravelled by the final sentence of "Everything." The final words undo the "heavenly" symbol of the freezer as a symbol of planning and plenitude: "When the war began in the spring of 1992, and electricity in the city of Sarajevo was cut, everything in the freezer chest thawed, rotted in less than a week, and then finally perished" (60). The ending of "Everything" renders the rest of the story paltry, from the quest to lose virginity, to the neat and archetypal quest story. Structurally, the final, 34-word sentence is insignificant, as it takes up approximately half a percent of the story. Semantically, the sentence looms over and seemingly eradicates the content of all that has preceded it. "Perished" is a brilliantly mis-chosen word, since "meat" has of course already died. The verb brings together thoughts of human demise as well.

By upending a seemingly whimsical tale about a trip to a sleepy town in what was once a common state, Hemon goes rogue on the quest narrative. After overtly satirizing literary conventions and tropes—travelling to purchase a freezer is hardly a grand quest, and getting drunk in a small ex-Yugoslav town is at best minimal roguery—Hemon's story veers towards the historical. "Everything" directs us towards the non-fictional scenario Hemon describes in "Let There Be What Cannot Be," where a "petty embezzler" moves from the margins of history to the mainstage: "It was only during the war, performing on a blood-soaked stage, that he could fully develop his inhuman potential. He was what he was because what could not happen did in the end happen" (61). These lines offer a gruesome parallel to the narrator's belief in his ability to fashion himself as a rogue. "Everything" is a story that, by introducing a nadir of modern European history, rejects the quest narrative and thus turns the story outward, moving us from delusions of teenage self-fashioning to historical horrors.

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## “Same Old Ed, . . . Uncommitted”: BMW Socialism and Post-Roguary in Guy Vanderhaeghe’s Early Fiction

# ABSTRACT

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In this paper I assess how Guy Vanderhaeghe’s early fiction criticizes the class-based and civil movements of post-1960s Saskatchewan through the recurring character of Ed. The protagonist of “Man Descending” and “Sam, Soren, and Ed” from *Man Descending*, the uncollected “He Scores! He Shoots!” and the novel *My Present Age*, Ed both condemns and epitomizes the contaminated and seductive gestures of the movements’ influences and enterprises. Vanderhaeghe deploys layers of social criticism: the first comments on the new urban progressive generation—the BMW socialists—while another manifests a counter-criticism that comments on those who challenge social progress, questioning their motives and the credibility of their critique. But what is a BMW socialist? A sociopolitical chameleon hiding behind pretense? Ed describes such a creature as a former “nay-sayer and boycotter” who “intended to dedicate his life to eternal servitude in a legal-aid clinic,” but then “affluence did him in” and now “his ass [is] cupped lovingly in the contoured leather seats of his BMW” (*Man Descending* 237–38). Vanderhaeghe’s early works criticize the contemporary middle class and progressivist movements of the second half of the twentieth century through this sociopolitical rogue—who in turn becomes a post-rogue. For Ed is ironically undercut by a counter-narrative that is often sub-textual, resulting in a fascinating appraisal of social ignorance, immobility, and unproductivity rather than of any specific ideology.

**Keywords:** Guy Vanderhaeghe, Saskatchewan, socialism, Slavoj Žižek, postmodernism.

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Guy Vanderhaeghe's Ed is a knave to socialites and a sociopolitical rogue, what one of the author's early characters would call a "non-violent shit-disturber" (*Man Descending* 93)<sup>1</sup>—although he is occasionally prone to violence as well. What he disturbs are the self-righteous values and discourses of a group that he labels "BMW socialist[s]" (241). But Ed is also a pathetic hypocrite, socially static and economically immobile. He is the epitome of politics, of the political putting-into-words, through his rants, tirades, and metanarratives. He is the truest embodiment of Vanderhaeghe's dual-layer commentary on progressivism—hyper critical and hypocritical—a culmination of character types, at once critic and criticized: hyperactive and interpassive. Ed is a post-rogue who feigns scoundrelism and in turn reveals the subterfuge of social commentary.

### GUY VANDERHAEGHE, ROGUE SOCIAL REALIST

Born in Esterhazy, Saskatchewan in 1951, Vanderhaeghe grew up through decades of major social movements and political change in the prairies. In his interview with Nicola Faieta, "Guy Talk," he says: "there was one set of beliefs that I was raised with that was challenged by another set of beliefs through the 1960s and 1970s" (264). While Vanderhaeghe does not explicitly use the term, I label this set of beliefs as progressivism, which became popular when the "labour movement, organized farmers, women, students, Aboriginal people, Canadian and Quebec nationalists were on the upsurge from the mid-1960s" and "political culture was moving slightly left" (Brown, Roberts and Warnock 23), at least in urban centres. In response to this progressive shift, rural ideology moved from a paradigm of the old left—the co-operative views of the Douglas days and the Pool—to a new right—the populism that was "quickly replacing left agrarianism" (25). The "cooperative" nature of the CCF might be assumed to foster progressivist politics; however, through the early and mid-twentieth century "Marxism was tainted in the social-democratic lexicon because the communists had appropriated it, and equated it with the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'" (Penner 142).<sup>2</sup> The lingering conservatism of

<sup>1</sup> *MD* hereafter.

<sup>2</sup> This tainting has clearly persisted in Canadian literary studies as well. Robin Endres notes that "[w]ithin the confines of Canadian literary criticism there is little explicitly Marxist theory and analysis of works of Canadian literature" (110), and with the exception of James Doyle's *Progressive Heritage* and a few scattered articles, little has changed since Endres made that claim in 1978. For further evidence, one need only note the absolute absence of the CCF, NDP and agrarian socialism in general in David Carpenter's *The Literary History of Saskatchewan*.



the Canadian prairies is tied to the geography and social stasis of rurality, for as Munroe Eagles notes, “[g]eographic features often provide evocative and powerful anchors for group identity and symbols of group unity” (19). Wendy Griswold argues that if shared “common ground, which is typically geographic, political, and/or economic, gives rise to shared forms of cultural expression,” the “inverse is true as well; shared cultural features may encourage political or economic linkage” (13). Eagles elaborates how geographic features in fact often “serve as nothing more than a metaphor for the common features, shared history, or ways of life that define [a] region” (19). This anchoring of metaphorical identity and imagined community, what Eagles calls the “Sense of Place” (19), is central to the complex politics of Vanderhaeghe’s 20<sup>th</sup>-century Saskatchewan and has renewed relevance as populist politics return to the forefront, both in the Canadian prairies and the western world more generally. Mid-century rural Saskatchewan’s sense of place revolved around the region’s distinctiveness as rooted in the agrarian socialism that carried it through the Depression; it arose in response to what Doug Owrarn notes as “the disappearance of traditional mythologies and the impossibility of holding to earlier utopian promises of the West as agrarian Eden” (351). This “working-class identity” defines the economically caged as “minority communities” in Vanderhaeghe’s fiction (Kruk 9), which serves as “a local response to the international social and political situation of the 1960s and 1970s” (Zichy 42). It is this “part of Saskatchewan’s distinct political culture—the continuous vigor of major party sentiments” (Smith 41) and regionalist identification with the tenets of the CCF—that causes a schism between the old left of the ’30s and its new expression by the ’60s generation.

Then came the Waffle, the 1969 manifesto that rejected the “communist and Trotskyite infiltration” of the CCF (*Waffle Manifesto* 1) and demanded “an independent socialist Canada” led by a radicalized New Democratic Party charged with dissociating the nation from American corporate capitalism (8–9). Norman Penner notes: “As far as the communists in Canada were concerned, their fight against capitalism included the fight against social democracy” whereas the Wafflers “wanted a much greater emphasis on socialism” (vi–vii). This divide within the Canadian left clashed with the emerging right from the United Kingdom and United States, and in the early 1980s Grant Devine and his colleagues championed the provincial Tories with “no grand design of what they meant to do besides get rid of the ‘socialists’” (Brown, Roberts and Warnock 33). The Tories won the 1982 election, at least in part thanks to that platform, and “the new Tory government believed that it could declare Saskatchewan done with ‘socialism’ and ‘open for business’” (35). As Gerald Friesen writes, in the 1980s the “farmer’s replacement as the focus of prairie

social mythology was the business leader" (436); as an agrarian economist Devine embodied both the farmer and the businessman, intersecting the ideologies of the old left and the new right.

This was the political climate—a socioeconomic blizzard on the progressively balding prairie—in which Vanderhaeghe was writing and publishing his first novel, *My Present Age*, a social realist rogue narrative published in an era in which scholarly and literary writing were dominated by postmodern historiographic metafiction. The novel follows and is narrated by Ed, who is also the protagonist of the two concluding stories in Vanderhaeghe's Governor General's Award-winning first collection, *Man Descending*, and the uncollected "He Scores! He Shoots!" The clash between populism and progressivism and the class divisions that often parallel those ideological affiliations are recurring interests in Vanderhaeghe's regionalism, which often borders on social realist fiction. While this genre was out of fashion with the literati in the wake of authors like Kroetsch, Wiebe and Atwood, Vanderhaeghe's early works wandered the borderlands between genres thanks to Ed, a former graduate student turned social commentator and historical fiction author. Ed's historicist meta-text is simultaneously the guise under which Vanderhaeghe's early work received scholarly attention and the veil behind which those works were able to make their astute social commentary on contemporary prairie politics.

Vanderhaeghe acknowledges a "class component" in his 20<sup>th</sup>-century Saskatchewan-set writing, stating: "I certainly did not grow up in a middle-class environment, and having experienced what it means to do without, I think that my early work has this element of certain groups of people being voiceless" (Faieta 260–61). Laurie Kruk has also noted that Vanderhaeghe's early stories "explore the 'cages' of economic mobility through portraits of working-class men" (6). Vanderhaeghe's first two collections were published in the wake of "two imposing figures [who] emerged to champion neo-liberal ideology" internationally: Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (Brown, Roberts and Warnock 32). The trends in rural politics throughout the mid-to-late-20<sup>th</sup> century and Vanderhaeghe's upbringing in the southern Saskatchewan town of Esterhazy provide context to understand the variety of politically inflected and socially critical voices in his early work. Throughout his career, starting with his master's degree in history, Vanderhaeghe has examined political dynamics and social reconstruction in Western Canada and the United States. I will assess how Vanderhaeghe criticizes these class-based and civil movements in post-1960s Saskatchewan through Ed, who both condemns and epitomizes the contaminated and seductive gestures of these influences and enterprises. Vanderhaeghe deploys layers of social criticism: the first comments on the

new urban progressive generation—the BMW socialists—while another manifests a counter-criticism that comments on those who challenge social progress, questioning their motives and the credibility of their critique. But what is a BMW socialist? A sociopolitical chameleon hiding behind pre-tense? Ed, describes such a creature as a former “nay-sayer and boycotter” who “intended to dedicate his life to eternal servitude in a legal-aid clinic,” but then “affluence did him in” and now “his ass [is] cupped lovingly in the contoured leather seats of his BMW” (*MD* 237–38). Vanderhaeghe’s early works criticize the contemporary middle class and progressivist movements of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through this sociopolitical rogue—who in turn becomes a post-rogue. For Ed is ironically undercut by a counter-narrative that is often sub-textual, resulting in a fascinating appraisal of social ignorance, immobility, and unproductivity rather than of any specific ideology.

### ED, A MAN DESCENDING ON BMW SOCIALISTS

I will discuss the Ed stories—“Man Descending,” “Sam, Soren and Ed,” “He Scores! He Shoots!” and *My Present Age*—in diegetic chronological order so as to trace Ed’s narrative evolution as a character and a critic from rogue to post-rogue.<sup>3</sup> The rogue motif, within the English literary tradition, is first associated with the Early Modern period—the womanizers in John Donne’s poetry, the comedic and villainous knaves in Shakespeare’s drama. But the rogue categorizes a site of aporia, embodying the traditional figure of the Early Modern vagrant, but also a metaphorical representation of the upper class as cutpurses, particularly during and after the Industrial Revolution, as depicted in “The March of Roguery” by C. J. Grant (see fig. 1). This character-type frequently appears in the picaresque, a mode that has persisted into the postmodern era and regionalist texts with works such as Robert Kroetsch’s *The Studhorse Man*. In North America, the socially critical rogue is perhaps best embodied by Mark Twain’s Huck Finn. Notably, Sam Waters, the protagonist of Ed’s meta-textual western novel, *Cool, Clear Waters*, meets the legendary drifter in a passage recounted in *My Present Age* (220–23). In the way that Huck was used to critique the Old South, Ed—reflected in both the moralistic

<sup>3</sup> While most literary critics ignore the uncompiled “He Scores! He Shoots!”—and at least one has called it “deservedly excluded” and “pathetically unconvincing” (Zichy 59–60 n. 12)—I will demonstrate its centrality to a reading of the recursive nature of Ed’s character across his narrative arc and the ways by which this recursion destabilizes previous readings of this character.

Sam Waters and the embittered middle-aged Huck—provides a voice that comments on a particular political climate. However, he also serves as a self-reflexive lens through which we may examine the pitfalls of social commentary and the dualism of roguery.

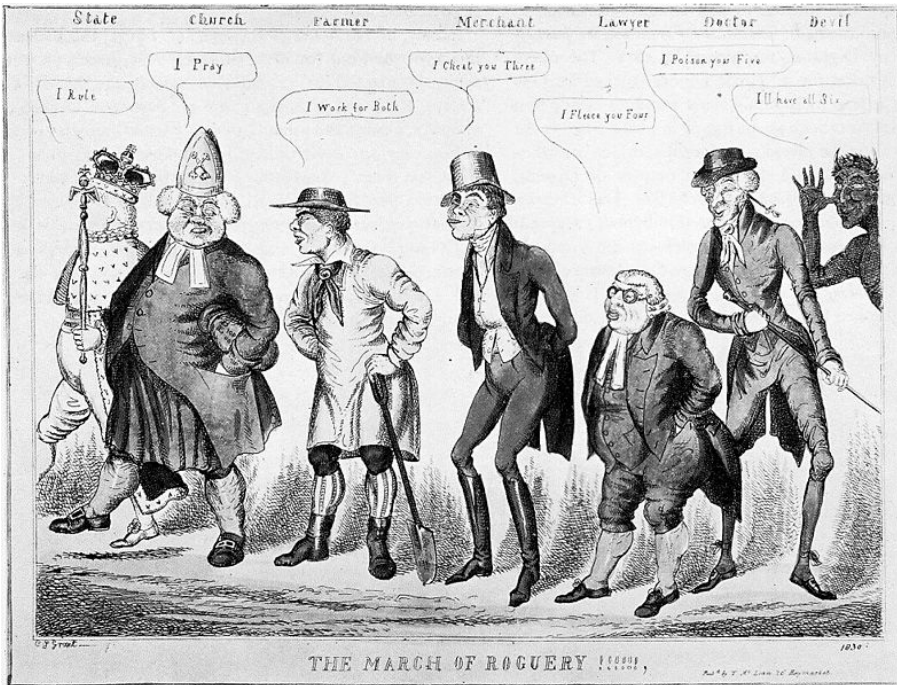


Fig. 1. C. J. Grant's "The March of Roguery." Source: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

When we first meet Ed in "Man Descending," he is a "fat, lazy, emotional, unemployed intellectual" (Forceville 53) who requires scotch as a "social lubricant" and yet whose "grievous faults of character could be remedied" if he were to make any effort (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 214–15). Thirty years old and living in the urban center of Saskatoon in the late 1970s, Ed is a seemingly ideal candidate to represent the new generation of progressive Saskatchewan. And as Stephen Dunning notes, "despite his vigorous ethical denunciation of his age, [Ed] also represents his culture" (31). However, the narrative's undermining of Ed—the commentary on his culture—is not a treatise against a particular milieu, but a commentary about the immobility within it. Ed's wife Victoria and her civil servant friends constantly harangue him about finding work (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 219, 222) for he is a graduate school drop-out who cannot hold a job in an "adult extension program" at what he calls the local "College of Knowledge" (218–19). Ironically, Ed is

faulted by middle-class “leftists” for not partaking in capitalism, for failing to be indoctrinated into a system that masquerades as socialist under the guise of progressivism while it is decisively on its way toward the neo-liberal and Devine-lead Tories of the 1980s.

Ed fully embraces this sub-textual commentary on progressivism; he incorporates it into his narration and his interactions with the other guests at the New Year’s party he attends, drunkenly taking on the role of the knave and thus the dual role of critic and criticized. When Ed joins two civil servants in an argument over Chilean refugees, he claims: “I know nothing about politics, but then neither do any of the people I am arguing with. . . . In no time several people have denounced me as a neo-fascist” (223). Ed does not give himself enough credit here; he is aware of the hypocrisy inherent in the civil servants’ anti-individualism and phony—or at least self-aggrandizing—concern for disenfranchised Chileans. Ed is not ignorant of the politics at play. Rather, he is less entertained by those politics than by his heightened awareness of human nature and his ability to manipulate people based on their ignorance. Charles Forceville writes that “despite frequent misjudgements, [Ed] is capable of surprisingly perceptive and profound comments” (53). He quotes Vanderhaeghe himself, who said in an interview with Forceville that Ed is “capable of telling truths that more admirable people *cannot* tell” (54). Ed sees himself as “the watcher”—Vanderhaeghe’s original choice for the collection’s title (Hillis 24)—a voyeur of and commentator on social interactions, yet he is as much a chameleon as those he criticizes. “Ed is, on one level in the novel, the almost nameless witness, the chronicler of his ‘present age,’” but on the other hand, he “is incapable of dealing in any practical sense with what this ‘present age’ confronts him with” (Forceville 55). Ed’s paradoxical insight and obliviousness, combined with his unwillingness to change and his belief that he is “not capable” of finding a job, telling the truth, or treating his wife differently because he is “a man descending” (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 226), allows him to be both disturber and pathetic fool, drifting between pariah and preacher, the embodiment of Vanderhaeghe’s commentary on progressivist politics.

Ed’s social roguery and simultaneously self-induced immobility are escalated in “Sam, Soren, and Ed.” The story opens with Ed’s observance of “the truly representative figures of Western decadence,” noting that he does not “presume to except [him]self from that company” but that he is also “not the only degenerate dotting the landscape” (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 229–30). The narrative resumes the tone established in “Man Descending,” giving Ed a voice that at once condemns what he sees as the sins of modern, urban, life—a “mass of gluttony, lechery, sloth and violence” (229)—and implicates him as part of that life, when he “gnaw[s] a chicken leg” (229),



ogles frisky teenagers (230), harasses his now-estranged wife (233–35), and picks a fight with “Mr. Kung Fu” (235–36). In his refusal to acknowledge his own faults, Ed has become more pathetic in his immobility than in the previous story. He no longer wears the subtext of an anti-ideological Marxism as support: Victoria does not press him about finding work when they interact, and there is no philosophical vendetta to be had against a roomful of civil servants. Dunning notes that “Sam, Soren, and Ed” “not only elaborates upon Ed’s personal decline, but also locates it within a larger cultural descent, most immediately from the elevated idealism of the 1960s” (32). No longer able to critique progressivist ideals without implicating himself—for no matter how immobile he has made himself within this paradigm, he is inescapably representative of the same—he shifts his commentary from what he sees as failing institutions (i.e. the “College of Knowledge”) to a fallen ideologue: his former friend and estranged wife’s lawyer, Benny.

Ed tells us that “[d]uring the late sixties and early seventies Benny was a priapic, hairy activist . . . a great nay-sayer and boycotter . . . with a millennial light in his eyes” who “had nothing but contempt” for Ed’s “uncommitted ways.” Ed “loved him for it,” but then “affluence did him in . . . , Benny knocked up money and then, in a rare interlude of common sense, married it” (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 237–38). Dunning writes that “Benny has betrayed more than personal loyalties: he has abandoned the idealism of a quintessentially idealistic generation, an idealism that Ed salutes and cherishes even though he could never make it his own” (32). To Ed, Benny is a scoundrel who has abandoned the noble leftist cause, yet “Ed was an outsider who could not assent to the self-righteously radical politics of his student days, . . . he felt guiltily inadequate about this and, . . . he ‘loved’ Benny for despising Ed’s ‘uncommitted ways’” (Zichy 53). But Benny also embodies the disillusionment of the ’60s, and in many ways serves as an allegory for provincial aspirations, particularly with regard to his education and the contrast between his university and post-university ideals. Ivan Avakumovic writes that the provincial universities in the prairies, “after a period of rapid expansion in the 1960s, discovered that the NDP when in power was less generous than many university socialists had expected” (255). Benny is the opportunistic Saskatchewan of the late ’70s—no longer a rogue in the sense of rejecting societal rules, but a member of “The March of Roguary” (Grant), a caricatured procession of cutpurse professions, including the lawyer. A leftist ideologue with a right-inclined wallet, Benny plunges headlong toward the Tory upset of 1982. As David Smith notes, the results of that election “revealed a latent weakness of governments committed to social-democratic ideals—which is that they appear, because of the goals they seek, to be insensitive to and distant from immediate

public concerns” (48–49). Ed, to be contrary, has adopted the Marxist subtext from “Man Descending,” idealising the “actual” left to which he had been “uncommitted” during his university years (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 237), growing late into the role of the sociopolitical rogue. Unlike Benny, a radical in the late ’60s whose vigor faded like the Waffles’ did, Ed is representative of the average member of the new generation, who “joined cooperatives . . . but . . . did not respond to any trumpet call to build a new world order” (Fairbairn 165). It is only in the provincial left’s twilight that Ed’s potential for rejection of social conventions emerges. He does not oppose progressivism, but the phoniness of those who claim to practice it: the “BMW socialist[s]” (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 241), in other words, those who have internalized an ideology which “hovers between ‘a system of beliefs characteristic of a certain class’ and ‘a system of illusory beliefs’” (Williams 66), concealing the disparity between classes and the hegemonic function of the “values and beliefs which a dominant class develops and propagates” (Williams 110). Ed attempts to completely remove himself from capitalism. He does not sell his labour for income and is not dependent on welfare or other governmental economic supports; he approaches what Gramsci called sub-proletariat. He resides in an in-between space of independence and outlaw. As Forceville notes, it is Ed’s “position as an outsider—emphasized by his unemployment—which allows him to stand back and comment on his society” (55), particularly its political and economic direction, in “Man Descending.” And yet, in “Sam, Soren, and Ed,” Ed uses his position to blackmail Benny for Victoria’s address. And as his socioeconomic situation declines, his commentary shifts to align more with his personal desires than a set of political beliefs.

While this shift at first appears to be oddly positive or at least beneficial, Ed’s apparent social progress is undermined by the subtext of his actions. His use of political commentary to extract information about Victoria allows him to confront her, resulting in the “positively medieval” challenge in which he intends to “giv[e] proof of his valour to his lady love” by competing in the upcoming River Run (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 255–56)—a seemingly genuine attempt to play the knight or the Donnian courtly lover rather than the rogue. Ed’s shift from ideological to personal politics is further depicted in his attempts to write a “Big Book” (244). After deciding that the position of author was “socially unproductive enough” to appeal to him (243), Ed begins a novel on the “lost generation”—his generation, new progressives (244–45). But after that book and a second idea both die, Ed begins writing a western about Sam Waters, ironically drawing on him as an inspiration for masculinity. Once again Ed has failed at and fled from any radical political discourse in favour of personal interest. And while he parallels himself with Waters when training for the River Run, “his alter ego serves only to



underscore the gap between Ed's ethical ideality and his reality" (Dunning 34). Any personal progress made through Victoria's challenge is undercut by the fact that Ed chooses not to enter the race despite believing that he could have completed it (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 261)—a delusional belief given that he was running less than half the length of the race during his practices. After romanticizing his training through the metanarrative of Sam's trial of manhood in the Old West, Ed doubles back on his ambitions, relinquishes his agency, and returns to his most comfortable position: the socially immobile and ironically hypocritical watcher. He fails at playing the political knave—falling into the base scoundrelism of personal manipulation—and fails at playing the courtly lover. His only retribution at the story's end is that he has finally "found [him]self a job" (261), brought back into the fold of capitalism through what must have been one of Benny's most boycotted businesses: Eaton's department store.

Vanderhaeghe's uncollected story, "He Scores! He Shoots!," takes place shortly after the events of "Sam, Soren and Ed" and depicts Ed as a bachelor slowly recovering from divorce. He remains socially critical, yet gradually discovers the empowerment of overcoming a life of irony and immobility. Ed holds his job as a salesperson in Eaton's china department, but employment has not relieved him from being mocked by his co-worker Carmichael, who constantly refers to him as the "*bull* in the china shop" (Vanderhaeghe, "He Scores! He Shoots!" 3). Ed continues to live a life of relative immobility and irony despite his return to the world of employment, depicted by his transparent claim that he is buying hockey equipment for a nephew to mask the shame of his lack of athleticism and his embarrassing "nom de hockey" from his adolescence (4–5). Also persistent is Ed's role as a judgemental watcher. He resumes his sly observations, this time hybridizing personal criticism with social commentary: he describes his colleague Sheila, "who belongs to a group of professional women . . . who foregather to ventilate their considerable grievances against society and the uppity cleaning ladies. These lively lasses refer to themselves *in toto* as The Collective. A name which always makes [Ed] think of Uncle Joe Stalin" (6). Word choice is revealing in this passage, as "professional women" suggests any woman working for a living but conveying a subtext of prostitution. Ed then distinguishes the category as "lawyers, civil servants, chartered accountants, social workers, teachers, 'communicators' etc." (6). In other words, they are middle-class women in unionized workplaces and crown corporations, or what Ed regards as feminist BMW socialists. While their "grievances against society" at first seem harmlessly, if not hypocritically leftist, akin to Victoria's civil servant friends, many members of The Collective could be found in a gender-swapped "March of Roguary" given their professions and their

condescension toward the working-class women in their employ. Finally, the reference to Stalin reflects the political disposition that characterized Ed in the previous stories. He still possesses the insight to comment on large-scale social ironies and the left's shortcomings, yet his own politics remain personally inflected, a site of irony.

Despite his duality as social rogue and pathetic fool, he does escape from one layer of his immobility over the course of the story: self-irony. Using several hockey-related plot devices, Ed takes Linda—one of the new members of The Collective—home with him and has adulterous sex with her after having his “resolve stiffened” by the fact that her last name matches his workplace’s bully’s (14). The next day, Ed is aware that “life is never as rich and rewarding . . . as we would like to imagine it” being that “there are seven Carmichaels listed in the directory” (14). However, the experience gives him the confidence to retort to his co-worker’s snide question of “How did the game go, big shooter? Did you score?” with the “cold, unflinching” response of “A hat trick” (15). Through this macho conclusion—which merits its own consideration within the discourse of masculinity in Vanderhaeghe’s *oeuvre*—Ed overcomes some of his social obstructions. His intercourse with Linda is a step away from the obsession with Victoria depicted in the other stories and his response to Carmichael measures his emergence from uncaring apathy. Most importantly, Ed is aware that his victory, like The Collective, is not all that it seems. His awareness of personal surroundings frees him from Carmichael’s criticism and prevents him from being undercut by his own narrative. From a more radically Marxist perspective, social mobility might make Ed more complicit in and subordinate to hegemony—the “domination [of] relations between social classes” (Williams 108)—and therefore arguably reduce his roguery. However, it frees him from the self-effacing irony of the pathetic fool. Ed’s transition indicates that sociopolitical rogues have the potential to free themselves of irony through awareness and agency. I argue that this balance of irony and agency, commentary and self-subversion, personal politics and party politics, which culminates in a critique of ignorance and apathy, is the primary political deployment of Vanderhaeghe’s early contemporary fiction. And as with all things spearheaded by Ed, this message is once again complicated by the addition of a final work related to that character.

### ED, A POST-ROGUE AVOIDING THE PRESENT AGE

When we revisit Ed for the last time in *My Present Age*, he has quit his job at Eaton’s, although, as Dunning notes, he does so “rather than wait to be fired because of his rudeness to customers” (36), a rudeness brought on,

in classical terms, by his “alienation of labour” (Endres 87). Ed is living in an apartment in near-sub-proletariat condition—quickly approaching the vagrancy of his meta-textual persona, Sam Waters, and his childhood icon, Huck Finn—a recursion of his situation at the beginning of “Sam, Soren, and Ed.” He is haunted by The Beast, a right-wing radio talk show host, and McMurtry, the senior citizen living in the apartment directly below his. The Beast roars at Ed and his ilk through McMurtry’s cranked speakers, and one day, at the novel’s opening, the old man himself roars at/about Ed through the call line. After McMurtry’s complaint about “bums,” The Beast proclaims that there are “just too many unemployment benefits and welfare rip-off artists” who are committing “fraud, . . . just a highfalutin name for stealing” (Vanderhaeghe, *MPA* 10). McMurtry is clearly opposed to progressivist sentiments, and The Beast serves as a mouthpiece for the incoming new right, exploiting the parallels between previous rural politics and contemporary urban ones. Both characters align Ed with the rogue, not in the sociopolitical sense, but in the image of the Early Modern cutpurse. Yet, rather than returning to his judgement of capitalism in “Sam, Soren, and Ed,” Ed attempts to clarify and justify his living situation: “I have phoned the open-line show to explain to him [The Beast/McMurtry] that I receive neither unemployment insurance nor welfare, but live on the capital I raised from cashing in my life insurance policy” (13). While he is perfectly content as a social outlaw, he resists being categorized as their kind of rogue. Driven to remove himself from the socioeconomic system, rather than serve as an outlier who moves against the current from within, he does not sell his labour for profit, but rejects all financial support. By cashing in his life insurance policy, Ed embodies the Marxist notion of life under capitalism—trading your years for money—and brings to light what Robin Mathews calls the “false consciousness of a colonial dependency in a bourgeois, capitalist, imperial system” (146). Ed’s repudiation of social and economic convention illuminates the “drugged, dragooned, down-trodden, dominated, and nearly drowned” state of the lower class (Mathews 146), and anticipates his total rejection of politics and interpassivity—his transcendence to post-roguery—that occurs at the novel’s conclusion. However, his behaviour in this scene and his avoidance of social support also suggest a fear of being (what he would perceive as) pitied by the middle class, the civil servants he derided in “Man Descending.” The irony is that Ed is (even if largely by his own doing) legitimately in need of welfare; he is in an economic position for which the activists of his university days would have rallied.

Dunning argues that “Vanderhaeghe resolves the ambiguity surrounding the authenticity of Ed’s reformation in the previous story [“Sam, Soren, and Ed”], for he has visibly declined, beginning the novel in worse shape than ever” (36). However, this reading ignores

the intermediate events of “He Scores! He Shoots!” Ed has not simply transitioned from a position of potential growth and maturity to his former immobility; he has returned abruptly to the role of the pathetic fool, to the ironic narrator devoid of agency, a role he shed at the end of the uncollected story. This gap in the canonical Ed narrative, this trace of a missing part of the story between *Man Descending* and *My Present Age*, haunts the genealogy of Ed’s characterization as much as it does Dunning’s reading. While *My Present Age* may be read as an independent work, a cohesive reading of Ed’s character, such as Dunning’s, Zichy’s, or my own diegetically chronological reading, is troubled by the disparity between the narrative’s chronology and that of the texts’ production. “Man Descending” was the first Ed piece to be published, appearing in *Aurora* in 1978, followed by “He Scores! He Shoots!” in *Matrix* in 1981, then “Sam, Soren, and Ed” later that year, while *My Present Age* first appeared in its full-length form in 1984 (Horava). It is likely that the uncollected story was written before Vanderhaeghe considered a novel featuring Ed, resulting in the disconnections within the character’s developmental arc. Furthermore, the lack of a significant gap between the publication of the second and third Ed story suggests that Vanderhaeghe was wrestling with how much closure to give the character. The fact that “Sam, Soren, and Ed” appears in *Man Descending* and “He Scores! He Shoots!” does not, canonizes Ed’s ambiguity and allows him to languish in the “gap” leading up to *My Present Age*. Only when all the published Ed works are considered within their diegetic chronology does this characterization collapse. We end up with recursions of the “same old Ed” (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 239), each embodying their present age while being critical of its politics, each having the potential to rise or fall within their situation, each needing to escape the irony of their narration, each struggling with the fact that they are always already depictions of a man descending.

One of the saving graces for this atemporal, recurring character is that the Ed from the novel, like all others before him, “provides more than a parable on modern life: he also analyzes the forces at work in his culture” (Dunning 36). This analytic approach is particularly evident when Ed shouts “Free Balzac!” in front of a downtown legal office and comments: “It is a sign of the present age that no one joined in. . . . Fourteen years ago someone would have” (Vanderhaeghe, *MPA* 102). Ed again blends personal and social politics; his protest is not for the liberation of an individual, but for a collection of his books that his estranged wife Victoria refuses to relinquish in their divorce proceedings. And yet, his social disruption reveals an astute commentary: the ignorance shown in response to his shouts is indicative of ever-declining progressivist engagement, now a mere relic of the ’60s and ’70s as the province winds up for Devine’s Tories

(who have already won the election by the time Vanderhaeghe is writing the novel). Ed recursively embodies both the roles of critic and criticized, cunning rogue and foolish knave. For example, after providing extensive commentary on Marsha's bourgeois father, Ed happily accepts her offer of his favorite drink, the gentleman's drink, Scotch (78), yet claims he "never went in for that heightened-awareness crap" in university (79). Ed distances himself from the leftist paradigms that he idealized in "Sam, Soren, and Ed," even though he continues to judge people by those standards.

Perhaps Ed's, and by extension Vanderhaeghe's, strongest socioeconomic commentary in *My Present Age* is found in Bill, Marsha's ex-husband, who has converted to an extremist Christian subset or what Ed calls "an unpopular lunacy," in contrast to the progressivist "atheist's liberalism" (33–34) that the couple previously practiced. As in Donne's knave poems, religion, sanity, and social politics are interwoven and contrasted, encapsulated within a single character. This parody culminates when "Marsha's Pop offered to write a thousand-dollar cheque and donate it to the Waffle branch of the NDP if Bill would get his hair cut and be married in the United Church" but now "it seems that Bill's political expediency is having unforeseen consequences" (85). This scene is thick with political ironies. The Waffle emerged in 1969, more than a decade before the novel's setting of Saskatoon's rightward shifting-politics, and while it "stood as the embodiment of the left" in Saskatchewan, it "precipitated its own demise by abandoning the NDP in 1973" (Avakumovic 265–66). Like Ed, who at first attempts to impose his social insights on those around him, the Wafflers "tended to lecture. Unfortunately for them, the NDP was not a captive audience of undergraduates who had to put up with what was being said to them" (Avakumovic 237), just as the conservatives and BMW socialists surrounding Bill and Ed remain relatively unchanged by their counter-cultural practices. Ironically, it is the coerced wedding that allows Bill to find his own faith and lunacy or, as Ed sees it, to recognize that "[h]e was always crazy" and that his choice of a particular religious "lunacy" is in accordance with his "fundamental nature" (Vanderhaeghe, *MPA* 33–34). Bill is the reductionist's equivalent of Ed, suggesting that little sanity can be found in the decline of the present age and the mirrored descent of one's own life. Ed claims that Bill is the "ultimate simplifier" (34), and Dunning applies Kierkegaardian philosophy to read both men as ethicists, claiming that everyone else falls into the "aesthetic sphere" and that they "could be regarded as another version of Benny" (37). However, this approach—lumping characters into a philosophical binary—collapses when they are considered through the lens of class. Benny, as we remember, is a "BMW socialist," while Stanley Rubacek, Ed's obsessive student, hopes to get rich by writing a best-seller: an over-wrought redemption

novel that he transparently tries to pass off as creative non-fiction. Both characters are similarly situated as aesthetes according to Dunning, and both are practicing capitalists; however, they are distinguished by their socioeconomic status, and as a result, interact differently with Ed, who himself disrupts the Kierkegaardian binary of aesthete/ethicist.

While Ed utterly rejects Benny for succumbing to affluence and joining “The March of Roguery,” he tolerates Rubacek. The middle-aged writing student does not show “any sign of ethical seriousness” (Dunning 37), but his presence allows Ed to distance himself from roguery—at least in his own eyes—and resume his allegedly chivalric quest for Victoria, thereby straying from the path of simplifier. For example, Rubacek takes shifts on watch and provides Ed with (unwanted yet necessary) company while Ed stakes out Victoria’s potential hide-out motels. Dunning writes that “Kierkegaard identifies this boundary condition as irony” (38), the very condition from which Ed was emerging in “He Scores! He Shoots!” For Dunning, “both reflective aesthetes and ironists escape real self-knowledge, aesthetes by abandoning themselves to speculation and fantasy, ironists by pointing their fingers” (38). This is the culmination of the canonical Ed—the Ed of the collected works, the chivalric knight who believes he can complete the River Run but never does, the knave who blames socialites for social decline, and the narrator ironically undermined by his own narration. Vanderhaeghe thus explores “the dialectic between Ed and his age” (Dunning 38) in which, despite his frequent criticisms, “Ed represents rather than rebukes his culture,” a culture lost between ethics and aesthetics, witnessing “the price of bringing ideals into connection with reality” (40–41). However, as with the stories, the character and the novel’s politics shift at its conclusion, inviting us to rethink our response to the modern condition, its political climate, and our notion of sociopolitical roguery.

At the end of the novel, Ed retreats from both personal and social politics, from knavish personal critiques and self-perceived knightly pursuits. He tells us: “When the bank opens I’m withdrawing all the money I have left in my account. I’m not even going back to the apartment for my clothes and the rest of my things . . . I’m running away” (Vanderhaeghe, *MPA* 248). He has seemingly become a true vagrant; in the final scene he has “disappeared” to a “new, simpler life” (249). We might read this as Ed’s final descent into the role of the fool, since “beneath his ironic disillusionment with society lies a deeper disillusionment with himself for failing to live up to his ideals” (Dunning 41). Indeed, Zichy argues that Ed’s “uncommitted ways” (Vanderhaeghe, *MD* 237) lead him to his “final position,” which is “the only relation to society he can muster” because “[w]hen Ed claims that in not running in the marathon he is following



the model of Kierkegaard rather than Sam Waters, . . . he has gotten Kierkegaard's message exactly wrong" (54). But these readings fail to account for the entirety of Ed's narrative—the former omits "He Scores! He Shoots!" and the latter engages predominantly with *Man Descending*. As a result of these omissions, arguments that Ed is an emblematic character do not consider Ed and his narratives' recursive nature, or the significant departure from that trend which occurs at the end of *My Present Age*.

Ed's retreat from roguery, from ridiculing the dominant narrative and idealizing the leftist political underdog, into seeming passivity, is in fact one of his most active expressions of agency and commitment to politics. At Marsha's brother's wedding shortly before Ed's disappearance, he gives an inebriated speech about the dysfunctions of marriage: his last swing at being a non-violent shit-disturber. Someone from the audience yells at him to "[s]it down and shut up!" (Vanderhaeghe, *MPA* 247), and this is what he does, on the scale of his entire life, in a very Bartleby-esque style. He would prefer not to be found, prefer not to engage with the people or politics of his past (250). His vanishment is not a forfeiture, but a rejection of all social convention, dominant and emergent, sanctioned and counter-cultural. It is a self-removal from the politics of language, for the novel, driven by Ed's narration, and therefore his very diegetic existence, depends on his continued expression through language. And through this dis-integration, Ed transcends roguery to become post-rogue, for he has abandoned the social structures that permit "The March of Roguary," as well as his position as an outlaw commenting thereon through his attempt to abandon discourse. The post-rogue is outlaw to all politics, including the politics of putting-into-words, existing outside of both the dominant culture and the critiquing yet undermined counter-culture.

Slavoj Žižek writes that "in much of today's progressive politics, the danger is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to be active and to participate." For most of his narrative, Ed is driven by an urge to play politics, to be the villain in a recurring game that always, sometimes inexplicably, returns to the start with each new episode. At the outset of each subsequent text, Ed returns, or, more accurately, is returned—sometimes by his own hand, but always by Vanderhaeghe's scriptor's—to a state of social immobility and of liminality between critic and fool. Ed's inability to *be* active, to subvert systems of power and enact change, is caused by his near-perpetual self-irony, his self-critical narrative voice, and the undermining metanarrative of the stories in which he finds himself. He is always limited by his duality—as rogue and fool—and the duality of roguery—the outlaw who challenges social convention versus the scoundrels who establish and exploit it. Only in "He Scores! He Shoots!" does Ed *become* active rather than remaining trapped in a *becoming*



active, achieved by overcoming his irony and coming to terms with his disillusionment. Žižek claims that “the truly difficult thing is to step back and withdraw from it [the urge to participate],” which Ed does achieve at the end of *My Present Age*. He finds himself in a time where civil servants, lawyers, academics and writers interpassively save the world—talking about Chilean refugees but doing nothing for them, forming a women’s collective that excludes and looks down on other women, fabricating creative “non-fiction” rather than living a life. Ed himself defers most of his action to his western novel’s protagonist, Sam Waters, and even his composition of the book is interpassive: his “process of creation [is] . . . a case of automatic handwriting” (Vanderhaeghe, *MPA* 69). This “interpassive mode,” ingrained in our present age, keeps us “active all the time to make sure that nothing will really change” (Žižek). As an ideological mode of being, therefore, “the first truly critical step is to withdraw into passivity and refuse to participate” (Žižek). In response to Saskatchewan’s political cacophony in the early ‘80s—the new right, overlapping with remnants of the old left, both at odds with progressivist BMW socialists who were too pseudo-active to prevent the decline of socialism—Ed finally can do nothing but remove himself from discourse. By doing so he “clears the ground for true activity” (Žižek). The Ed texts circle around agency, commentary, and roguery, but they do not always demand activity.

Vanderhaeghe’s contemporary short stories culminate in a message against apathy and irony, and *My Present Age* concludes with a warning against unproductivity, against over-speaking and under-hearing, against the roaring of The Beast’s voice, which opens the novel, destroying our “brief peace” (1). Ed, as a post-rogue, transcends the motif’s dualism to ultimately reject the progressivist stagnancy of interpassivity and the ideological constructs of contemporary social convention.

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## Aussies, Rogues and Slackers: Simon Hanselmann's Megg, Mogg and Owl Comics as Contemporary Instances of Rogue Literature

# ABSTRACT

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This paper examines the Megg, Mogg and Owl stories of Simon Hanselmann, an Australian artist whose serialized comics both depict acts of contemporary roguery committed by a group of friends in an inner city sharehouse and test the generic limits of its own storytelling conventions, thereby becoming contemporary instances of “rogue texts.” The paper positions the adventures of Megg, a witch, Mogg, her familiar, Owl, their housemate, and associated characters including Booger and Werewolf Jones as contemporary variations of both the Australian genre of grunge fiction and the broad international tradition of rogue literature. It shows how Megg, Mogg, Owl and their friends use the structure of the sharehouse to make their own rules, undertake illegal behaviour, and respond to the strictures of mainstream society, which alongside legal restrictions include normative restrictions on gender and behaviour. It shows the sharehouse as a response to their economic, as well as cultural and social conditions. The paper then shows how Megg and particularly Owl come up against the limitations of the permissiveness and apparent security of their “rogue” society, and respond by beginning to “go rogue” from the group. Meanwhile, the text itself, rather than advancing through time, goes over the same chronology and reinscribes it from new angles, becoming revisionist and re-creative, perhaps behaving roguishly against the affordances of episodic, vignette form. The paper argues that Simon Hanselmann's Megg, Mogg and Owl comics can be understood as contemporary rogue texts, showing characters responding to social and generic limits and expressing them through a restless and innovative comics text.

**Keywords:** comics, grunge fiction, rogue literature, sharehouses, serialized storytelling.

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## INTRODUCTION: SIMON HANSELMANN'S MEGG, MOGG AND OWL COMICS

Simon Hanselmann is a prolific Australian comics-maker whose work chronicles the fictive lives of Megg, Mogg and Owl: young depressives sharing a house and experimenting with sex, sexuality, substances and behavioural norms, a “caustic, abusive ensemble of millennial burn-outs” (Brown). This paper analyzes the Megg, Mogg and Owl comics, funny animal narratives that depict a central group of non-conformists—explicitly positioned at the fringes of society, but whose characters and moralities are steadfastly concerned with creatively exploring boundaries of acceptable behaviour rather than with being outright deplorable. Still, as time passes in these comics, the reader’s understanding of the characters develops; characters change; and the work itself comes to deviate from the expectations it establishes in the reader, troubling expectations of what kind of story is being read.

As such, while the comic is not formally a work of rogue literature—which would have required its publication some three hundred years ago, into an environment with different understandings of subjectivity, publication and audience, among others—it suggests new configurations of the reinvigorated rogue, both a text about a group of persons who behave roguishly and a text conducting a meaningful act of roguery against genre, expectation, form. As characters change, so does the storytelling method; the story is typically composed of short vignettes which begin to chafe against their own formal limitations. While, like seventeenth-century rogue literature, the text surveys and depicts “low life and all forms of deceitful practices” (Mayall 56), and highlights much that’s vital and compelling about these practices themselves; it also allows its characters to grow away from those behaviours and out of the textual and generic structures that much of the comic spends depicting them so well.

The Megg, Mogg and Owl stories are sharehouse stories with sitcom rhythms; they double as ersatz delivery systems for complex, evolving and multifaceted tales of transgressive behaviours, especially investigating the dynamics of friendships and romantic partnerships that exist outside normative categories. Through both continuing and undermining traditions of slackerdom, embodying disinterested thinking and pushing past the boundaries of conformity and containment, they continue a conversation about changing masculinities in Australia begun in prose fiction as “grunge literature” in the 1990s. Ultimately, they are queer and probing narratives that explore the lived experience of mental illness and the consequences of trauma, complicating ideas of the citizen as criminal, the citizen as romantic, and the criminal as a force for

either social good or ill; as such, this paper argues that the literature of roguery provides an instructive lens through which to understand this contemporary Australian comic.

### THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME: MEGG, MOGG AND OWL AS CONTEMPORARY ROGUES

Meg and Mog are characters from a series of children's books published in the UK by Helen Nicoll and Jan Pienkowski (1972), but Hanselmann's stories, in the artist's words, have "zero similarities" to the children's books beyond surface influence (qtd. in Collins).

Megg is a green-skinned witch. Mogg, a cat, is both her lover and her familiar; until the end of the three main books' chronologies, they share a house with Owl, an anthropomorphized owl, who is more anxious to obtain markers of traditional adulthood than Megg and Mogg, bong-smoking slackers who often "gleefully sabotage [Owl's] anxious gestures towards romantic or professional normality" (Randle).

The most significant secondary character in their "desolate suburban world" (Reith) is Werewolf Jones, a burnout "party bro" who's into more serious forms of criminal behaviour than the protagonists (for instance, using heroin), who has two kids, also werewolves, Diesel and Jaxon, and who is more "up" for wild fun than any of them, as well as more liable to steer that fun towards a dark and disturbing outcome. He is often the catalyst of individual vignettes, especially the stories longer than a single page that take the characters away from the couch in their sharehouse and into the outside world (for instance, a theme park). Their milieu also includes occasional characters, including Booger, a "gender-illusionist boogeyman" (Hanselmann qtd. in Reith) with mottled green skin who presented as male when the characters all met in high school and presents as female in stories set in the present day.

The Megg, Mogg and Owl stories are published in a variety of formats and through a variety of sources: bound hardbacks from art and comics publishers, scans posted on Tumblr, self-published zines, vignettes in magazines, and other forms of digital and physical ephemera. In this paper, I limit the study to the three widely available collections published in English through Fantagraphics: *Megahex* (2014), *Megg & Mogg in Amsterdam (And Other Stories)* (2016) and *One More Year* (2017). All three collections cover roughly the same short span of time, with the latter two volumes filling out the main narrative with extra episodes.

In these episodes the characters exhibit alcoholism, drug addiction, codependence, promiscuity, hypocrisy, cruelty and laziness. They perform

a litany of misdeeds, from the clearly illegal to the questionably tasteful: these include misleading employers, cheating others, stealing, spreading bad information, corrupting others, having sex in public, defecating in public, spying on change rooms, breaking promises, and basic neglect of romantic, domestic and personal responsibilities. For the most part—with the crucial exception of an instance of sexual assault, discussed in the following section—these deviant behaviours are charming, as well as cringe-inducing. They may frequently either offend or revolt the reader, but rarely will they do both—instead, like the literature of roguery, “offering an irresistible combination of the exotic and alluring with the picaresque and threatening” (Mayall 65).

In large part, they offer the simple pleasure of watching young people push boundaries. Despite the comics’ large international readership, they cannot be decoupled from the Australian context of grunge literature, with which they share many characteristics. Referring to a boom in Australian fiction in the 1990s (with plenty of precursors), novels published (or received) as grunge literature promised to be raw, disturbing, compelling, unflinching and “real,” and proved popular with a “previously unmapped demographic of sub-thirty year old readers” (Leishman 94). Key works of grunge fiction suggested or promised to chart “the territory of Australia’s inner cities and the disenfranchised people who lived there; gritty, dirty, real existences, eked out in a world of disintegrating futures where the only relief from ever-present boredom was through a nihilistic pursuit of sex, violence, drugs and alcohol,” with notions of realism being “compounded” by the knowledge that many grunge novels were debuts (Leishman 94). As a commercial category, grunge fiction can be linked to related art forms marketed towards this demographic in the 1990s, including grunge music; as an artistic category, it has been linked to dirty realism, to Australian social protest literature of the 1930s, and to 19<sup>th</sup>-century French decadence literature (Vernay 152).

For many Australian readers, simply setting a comic in a sharehouse suggests a relationship to grunge literature. Since the 1960s, when it became common practice for young Australians to rent houses together in cities, the idea of the sharehouse has both been fixed in the cultural imagination as a site of experimentation and youth, and according to Griffin, an idea that has tracked changes and upheavals in society (21). In the present decade, the sharehouse is considered “a place to become yourself in ways you hadn’t expected” (22) with the economic reality of sharehouses (not everyone who lives in sharehouses would choose to live there) mixing with social benefits and a sense of imaginative possibility—access to new people and attendant opportunities, as well as freedom from the family.



As a crossroads, a private space, a subcultural space, and a space of conversation, the Australian sharehouse acts as a natural home for contemporary popular visions of roguery; and indeed Hanselmann's stories, which often take the form of a single page vignette, are ideally suited to chronicling it. Just as past instances of rogue literature might collect observations of wayfaring communities and concretize them as shorter-form anecdotes, the episodic structure of Hanselmann's work feels fragmented, observed, overheard, recalling Griffin's suggestion that "the true sharehousehold art form might be the oral tradition that's sprung from it": "After all, the stories people tell about sharehouses are how the sharehouse lives on as a dream. Part grimy kitchen-sink prurience, part distinctive oral history form, they can be educational screeds, implicit slices of moral instruction, and rich, weird lamentation" (23). If the vignettes aren't filled with the dictions of the "market place, prison and brothel," then, like instances of rogue literature, they well contain "a skilled literary reconstruction of the underworld cant based on speech movement" (Kleparski and Pietrzykowska 128).

If Hanselmann's texts eventually show the characters pushing against the boundaries of their social and economic lives, sharehouse life is initially depicted as a refuge, a place for the characters to be themselves and escape from mainstream society—a place that requires different attitudes towards work, the law, gender and money. According to Leishman, "Australian narratives have traditionally represented a particular type of individual, who has been defined in terms of his relationship to an uncompromising and brutal landscape"; for this individual, like the landscape, social injustices are not escaped, but endured (97). They are outlaws, but also social avengers, as when Megg sees a trucker making a lewd gesture, leans out the window of a car, and slashes his tires (Hanselmann, *Amsterdam* 10). Time and again, the Megg, Mogg and Owl stories show life outside the sharehouse as an ordeal.

Regarding work, neither Megg nor Mogg have jobs; Werewolf Jones sells felt hats on Etsy. Regarding the law, all the characters use drugs seemingly daily, and sometimes orgiastically. Regarding gender, in one scene, Megg is shown putting on makeup, smoking from a bong, then checking her possessions before leaving the house: she goes through a pouch of tobacco to check that five cigarettes are pre-rolled, then goes through her handbag, checking that she has "[b]ook, crystals, lighter, keys, knife, purse, phone, gloves, travelcard, pen, tobacco, travel joints, rum" (Hanselmann, *One More Year* 162). Much like Joan Didion's famous list of things to pack and carry when leaving town on a reporting mission—mohair throw, typewriter, 2 legal pads and pens, files, house key (Didion 34–35)—this process suggests that being a woman requires a kind of artillery, let

alone a depressed, unemployed woman who doesn't own a home. In one scene Booger, who once presented as male but now presents as female, goes to try on women's clothes in the changing rooms at a boutique and the attendant says: 'Uh, sorry. . . We uh. . . / We don't allow men in the lady's change rooms' (Hanselmann, *Amsterdam* 52). Megg comes to her defence and calls the attendant a "hate monger" and a "rude bitch"; "Oh, it happens all the time. . .," says Booger (52). Regarding money, at one point Megg suggests the three housemates "just stop paying rent altogether. . . / and see what happens. . ." (Hanselmann, *One More Year* 28). "Everything will be okay," she assures Owl: she's going to start making and selling ceramics, and Mogg will sell some of his CDs (29).

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They are not supported by traditional family structures. At one point Megg gets a text from her mother and is excited to hear from her; yet in the subsequent phone call, her mother asks to borrow fifty dollars, which is clearly an amount Megg cannot afford (she still says okay) (Hanselmann, *One More Year* 153–54). Yet they are (mostly) united by an aggressive attitude towards financial success. In a one-page strip called "Young Professionals," Megg, Mogg, Owl and Werewolf Jones are shown having a picnic in a park. Megg says: "Man, what a classy afternoon! / It was nice to get out of the house" (Hanselmann, *Amsterdam* 64). Mogg says: "Yeah, good idea, Megg" (though an asterisked info box corrects him: "Actually Owl's idea") (64). Megg says: "We should do classy picnics more often. . ." (64). "Yeah. I had a good time. / Top class!" says Werewolf Jones, who is pricking himself with a needle while the others (except Owl) smoke weed (64).

As this scene suggests, Owl is the character nearest to ideas of the citizen supported and encouraged by mainstream society. Indeed, his failure to belong to both mainstream society, in which he yearns to play a role, and to the culture of the sharehouse, to which he cannot belong thanks to steps he takes to better his lot, is a frequent source of derision from the other characters, especially Mogg the cat. In one scene Owl has a "ladyfriend," a "trainee policewoman," coming over to the house and seems embarrassed by Megg and Mogg. "She's very 'straight,'" Owl explains (Hanselmann, *Megabex* 53). "What?! Why is this woman coming to our house?! / Why can't you just fuck her in the woods like a real man?" says Megg (53). Owl begs Megg and Mogg to be on their best behaviour: "This is really important! I need her to think I'm a normal guy . . . A nice normal guy with a respectable career & good health" (53). Megg replies: "I don't think 'call centre douche' counts as a respectable career" (53).

At one stage, Owl discovers he is paying 80% of the rent. "... Yeah... you have your own room," says Mogg; "That's fair" (Hanselmann, *One More*

Year 6). She adds: “My parents only give me a certain amount of money, Owl . . . I can’t afford the type of fancy rent that you pay” (8). Even when Owl gets a “dream job,” the triumph is a tragedy: “they’ve agreed to take me on part time on a trial basis” (Hanselmann, *Megahex* 182).

Yet the Megg, Mogg and Owl stories don’t so much depict individual acts of outsiderdom as the operations of a counter-group: like instances of rogue literature, they depict “a society within a society, or rather outside it, an anti-society with its own rules and rulers” (Salgãdo 23). True, Owl is a black sheep, but he’s also depended on and treasured (if never supported, and in some cases actively harmed—the eventual catalyst for change). While no two characters display as much explicit and ongoing affection as Megg and Mogg, whose romantic and sexual relationship is as habitual and comfortable as it is frequently strained, the stories offer many opportunities for characters to express some form of love for one another. When Megg and Mogg are in Amsterdam, having a terrible time without their antidepressants, and learn that Owl is coming too, Megg says: “Owl?! / Oh, thank god! / . . . No offence. . . / But thank god” (Hanselmann, *Amsterdam* 127). They treat Owl cruelly, but depend on him. In another scene, Werewolf Jones hears his son Diesel level a repulsive slur against Owl, and is shocked to learn that he’s only repeating something Werewolf Jones said in the first place. Werewolf Jones explains: “Boys, Owl isn’t so bad. . . He’s just a bit of an asshole narc. . .” (Hanselmann, *Amsterdam*, 149). For Werewolf Jones, this is a serious compliment; the slur is something Werewolf Jones believes he is allowed to say within the context of his debatable affection.

Indeed, even Werewolf Jones is bound to the group because he suffers from mental illness, having a “disgusting person freakout” at the same time as Megg is having her daily “body freakout” (Hanselmann, *Amsterdam* 115) (fig. 1).

Despite how often the characters harm each other and seem to put their friendships in jeopardy, it’s clear they are highly valued. At one point, Werewolf Jones buys paint to paint the house (where he doesn’t live) and says: “We’re a family! / We’re at our best together!” (Hanselmann, *Amsterdam* 157). For all the deviant behaviour depicted in the stories, perhaps the most radical is the insistence on the value of friendship groups, which stands in contrast to the rugged idea of the (white, straight) Australian man pitting himself against the landscape; this also sets Hanselmann’s work apart somewhat from the tradition of grunge fiction, which often focuses on the romantic and the individual more than the group. What matters to Hanselmann’s characters is not the laws or standards of the culture or the land, but those set up within the sharehouse by example and agreement.



Fig. 1. Hanselmann, Simon. *Megg & Mogg in Amsterdam (And Other Stories)*. Fantagraphics, 2016. 115. Used by permission of Fantagraphics Books.



## THE LIMITS OF THE SHAREHOUSE: GOING ROGUE FROM THE GROUP

If rogue literature aims both to “satisfy the ever-present desire for the sensational” and “forewarn honest people against social parasites” (Kleparski and Pietrzykowska 123), the Megg, Mogg and Owl stories constantly ask the reader to reevaluate their understanding of what they’ve just read. What from one angle may be a sensational antic purposed towards friendship bonding and asserting the value of group, from another angle may be, of course, dangerous and criminal. The angles can also differ within and among participants. The structure of the comic begins to complicate and move towards change, when antics that may be appealing precisely because they are criminal are shown to affect characters to the point of trauma.

Among the Megg, Mogg and Owl stories’ relationships to popular and literary genres is a skeptical but deep-rooted relationship to the network sitcom. In interviews Hanselmann has claimed TV is “a bigger influence on his work than most comics”: “I’ve learned all of my most valuable lessons from *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*” (qtd. in Reith). Elsewhere he states the Megg, Mogg and Owl stories are “just a sitcom on paper” (qtd. in Nadel). When they appear in the comic, references to sitcoms are pointed and even critical, as when we briefly see Mogg watching a sitcom that resembles *Friends* on TV: “Monica, your OCD is spiralling out of control. . .,” says one character (Hanselmann, *One More Year* 109). “We’re legitimately concerned. This isn’t funny” (109). This stands in contrast to a comic where the humourous beats are periodically broken up with depictions of mental illness that go beyond gritty comic book “darkness,” even crossing into formal experiments that literalize the feeling of mental illness (as in fig. 1).

Yet it’s the episodic form of this comic that most closely resembles the sitcom, not only in its method of doling out story piece by piece but in the necessity of setting up comedic beats that either deliver on or productively subvert expectations set up in previous episodes or within scenes. As Nadel notes (after Frank Santoro), the regular grid of most of Hanselmann’s pages establishes expectations in ways that closely match the pacing of a sitcom scene. Many stories open with the characters sitting on a ubiquitous sharehouse couch, with a bong on the coffee table, pizza scraps and empty drinks; indeed we get this so often that every other kind of scene feels like an excursion, a special variation on the theme. These rhythms feel secure and serve as a visual cue that relationships will reset as if through “inconsumable” time (Eco 16). They also serve as spaces of security for the characters, who experience the world outside the sharehouse as difficult.

Over time, though, the characters start to push against these structures, and a text about contemporary roguery starts to behave as a contemporary rogue text. For all its benefits, the group is not sufficient to support its constituents' needs; moreover the structure of the comic, with its sitcom beats and implied reset procedures, is not sufficient to support the growth of individuals, which is necessary for characters who exist in time. In a reliable world, a reliable home, and as part of a reliable group, roguery is appealing for its "colour, excitement, energy, freedom and lack of restraint" (Mayall 77). However, the approach has limits; and to different extents, the characters of both Megg and Owl show how the sense of isolation they feel in the world outside the group might be felt just as acutely within the group.

If Megg feels embattled as a woman outside the sharehouse, she is also isolated in the house she shares with Mogg (a male cat) and Owl. As Murrie points out, contextualizing the phenomenon of grunge fiction, male friendship, "mateship," "has traditionally been a defining feature of dominant masculinity in Australia and the mechanism by which masculinity is both authorized and acknowledged in the individual male subject" (171). Despite Megg's gender (and the anthropomorphic status of the characters) this particular group is masculinist, both self-policing and self-authorizing, "an ideal vehicle for the maintenance of hierarchical power relations" (171). If masculinity after grunge literature is "marooned," "confused, contradictory, exhausted and disempowered," incoherent (176), then rogue spaces like sharehouses—and closed friendship groups—are spaces where this can either be challenged or remain intact.

When Owl and Werewolf Jones try to get Megg to play a video game in which one level is called "Feminist Rally Massacre," Megg has Booger take her to a "crafternoon" (Hanselmann, *Amsterdam* 72). There, three women named Emma, Clarity and Azura make vegan lasagne and spout apparently vague or unlistenable leftist values: "Basic wages blah blah blah," "Blah blah blah detention centers," "Blah blah blah the refugees," "Discrimination blah blah blah," "Blah blah blah privilege," "Blah blah blah yarn bombing" (Hanselmann, *Amsterdam* 75). Megg and Booger offend the women by chain-smoking and peeing in the back yard; Megg is contemptuous of these "flaccid hippies" emphasis on "playing" (80). She goes back to the male-dominated sharehouse and her cat/familiar/boyfriend, but because she's had an awful experience in the outside world, the return reads as an act of resignation.

In more and more of Megg's vignettes, particularly those spent alone with Mogg, Mogg expresses contentment with their up-and-down relationship while Megg expresses or hides dissatisfaction and fear of being stuck. One night the two of them are looking at the moon and Mogg says: "I never want to leave 'drug world.' / . . . Can we never leave?" (Hanselmann, *One More Year* 168). ". . . No . . .," says Megg (168). "One

more year”” (168; fig. 2). Because Megg’s dialogue appears in scare quotes, it suggests this deadline has been discussed more than once.

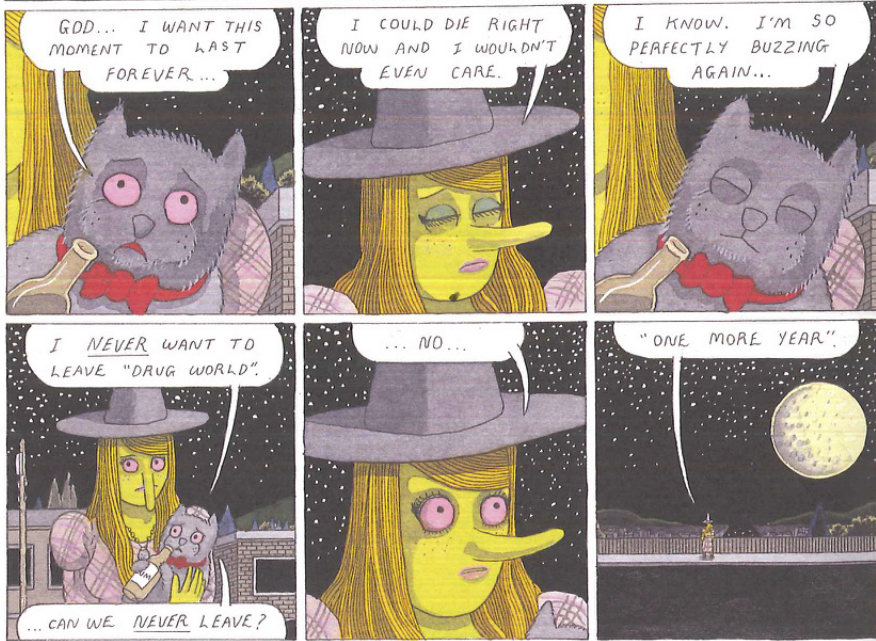
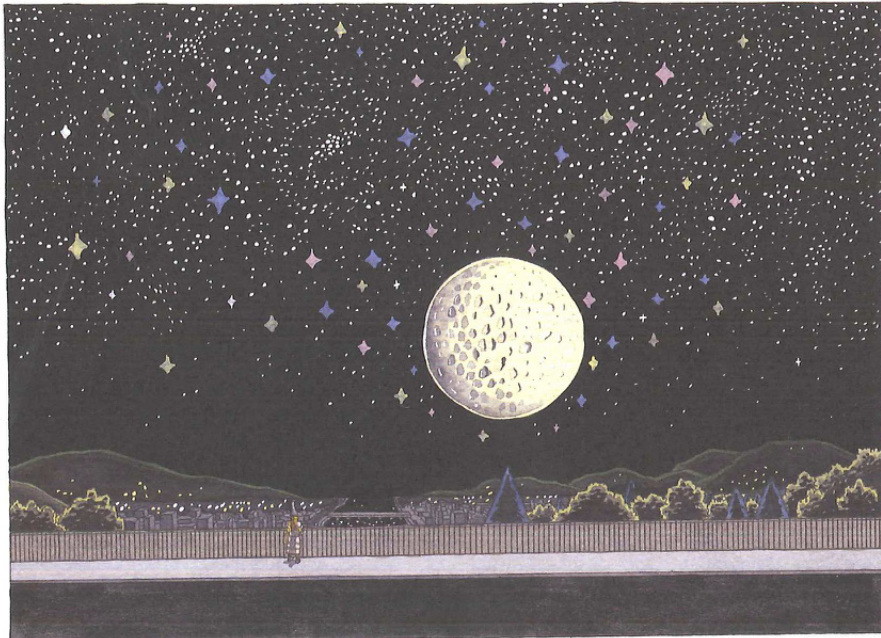


Fig. 2. Hanselmann, Simon. *One More Year*. Fantagraphics, 2017. 168. Used by permission of Fantagraphics Books.



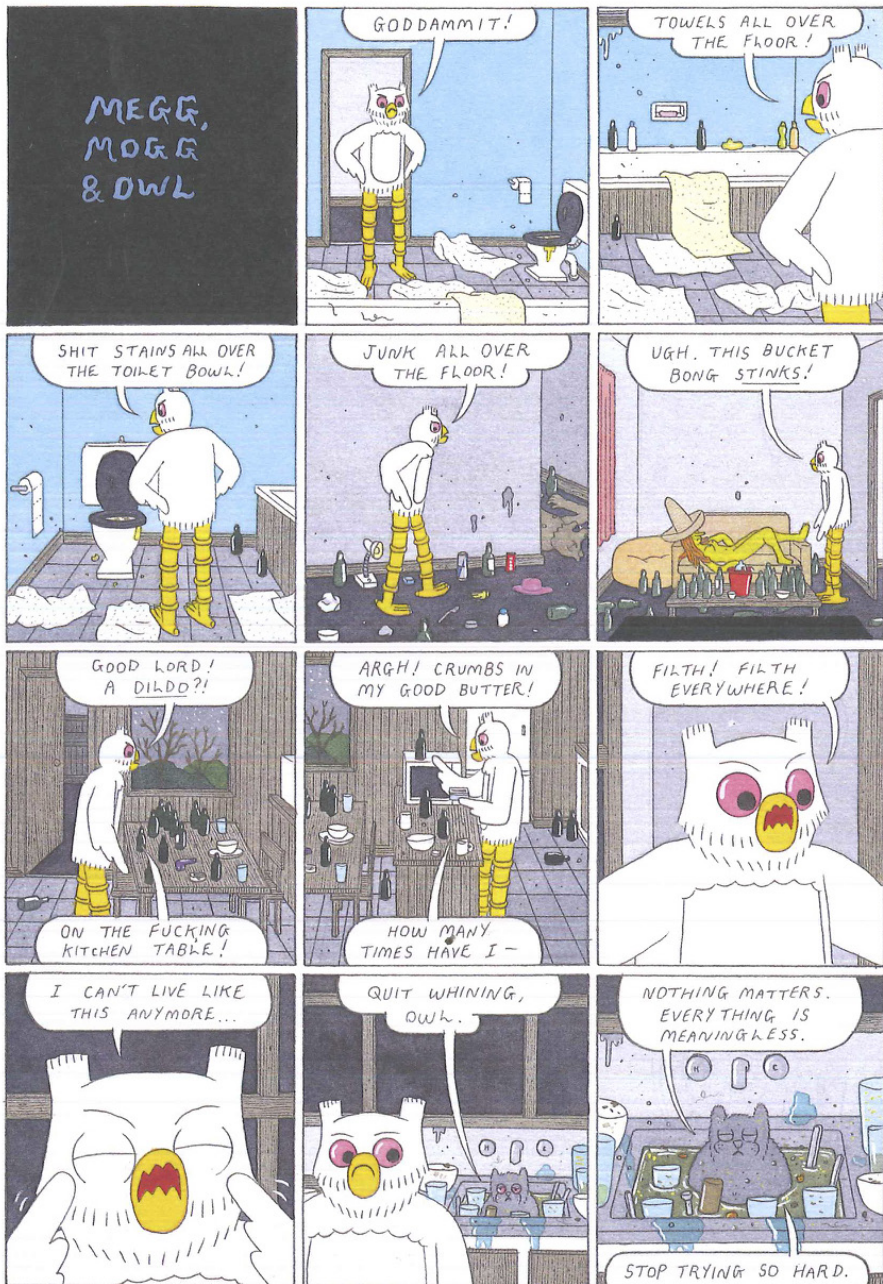
However, it's Owl who demonstrates the clearest need to go rogue from the group, and thereby most starkly reveals the limitations of the episodic form for allowing growth of characters. Owl is constantly demeaned, humiliated and disrespected by Megg, Mogg and Werewolf Jones, from the group declining to clean up the house on a day to day basis (Hanselmann, *Amsterdam* 98; fig. 3) to Megg spending money he's lent her for emergency dental care on alcohol, a Nintendo, a dress and a pallet of bananas (Hanselmann, *Amsterdam* 41).

These scenes exhibit considerable variance in tone, and are as likely to develop character as they are to set up a joke. Even so, the overall outcome is usually humorous, with the most serious moments in the Megg, Mogg and Owl stories being centred around, for instance, mental illness rather than sharehouse pranks.

A clear exception is a "prank" in which Megg, Mogg and Werewolf Jones sexually assault Owl. Specifically, they take him to a house promising a "birthday surprise" and then pretend to rape him, both through stating their intention and through physical violence and groping, before revealing it was all a trick and singing "Hip hip hooray!" (Hanselmann, *Megabex* 68–72).

Reading this scene for the first time is confusing; subsequent reads are sickening. Indeed, the scene was complicated in both conception and reception. In the version first published, Mogg tells Owl: "We're going to rape you"; in the collected edition, the line reads "We're going to do you" (68). According to Hanselmann, "it made more sense (for later in the story) for Megg and Mogg to not really fully know what they were doing"; some online commenters accused him of glossing over sexual assault, while others accused him of bowing to political correctness (Reith). Later in the story, Megg and Mogg are surprised that Owl has been traumatized by the episode. "It was sexual assault," he explains (Hanselmann, *Megabex* 73). "Don't say that. That makes us sound horrible. . .," says Megg, also claiming it was Werewolf Jones' idea and that he said it would be funny (73). They apologize. "Please don't move out!" says Megg (73). For Hanselmann, the awfulness of the scene is the point: "People are horrible. People are cruel. People are abused. Social circles, especially in small towns, can get fucking nasty" (qtd. in Reith).

Towards the end of the chronology of the Megg, Mogg and Owl stories published in the three Fantagraphics books, although the plots remain slow-moving and often revisit old territory, the reader begins to spend slightly more time with Owl away from the group, as in a scene showing Owl responding to New Year's Eve fireworks with seemingly ambiguous feelings, perhaps loss or confusion (Hanselmann, *Megabex* 194). Afterwards, he comes home to the sharehouse and sees others



98.  
Fig. 3. Hanselmann, Simon. *Megg & Mogg in Amsterdam (And Other Stories)*. Fantagraphics, 2016. 98. Used by permission of Fantagraphics Books.

partying. “What’s wrong with you, Owl? It’s fucking New Years!” says Werewolf Jones (195), and adds: “Wake the fuck up!” (195). The others convince him to join them for cocktails, but it’s just another prank; they’ve made him cocktails that feature rum and urine (196). “What’s wrong with you, Owl? Aren’t you mad?” says Megg, when the joke is revealed (197). “Depressingly,” says Owl, “I’m accustomed to such treatment at this point” (197).

Just as time the reader spends with Megg reveals growing dissatisfaction with her male-dominated friendship group, her relationship with Mogg, and her dependence on drugs, time spent with Owl reveals severe problems that are at first covered up by his normative behaviours. He is promiscuous for reasons that seem based in addiction rather than pleasure; he acquires STDs; he is alcoholic to the point that he seeks treatment from Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. What Megg seems to know, for herself, implicitly Owl says, for himself, explicitly. Approaching thirty, he says: “I need to make some changes in my life. Things can’t go on like this forever” (Hanselmann, *Megabex* 101). Finally, the main chronology ends with Owl moving out (Hanselmann, *Megabex* 204) (note that the following two collections also discussed in this article take place within this main chronology).

Although the literature of roguery appeals to the reader’s appetite for the salacious, and grunge literature positions deviancy as a means of breaching “the stresses and strains of modern life” (Vernay 155), the Megg, Mogg and Owl stories invite the reader to consider rogue acts in a panoply of contexts, whose values change as characters change and time in the story progresses. Owl’s decision to move out is not explicitly linked to the sexual assault, but the scene clearly repositions Megg, Mogg and Werewolf Jones’s other pranks as occasions of harassment, bullying and assault. It suggests that while the rogue world of the sharehouse allows inhabitants the advantage of negotiating their own social rules, it also lacks the regulations and balances of the outside world, which is moderated by norms and laws.

## CONCLUSION: FLASHING BACK AND FLASHING FORWARD

With a few notable exceptions published online and in short online pieces, the Megg, Mogg and Owl chronology ended in 2014 on the last page of *Megabex*, with Owl alone in the back of a taxi, moving out of the sharehouse. Since then, the two full-length books published by Fantagraphics have included antics, excursions and flashbacks that deepen, contradict and colour scenes within that chronology, rather than showing what life looks like for the characters beyond the macro-structure of the story. When Owl moves out, Megg says: “Owl! You can’t go! You just can’t! / We’re

a three person couple!” (Hanselmann, *Megahex* 204). It’s not clear that the friendship can survive outside of cohabiting three-person coupledness, or that the couple can survive without the three-person friendship.

Online, Hanselmann assures readers that the scope of the narrative will expand and the form of this instance of contemporary rogue literature will keep changing to facilitate the expansion. For Hanselmann, *One More Year* (the title of the third volume in the series) means “one more year until I finally stop fucking around and start to take these characters’ lives forward,” “one more year of the same old garbage,” “one more year until Werewolf Jones dies of an overdose and the shit really hits the fan” (qtd. in Brown, 2017).

Yet although the characters have begun to go rogue from the beats of the format, necessitating that the format will follow, the narrative has meanwhile circled back and become continually re-creative: changing its own dominant readings, problematizing its own orthodoxies, and asking the reader to follow along and catch up with its re-inscribed meanings. A text about funny animals in sharehouses becomes a text about growing up and responding to trauma.

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## The Rogue as an Artist in Patrick deWitt's *The Sisters Brothers*

# ABSTRACT

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This article explores Eli Sisters as a reinvigorated rogue who finds his artistic calling in Patrick deWitt's *The Sisters Brothers*, published in 2011. With the help of insights from narratology and genre theory, the article provides a textual analysis of Eli's discourse, perspective and behaviour. Eli casts a critical light on the senseless violence, unbridled greed, ecological devastation, and hyper-masculinity inherent to America's Frontier myth. As a reinvigorated rogue, he raises questions about what it means to be human and reflects upon morality. With hindsight, the rogue as an artist creates a generically hybrid narrative that parodically imitates and transforms the genre conventions of the Western and the picaresque tale. The article also draws attention to the power that Eli assigns to women in a story about male heroic conquest. These include otherworldly female figures from classical mythology and the brothers' mother.

**Keywords:** Patrick deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers*, the reinvigorated rogue, parody, genre border crossing.

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Eli Sisters, the protagonist in Patrick deWitt's highly acclaimed novel *The Sisters Brothers*, retrospectively unfolds his tale about the epic journey of the Sisters siblings during the 1850s California Gold Rush. Eli creates a generically hybrid narrative in which he combines the fictional conventions of the Western and rogue tale with figures and motifs from classical mythology. Eli's written personal testimony disrupts the ontological borders between different storyworlds. In the course of Charlie and Eli's adventure, events that belong to the profane space and historical time of the popular Western and picaresque tale are interrupted by incidents that allude to mythical space and sacred time. The professional gunfighters are at the mercy of powerful female supernatural agents that confront the brothers with their moral responsibility. It is the Fates who intrude into the lives of these outlaws so as to allocate cosmic justice. They control the metaphorical thread of life and interfere with the journey's intended sequence of events. In this way the three Fates subvert the linear travel adventure plot, the clear teleology, and historical time of the traditional Western and rogue tale. They also bring a sudden halt to comic scenarios that are typical of the latter genre, for the main characters are subjected to fearsome and even tragic events caused by various supernatural beings.

The Sisters brothers have a bad reputation as ruthless killers, although Eli clearly has more in common with the amoral rogue. He regularly displays the rogue's positive traits, such as the capacity to be gentle, charming and clever. He is, however, in many ways distinct from the traditional rogue. He shows personality traits of a reinvigorated rogue who displays a high degree of sincerity, empathy, vulnerability and sentimentality. It is thanks to his ethical sense that he will give the plot of his life an unexpected twist.

Eli Sisters is the author's medium to creatively reinterpret the historical past. He composes a story in which he throws a critical light on the senseless violence, unbridled greed, ecological devastation, and hyper-masculinity inherent in America's Frontier myth.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Eli reflects on aspects of human nature that are both timeless and typical of our own age. He overtly and systematically expresses his concern about people's isolation, individualism, shallow materialism, and lack of a moral sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Like E. L. Doctorow's postmodern novel *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), deWitt's parody of the Western is used to satiric ends. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon states that Doctorow underlines "the power of money, greed, and force on the frontier." She adds that the American novelist's post-Western "forces us to rethink and perhaps reinterpret history, and he does so mainly through his narrator, Blue, who is caught in the dilemma of whether we make history or history makes us" (134).



The sensibilities which Eli displays are strikingly prominent in contemporary fiction. Thus Mary K. Holland detects in present-day American literature “sentimental deployments of language as an essentially humanist endeavor” and a “crucial shift toward affect and human feeling” (7–8). Peter Boxall recognizes in twenty-first century fiction “a new ethical relationship to history, a new sense of a *responsibility* to material historical forces” (41–42). In her study of contemporary British fiction, Vera Nünning similarly discovers a return to ethical questions (254).

At the same time, literary and cultural theorists emphasize that moral seriousness is not necessarily absent in formally experimental postmodern fiction. According to Hans Bertens, early twenty-first century fiction more openly displays “an affirmative, humanist strand” of postmodernism (306). Bertens asserts that many contemporary writers both rely on postmodern metafictional self-reflexivity and overtly signal a serious moral commitment (308). Irmtraud Huber confirms that “although the new generation of writers sets out to do something different, the move is not so much against postmodernism but *through* and *beyond* it” (46).

The Canadian novelist Patrick deWitt clearly follows the tradition of (Canadian) postmodern literature in contesting master narratives and creating generic instability by means of parody. In *Undermajordomo Minor*, he imitates and transforms the fictional conventions of the Gothic novel. He parodies the comedy of manners in his latest novel *French Exit*. His experiment in *The Sisters Brothers* with the rogue tale, the Greek epic and the Western genre, which is a modern variation on Greek hero myth, is reminiscent of Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man* (1969). Like Kroetsch, deWitt relies on the figure of the rogue in order to retell a story and revivify various genres.

Eli Sisters gradually becomes aware of his need and desire for sincere communication, not only with Charlie but also with the characters he encounters on the road. Irmtraud Huber notices that contemporary literature often addresses people's isolation and focuses on communicative bonding. Characters establish connections through intersubjective dialogue and storytelling. Mary K. Holland observes that, since “the narrative turn” in the 1980s, prose fiction has increasingly emphasized the individual's interaction with others through storytelling as essential to human existence (1). Fictional characters are depicted as storytellers who resist narrative models imposed on them and actively construct their “narrative identities” (Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn* 225).

Eli, who uses language to create meaningful relationships, finally realizes that he possesses a gift for storytelling and a poetic sensibility. His fictional autobiography largely deals with this process of self-discovery. Eli's artistic vocation fits into the tradition of picaresque adventure novels

by, for example, Joyce Cary and Iris Murdoch. Ana Raquel Lourenço Fernandes mentions Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* (1944) and Murdoch's *Under The Net* (1954) in which the rogues are "creators in pursuit of a new, original work" (57). In *The Horse's Mouth*, the protagonist is a painter "who seeks new ways of giving meaning to the world"; in *Under The Net*, the rogue is "an aspiring writer, whose artistic quest rouses the moral, aesthetic, and epistemic uncertainties of the time" (Fernandes 220).

This article examines Eli Sisters as a rogue who casts a critical light on the Gold Rush, raises questions about what it means to be human, and reflects upon morality. In addition, the first-person narrator will be treated as deWitt's medium for literary experiment. Eli is the artist who creates the roguishly subversive narrative in which the boundaries of various genres are deliberately transgressed. Eli parodically disrupts the hierarchy between "high" and "low" literary genres and freely combines the lyrical, epic, and dramatic mode. He is also the inventor of an epilogue that subverts the conventional ending of both the Western and the picaresque tale.

*The Sisters Brothers* revolves around the adventurous journey and strange twist of fate in the lives of Eli and Charlie Sisters. These notorious outlaws and gunfighters work as contract killers for their employer, the Commodore. The latter sends them on a mission to find and kill Hermann Warm, a lone prospector who invented a scientific formula with which to extract gold from a river. The powerful and greedy Commodore, also known as "a killer and bully" (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 194),<sup>2</sup> wants the famous brothers to provide him with the fortune hunter's recipe. In their quest for Warm and his gold-finding liquid, Eli and Charlie are preceded by Henry Morris, the Commodore's scout. In 1851, the brothers depart on horseback from Oregon City and head for the wilderness of California.

Eli rarely foregrounds the written nature of his autobiographical narrative. He merely includes the following metafictional lines: "as will be shown in the proceeding pages" (184); "which I will now describe" (199); "the above-described mentality" (247). He more obviously creates a temporal and cognitive distance between his older and mature recollecting self and the experiencing "I." According to Ulrich Wicks, the "double perspective of the narrating 'I' and the remembered 'I' is a crucial aspect of the narrative nature of picaresque from Apuleius' *Golden Ass* to *Felix Krull* and *Die Blechtrommel*" ("The Nature of Picaresque Narrative" 244). Dual focalization is a means for the narrator to depict and analyze his younger and ignorant self in the past and to emphasize "the difference

<sup>2</sup> Patrick deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers*. London: Granta, 2011. All subsequent references in the text will be to this edition.

between who he was then and what he is now" (Wicks, "Narrative Distance in Picaresque Fiction" 167).

In accordance with the conventional picaresque tale, the wiser narrator of *The Sisters Brothers* imposes an episodic structure on his narrative. With hindsight, Eli parodies his role as an outlaw in the classical Western. By portraying himself as a misfit in this storyworld of male heroic conquest, he liberates himself from the monologism and single world-view of the formulaic Western genre.

In deWitt's novel, the rogue as an artist retrospectively constructs his own individualized and highly introspective narrative identity. Eli is a realistic character who displays a rich psychic life and a complex psychology. He admits that he is capable of extreme violence when someone bullies him and even relishes his sudden "reversal to animal" (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 246). Directly after, he feels a pang of shame about his capacity for savagery. He also gives the reader cause for amusement by revealing that he follows his mother's advice to masturbate in order to calm down.

Eli blames Charlie for manipulating him into violence and he increasingly manages to persuade Charlie not to get involved in senseless bloodshed. He is the one who convinces his older brother that it would be wrong to harm Warm and Morris. The latter unexpectedly chose to become Warm's friend and business partner. From Eli's moral point of view, these men aren't evil and he therefore urges Charlie not to shoot them, as it "would be more like killing children or women" (224). After having made Warm's acquaintance, Eli confides to him that he is used to assisting his brother in killing antagonists as "the thought of someone causing harm to" his brother is unbearable (262).

Being afraid of the Sisters brothers implies being afraid of death because the professional assassins have the bad reputation of killing their enemies before robbing them. By naming his main characters the Sisters brothers, deWitt contrasts the dread caused by the latter with the fear inspired by the three spinning Sisters from classical mythology. Clotho who spins the life thread, Lachesis who determines its length, and Atropos who cuts it, are part of the determinism of the Greek theological system. This classical triad may appear in literary texts in the guise of three witches. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the three "weird sisters" are versions of the Fates. The adjective "weird" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *wyrd*: "what happens to a person in life, fate, (bad) luck" ("Weird"). Shakespeare's tragedy revolves around the moral imperative "thou shalt not kill" and Macbeth, who stabbed king Duncan of Scotland, will inevitably be punished by the Fates. According to Margaret Visser "Shakespeare, however, insists on his characters' free will: the riddling fiends mislead, but they never force decisions" (12).

Eli departs from realism when he describes mysterious characters who unexpectedly cross the brothers' path. These nonhuman forces belong to the epic realm of ancient myth and impose a moral order. They allude to Greek tragedy's normative and static world order and are a means for the rogue as an artist to deal with the subject of moral choice. Various otherworldly figures cause terrifying crisis events. Eli is deeply upset by a lone, weeping man who is strangely familiar to him and who keeps following the brothers. The uncanny apparition haunts him, for this person is most probably his murdered father. In a fit of violence, the latter severely broke his wife's arm and was subsequently killed by Charlie. Eli is convinced that his father was "a bad man" (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 261) who "deserved to be killed" (66). Nevertheless, the repressed memory of the assassinated father returns as a ghost from the realm of the unconscious to disturb the brothers' peace of mind. Charlie is not affected by the stranger's distress, for he is not troubled by pangs of guilt. Throughout the entire narrative, the culprit is shown to be followed and punished unwittingly by the mythological Fates and Furies. His ill fortune will be the punitive measure for his deliberate patricide.

In Oregon Territory, Eli and Charlie enter a cabin that belongs to an "old witch" (31). To Vanja Polić, "the woman reminds of the three witches from *Macbeth*, or perhaps one of the three Moirae" (142). Eli's lyrical description of "a one-room shack, wispy cotton-smoke spinning from its chimney" (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 28) indeed alludes to one of the mythological sisters who spins the web of fate. Considering the reference to her snapping "a piece of thin wire" (30), she must be Atropos who snips off the thread of life when someone's time comes to die. The relentless mythical crone significantly asks: "Do you fear I will kill *you*?" She knows everything about the brothers and "the dead men following behind" them (30). Charlie has reasons to be afraid, for the witch secretly administers to him a "heavy black liquid" (31), a potion of poisonous *Atropa Belladonna* berries that will make him suffer.

In the first "intermission" or intercalated dramatic scene, Eli experiences the visitation of a "terrible" girl who kills a real dog with a lethal dose of *Belladonna* (143). The otherworldly being informs Eli about her prophetic dream that contains "a protected man" and a dog that is in pain because it lost a leg. Her message predicts Charlie's predetermined fate, namely the unavoidable loss of his shooting hand. She describes herself in the dream as "tumbling lightly in circles" with the dog "spinning within the orb" beside her (144). The circle is a metaphor for fate and cyclic time (Visser 22) and "spinning" alludes to the Goddess who spins a person's life.

Eli turns out to be the protected man from the weird girl's prophecy because Mister Mayfield's bookkeeper saves him from being killed by

trappers. Eli describes the bookkeeper with an image that refers to her mythical dimension, for she rolls her head “in slow circles” (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 135). The woman presumably protects Eli from misfortune because he wishes to turn his back on a life dominated by greed, murder, and the need to be a “real” man. Instead, the protagonist allows his emotional intelligence and ethical awareness to gain the upper hand.

Charles Taylor calls the construction of one’s own mode of existence an instance of “self-determining freedom” (27). Hanna Meretoja argues that “a sense of the possible—a sense of how things could be otherwise—is integral to moral agency and to the ethical imagination of individuals and communities. It has transformative potential” (*The Ethics of Storytelling* 4).

Space symbolism alludes to Eli’s spiritual transformation that begins in the old witch’s cabin. He crosses its “cursed threshold” (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 38) in order to kill the grizzly bear that attacks his horse Tub. A curse is a *fatum*, “a thing said that must inevitably come to pass” (Visser 21). The threshold is a spatio-temporal symbolic border associated with “the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life” (Bakhtin 248). Eli’s heroic decision to save a horse that “could not travel more than fifty miles in a day” (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 6), while putting his own life at risk, is a liminal phase that initiates his transition from a familiar to a different type of manhood and selfhood. After this first stage in his rite of passage, Eli continues portraying himself as a protagonist whose experiences bear a similarity to those of the mythic hero. His quest plot overlaps to some degree with the narrative archetype as defined by Joseph Campbell:

Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. (245)

The grizzly bear ruins one of Tub’s eyes, as a result of which Eli’s horse is weakened. The protagonist feels great empathy with the suffering creature and reflects: “What a life it is for man’s animals, what a trial of pain and endurance and senselessness” (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 241). As a writer, he retrospectively muses over the effect of his faithful horse’s death: “Many months later I became sentimental about him, and this feeling is still with me today, but at the time of his actual demise I experienced merely a lifted weight” (242). According to Richard Kearney, “this power of empathy with living things other than ourselves . . . is a major test not just of poetic imagination but of ethical sensitivity” (139).

Patrick deWitt's reinvigorated rogue also displays ethical sensitivity as a witness to the tragic chain of events suffered by the other main characters. The story's protected man is the only one who escapes being victimized by Warm's poisonous scientific formula. The narrative distinguishes Warm from Eli, for the prospector is a traditional rogue who puts his imagination to wrong use whereas Eli uses his imagination creatively to find ways of being human in the social world. Warm's scientific discovery is the product of an instrumental rationality that is indifferent to water pollution. He invents a mercury solution to extract gold ore from his claim.<sup>3</sup> If successful, he intends to "sell the formula's secret ingredients for a million" (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 192). The tragic episode contrasts the characters' allotted share in financial terms with their allotment of ill fortune as dictated by the three dark Sisters. Morris makes a misstep and falls into the highly toxic water, upon which Warm leaps after him. Morris's fall is fate masquerading as chance and it is fate which causes the men's downfall, to punish their greed and ecological destructiveness. The irony of fate, also known as cosmic irony, turns the so-called "River of Light" (195) into a river of darkness and death. This type of irony, which is closely connected to situational irony, implies that the outcome is incongruous with the characters' expectations.

Ulrich Wicks points out that a particular "grotesque or horrible incident" often occurs in picaresque fiction to deal with "the blackness and horror of the debased world" ("The Nature of Picaresque Narrative" 247). Eli reflects on the incident with the scientific formula as "a tangle of grotesqueness and failure" (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 289). Warm and Morris are blinded by the shiny liquid metal and Eli compares Morris to "a piece of driftwood more than a man" (288). The terrifying and shocking event has a spiritually cleansing effect on Eli, for he is overwhelmed by a singular mix of pity and fear. He also realizes that he must be the man who is protected from harm in the weird girl's prophetic dream, for he ends up as the lucky one who departs in one piece from the wilderness of California.

The girl's dream about the three-legged dog predicted an omen of bad fortune in Charlie's life. Apparently by accident, he spills Warm's caustic

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<sup>3</sup> This process was introduced in Northern California at the end of the nineteenth century. It was responsible for the serious contamination of the soil, groundwater, rivers and lakes. Dalberg Global Development Advisors report the devastating effects of liquid mercury today in the Amazon region, specifically in the context of the new gold boom (Dalberg Global Development Advisors). In a similar vein, Human Rights Watch documented the harmful effects of mercury in artisanal and small-scale gold mining in Africa and the Philippines.



substance on his shooting hand. However, it must be fate, the engineer of situations, which plays cruel tricks and causes the unexpected reversal of the outlaw's fortune. Charlie loses the traditional Western hero's "fully coherent male body" (Mitchell 167). A sign of his merited misfortune, his ruined hand will finally tame and degrade the sharpshooter.

In the following episode, it becomes clear that Charlie's shooting hand is destined to be amputated. The brothers return to Mister Mayfield's hotel in California in order to collect a hidden pile of money and gold. Yet the hotel is burnt down and the men are unexpectedly overpowered by Mayfield's "whores," the avenging Furies in human form. Eli poetically describes the smoke that surrounds the hotel as "wriggling ghost-snakes" (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 303), for the infernal goddesses of the Underworld have snakes entwined in their hair. The chthonic deities of vengeance severely punish the wicked brother, as they did with Orestes who committed matricide in Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*. In *Beyond Fate*, Margaret Visser mentions the family as the special province of the Furies, the agents of the Fates. Matricide or patricide were viewed as the most heinous of crimes and one who killed a member of his own family was punished by "a pack of Furies, the Angry Ones, for having blood on his hands" (Visser 52–53).

Eli literally refers to an angry "pack" of whores who look down on the brothers "with scandal and outrage." They exclaim: "These bastards. Let's get them" (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 305). The Erinyes, who possess superhuman strength, pin the brothers to the ground. The men are incapable of movement and one of the Furies mercilessly grinds her heel into Charlie's damaged hand, thus making sure that it will never heal. After this tragic episode has been brought to a close, Eli inserts another "intermission" into his narrative. In the second dramatic scene, "the peculiar girl" from the previous visitation appears to Eli with her dress hem "spun in a wheel" (308). The supernatural being tries to kill Charlie with a lethal dose of "black granules" or Belladonna but Eli saves his beloved brother by preventing him from drinking the potion.

Eli commits another heroic deed as soon as the brothers are back in Oregon City. He had made the conscious decision beforehand that murdering the Commodore would be "the final *era* of killing in [his] lifetime" (243). The rich and very influential Commodore has a pernicious influence "in every corner of the country" (316). Eli invents a scheme and proves his mettle by single-handedly drowning the villain in his bathtub while having all his "weight upon him" (317). This way, the rogue tricks the Commodore's followers because there is no bloodshed. More importantly, wily Eli proves that his so-called weakness in the context of the Western, his being overweight, can be turned into a strength.



Eli's archetypal quest for personal identity revolves around his pursuit of happiness and his genuine wish to lead a virtuous existence. Thanks to the guidance of the Fates, Eli discovers that his hands are made to write creatively. After the first stage in his initiation process, he says: "I blew out the candle and stared once more at my ghostly hands. When they began to tingle, I wondered about the curse from the gypsy-witch's shack. When would it come to bloom, if ever? What form would it take?" (81). The image of his "ghostly hands" most probably connotes his unexplored creative imagination, for in the end he will become an artist instead of an honest shopkeeper.

In the context of Eli's process of emotional and spiritual growth, it is not only the powerful female characters who incarnate the ancient Fates and Furies that play an important role. While travelling on the road of life, the brothers also encounter real-life characters that have a story to tell. Some of these characters are women who typically populate the Western. Charlie uses (what seem to be mere) prostitutes to satisfy his basic needs, whereas Eli genuinely desires to establish with these women a relationship based on kindness, intimacy and trust. He deals with all the women he meets as unique individuals with whom he engages in a dialogue.

In contrast to Charlie, Eli cares very little about material gain. He willingly gives part of his spoils to the women who work in hotels and to a needy boy who the brothers encounter on the road. In addition, he is obviously more interested in digging out his own and other people's hidden sadness and suffering than in excavating gold. A case in point is his reaching out to Warm. He listens to the prospector's life story, which turns out to be that of a traditional rogue whose maturation ends with his being a scientific inventor. Thanks to their intersubjective dialogues, Eli gains insight into his ultimate calling. Warm is impressed by Eli's ability to transform mental images into story material. He compliments him by saying "touch of the poet in you, Eli" (261), which is Warm's way of referring to the protagonist's artistic sensibility.

As an artist, Eli relies on the critical and creative dimension of language to gain (self-) understanding. He parodies his role in the traditional Western by using a discourse that is incongruously eloquent or high for a character of low origin. As Vanja Polić remarks, "Eli's delicacy and elegance of phrase as well as his thought processes immediately strike the reader as discordant with his vocation of a gunslinger" (138). His tone of elevated seriousness is very strange indeed in the storyworld of both the Western and the traditional picaresque tale. When he expresses his feelings to the female bookkeeper at Mister Mayfield's hotel, Eli is clearly astonished by his lofty and lyrical discourse: "Your laughter is like cool water to me," I said. I felt my heart sob at these words, and it would not have been hard to summon tears: Strange" (deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers* 137).

Eli is a sophisticated narrator who also displays eloquence in dealing with the ethical aspect of human behaviour. This is more than a rhetorical trick to arouse the readers' sympathy, for interpersonal dialogue and connection are essential to Eli. As stated earlier, his creative, sentimental deployment of language, the deliberate shift towards human feelings, moods and emotions, is typical of many narrators and characters in contemporary fiction.

Eli slowly discovers his free will and capacity to redefine himself. He used to be a follower of his extremely violent and manly brother, yet becomes a self-assertive hero who makes the moral decision to improve himself. He liberates himself from a pre-determined existence as soon as he makes the conscious decision that he wants to lead himself (302). Thus the outcome of Eli's spiritual journey is the result of his freely chosen destination, which involves a different way of being and an alternative route. The protagonist's controlling power of reason becomes clear from his ethical decision to return to the parental home after many years of absence. The mother refused to see her sons as long as they chose to be killers rather than look for a decent job.

Eli's epilogue defies the conventional ending of both the Western and the picaresque tale. It explores the attachment plot between the mother and her children and thus once again satirizes the ideal of hyper-masculinity. The image of silver in the first line of the epilogue, "[t]here was silver in the dawn" (319), alludes to the moon as a symbol of feminine energy in a male-dominated world. It is far from coincidental that Mister Mayfield's female bookkeeper leads Eli to "a safe place" lit by the moon (131) in an earlier episode.

Eli's reunion with his mother is emotionally satisfying. Overwhelmed by love for his mother, Eli tells her: "I have missed you very much, Mother. I think of you so frequently, and I believe Charlie does, also" (322). The outcome of his life story pleases Eli, mainly because finding his own fulfilment, equilibrium and love are essential to him. The image of the rope in Eli's lyrical description, "[n]ow she pulled me to her, hand over hand up my arm as though she were scaling a rope" (324), may connote the life-line that binds him to his mother.

Eli's epilogue accentuates the natural bond of love between mother and son. This is quite distinct from the classical Western, which rejects female authority and definitively takes boys away from their mothers. Jane Tompkins argues that "the Western is a gigantic coming-of-age plot in which the hero proves to himself and anyone who will pay attention that he isn't Mama's Boy anymore; he is a man" (144). The content of Eli's epilogue also differs from the traditional picaresque tale. With regard to the latter, Luigi Gussago remarks that "the connection between parent and

child is rather unusual in the picaresque (dis)order of things, . . . parents do not accommodate themselves to the requirements of their institutional roles: picaresque heroes are inevitably either orphans or undesired children” (153). DeWitt innovates the Western and the rogue tale by adding to his novel a morally satisfactory epilogue. In the alternative ending, which deals with the brothers’ unexpected destination, Eli eulogizes the importance of family ties.

As a storyteller, Eli clearly assigns a prominent role to powerful women in a narrative that is supposed to revolve around heroic male conquest. This analysis has shown that various otherworldly female figures cross the ontological border between the Greek Underworld and the main characters’ reality. These women variously punish, guide or protect the lawless Sisters brothers in the context of their epic journey. Eli never discloses the provenance or meaning of these intimidating female characters.<sup>4</sup> The reader needs to deduce their potential significance and function from the figurative discourse with which Eli reconstructs the past. It is no doubt appropriate for the rogue as an artist in present-day fiction to deliberately subvert the reader’s expectations by refusing to give in to the common desire for a closed interpretation.

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<sup>4</sup> DeWitt also explores the tension between determinism and free will in his tragedy of manners, *French Exit*. This novel contains two explicit references to the Fates: “Without speaking of it [Malcolm and Frances] both had the sense of being tested by the Fates” (93); “The Fates have done you this damage” (130).

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## The Lynching and Rebirth of Ned Buntline: Rogue Authorship during the American Literary Renaissance

# ABSTRACT

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Though largely unknown today, “Ned Buntline” (Edward Zane Carroll Judson) was one of the most influential authors of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. He published over 170 novels, edited multiple popular and political publications, and helped pioneer the seafaring adventure, city mystery and Western genres. It was his pirate tales that Tom Sawyer constantly reenacted, his “Bowery B’hoys” that came to define the distinctive slang and swagger of urban American characters, and his novels and plays that turned an unknown scout into *Buffalo Bill, King of the Border Men*. But before “Ned Buntline” became a mainstay of the popular press, he had been on his way to becoming one of the nation’s highbrow literary elites. He was praised by the leading critics, edited an important literary journal, and his stories appeared in the era’s most prestigious publications. This study examines how and why “Ned Buntline” moved from prestigious to popular authorship and argues that the transformation was precipitated by one very specific event: in 1846, Edward Z. C. Judson was lynched. A close examination of Judson’s life, writing, and the coverage of him in the newspapers of the day (including the remarkable story of how he survived a lynching) demonstrates that the same issues that led to his lynching also led to his rebirth as a new kind of American author.

**Keywords:** Ned Buntline, antebellum American fiction, 19<sup>th</sup>-century popular press, publishing history, lynching.

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A few minutes after ten o'clock on Saturday night, 14 March 1846, a band of angry men broke into the Nashville Tennessee Court House, overpowered the jailor, and dragged Edward Z. C. Judson from his prison cell out into the Public Square. A rope was coiled about his neck and a mob of citizens looked on as his already broken body was hauled up an owning post, his legs kicking as he dangled in the night air. Amazingly, this event did not end Judson's life, but it did change it forever. During the two years before this life-altering event, Judson's star had been rising. He had launched a well-respected journal that promoted the literary efforts of America's expanding West, gained the support of the nation's most prominent editors and writers, and wrote entertaining tales that regularly appeared in the elite literary publications of the day. Judson was on his way to being a significant author of the American Literary Renaissance. But when the rope was cut and he fell to the ground, gasping and choking for breath, he was reborn as a different kind of writer. The events that led to his lynching taught him some important lessons that changed the way he thought about writing. From this point forward, Judson fully embraced his emerging literary alter-ego, "Ned Buntline," and abandoned the highbrow literary world to become one of the leading figures of the popular press. Over the next forty years his scandalous city-mysteries shocked and entertained America's increasingly urban population, his novels and plays turned an unknown Western scout into *Buffalo Bill, King of the Border Men*, and his nautical yarns inspired Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer to join thousands of other youth across the nation, acting out the sensational pirate tales they read about in Buntline's stories. His writing also drove filibustering efforts in Cuba, temperance crusades in California, and helped launch the Know-Nothing party that rattled American politics in the mid-1850s. Ned Buntline, though largely forgotten today, was a house-hold name in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and arguably one of its most influential authors.<sup>1</sup>

This study focuses on the months immediately surrounding Judson's lynching to explain why an up-and-coming author would switch from the elite world of *belles-lettres* to the cheap, sensational publishing market

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<sup>1</sup> Judson published at least 170 novels as "Ned Buntline" between 1846 and his death in 1886. His 1848 *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* was among the most popular of the era's "city mystery" novels; his publication of *Buffalo Bill, King of the Border Men* (1869) and play "The Scouts of the Prairie" (1872) launched William Cody's fame and America's obsession with the Western; and in chapter 13 of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Tom proclaims himself, "Tom Sawyer, the Black Avenger of the Spanish Main!" and his friends chime in that they are "Huck Finn the Red-Handed, and Joe Harper the Terror of the Seas," all characters from pirate tales by Ned Buntline from the 1840s.



that was just beginning to emerge in 1840s America. It also serves as a case-study for the argument outlined in Jane Tompkins's seminal work, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* that redefined the study of American literature, moving it “away from a small group of master texts” and toward a more egalitarian “redefinition of literature” that saw novels not as “works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms” but as cultural creations that attempted “to redefine the social order” (xi). She saw books not as artworks designed to “be enshrined in any literary hall of fame,” but as didactic and dynamic texts designed “to win the belief and influence the behavior of the widest possible audience” and “to make people think and act in a particular way” (xi). Her goal was not simply to create a wider pool of authors available for academic study, but to look specifically for texts that did significant “cultural work” and that had “traction in their original setting” (xv). She argued that a “text succeeds or fails on the basis of its ‘fit’ with the features of its immediate context, on the degree to which it provokes the desired response” (xviii). What Tompkins described is what Judson realized as he hung from an awning post in Nashville. He had dabbled in a new writing style that proved capable of provoking a powerful response. It was not yet the response he desired—that was the part he needed to figure out. During his long months of recovery, this realization caused a metamorphosis. He abandoned his place among the elite writers of his day and embraced the life of a writing rogue with an authorial voice that would cause riots, launch political parties, and make him one of the most innovative and important writers of his era.

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Edward Zane Carroll Judson, known throughout his life as “Ned,”<sup>2</sup> was born in the small village of Stamford deep in New York’s Catskill Mountains on 20 March 1823. His father, Levi Carroll Judson was a school teacher and principal who moved the family first to rural Pennsylvania and then, when Ned was eleven, to Philadelphia where Levi became an attorney and cultivated his authorial ambitions, writing a book on the Founding Fathers of America. Levi pressed his teen-aged son to read law and join him as an attorney, but Ned, still longing for the adventure and freedom of his rustic childhood, ran off to sea, sailing first aboard merchant vessels

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<sup>2</sup> This article discusses both the man, Edward “Ned” Zane Carroll Judson, and his literary persona, “Ned Buntline.” Instead of alternating between “Judson” and “Buntline” it will address him as “Ned” throughout the text to avoid confusion.

in the Caribbean and then as a Midshipman in the US navy starting in 1837. During his navy years he saw action in the Second Seminole War and acquired a bit of a literary reputation himself, having one of his rollicking tales printed anonymously by New York's prestigious *Knickerbocker Magazine* in 1838 (Buntline, "My Log-Book"). On 12 December 1841 he took a Spanish bride, Severina Tecla Marin, in St. Johns, Florida—six months later he left the navy and they moved to New York. Records don't show what the young couple did for the next two years, but by December of 1843, Ned had gone to Pittsburgh to reestablish connections with his family who had moved there a few years earlier. He initially left Severina behind to give him some time to convince his Nativist father to accept his Spanish bride and her Catholic faith.<sup>3</sup>

By May of 1844 Ned was feeling more secure. He moved Severina to Pittsburgh and with his father launched *Ned Buntline's Magazine* featuring his new nautical *nom de plume* on its masthead. Though it failed after only two issues, it garnered the attention of prestigious editor, Lewis Gaylord Clark, who wrote in his *Knickerbocker Magazine*:

Ned Buntline. . . Your craft makes a right gallant appearance, and seems manned by a hearty crew, who have abundant ability, and do their work with a will. . . and if the 'OLD KNICK' can serve your interests at any time, let him know the *how* and the *when*. That you will *deserve* encouragement and substantial patronage, is quite certain" (Clark, "Editor's Table" Jul. 1844: 102).

With praise from such high places, Ned was able to gain a new partner, Lucius A. Hine, and in November of 1844 they launched the *Western Literary Journal and Monthly Review* in Cincinnati, Ohio, then the publishing capital of America's expanding West. Their journal was well received and by January of 1846 they picked up another partner, Hudson Kidd, who helped expand the publication into the South with a new office in Nashville, Tennessee. By early 1846 Ned moved Severina from Cincinnati to Nashville while he continued to shuttle between, working with both Hine and Kidd, and collecting subscriptions and stories at every steamboat wharf up and down the Ohio and Cumberland Rivers that connected the two cities (Larsen 111–12; Venable 304–05). On the literary front, things were going very well. Hine provided the funds to bankroll the new publication until it got on its feet, and the *Knickerbocker* had accepted two swashbuckling tales of the Caribbean from "Ned Buntline" for both

<sup>3</sup> This quick overview of Buntline's early life comes from Bradshaw, Larsen, Monaghan, and Pond. Judson's birth year is disputed—a claim for 1821 can also be made.

its October and December issues. Clark praised the *Literary Journal* and Ned especially, saying: “There is a certain life, a semblable spirit, in every thing we have seen from his pen, that renders him a most entertaining companion” (Clark, “Editor’s Table” Dec. 1844: 582–83).

Having spent the past several months traveling along America’s river ways trying to drum up support for the journal, Ned began to realize that what they were publishing was not what Americans actually wanted to read. America was a land of practical, frank people who enjoyed sentimental poetry, scandalous gossip, and exciting stories in which hard-working people triumphed over injustice.<sup>4</sup> This was not what their journal was publishing. In fact, they were condemning such works. He himself had harshly reviewed popular authors for writing stories that were too sensational, too scandalous, and too hastily written. George Lippard, a blood-and-thunder writer from Philadelphia, had released *The Ladye Annabel; or, the Doom of the Poisoner* and Ned responded like all proper editors, finding it “only extraordinary for its quantity of ‘incident,’ strange, fearful and thrilling” (Buntline, *Western Literary Journal* Nov. 1844: 63). This, however, had not prevented them from reprinting three columns of an especially gruesome part of the story; that they accompanied it with a stern warning that such writing would bring “Mr. Lippard much injurious fame” (58–59), didn’t obscure the obvious—this was engaging writing that people wanted to read. Ned had also ridiculed the popular author Joseph Holt (J. H.) Ingraham’s new book *The Midshipman*, beginning his review: “Ingraham has written a great deal upon subjects of which comparatively he knows nothing” (26). As a former Midshipman himself, Ned gleefully noted dozens of factual mistakes while also mocking Ingraham for the rapidity at which he wrote. In a review in their next edition, he noted that Ingraham had already produced two new works, doing so by simply taking headlines from news stories and converting them into sensational ten-chapter novellas (Buntline, *Western Literary Journal* Dec. 1844: 112–13). Then, in a review of Lippard’s *The Quaker City*, a hugely popular book that used thinly-veiled characters to expose the misdeeds of Philadelphia’s prominent residents, Ned reluctantly admitted that he was “somewhat amused with the hits which are given to some persons . . . one can scarce help laughing at the duplicate” (Buntline, *Western Literary Journal* Jan. 1845: 183). But ultimately he condemned the quick, overly-sensational writing: “We regret to see [Lippard], like Professor Ingraham, prostituting his able pen in recording, in a trifling

<sup>4</sup> Further information on America’s reading habits in the mid-1840s can be found in Streeby’s *American Sensations* (81–101) and Denning’s *Mechanic Accents* (27–41).

*novellette* shape, scenes which have already cast a sufficient blot and stain upon our land” (183). He moralistically concluded: “Seek nobler themes, and loftier notes will be your reward” (183).

Ned also began to come to a financial realization—despite his growing literary prestige, he and Severina were barely making it. The *Knickerbocker* promised funds but was often slow to deliver and never offered enough work to make ends meet (Monaghan 299). And though the *Literary Journal* received much praise, it wasn’t making money—Severina, despite her ill health, picked up factory piece-work just to pay the rent (Larsen 112). In light of this, Ned began to lose interest in the *Literary Journal* and to believe that Lippard and Ingraham were right. It was their works that people were buying and reading. Why not engage in the same game, only do it better? After all, he was doing well among the elite publications of the country not because he was writing on more sophisticated or enlightened themes, but because he was writing exactly the same sort of sensational stories, but writing them better. His tales were sophisticated enough to impress the elite “Knickerbocker Group,” but amusing enough to also appeal to the masses. Why not capitalize on this? Thanks to the *Knickerbocker* “Ned Buntline” was well-known—a name that denoted rollicking, well-written stories. He could use this fame to launch a publication of his own, one that wouldn’t come out at regular intervals or seek subscribers—such deadlines and financial stresses made publishing risky and hard. Instead, he could just print issues whenever he had enough new material and then distribute them via the steamboats constantly moving across the region.

Ned launched *Ned Buntline’s Own* in 1845. Multiple sources reference it, showing that it was small—octavo size at just seven by nine inches—but where it was published and what it contained are largely unknown because not a single issue survives (Monaghan 106; Venable 304). It is telling that in an era when prospectuses for new publications are constantly in newspapers (*Ned Buntline’s Magazine* and the *Western Literary Journal* had ads in dozens of papers), not a single one appeared for *Ned Buntline’s Own*. Further, different sources note different locations of publication—Paducah and Smithland Kentucky, Clarksville and Nashville Tennessee (Paterson 14; “Smithland”; Teitloff). This demonstrates Ned’s new publishing method; he didn’t seek subscribers and he didn’t set up shop in any particular location. This was an itinerant paper, moving and adapting to the audiences it was serving throughout the waterways and boom cities of the expanding American West. In the *Knickerbocker’s* April “Editor’s Table” section, Clark, in his gossipy style, obliquely addressed his regular contributor’s odd new publication, noting “NED BUNTLINE, with ‘a clear field’ asks ‘no favor’ of his readers. He is one of your gallant, dashing sort of persons who *compel* admiration” (Clark, “Editor’s Table” Apr. 1845: 373).

Though no copies of *Ned Buntline's Own* from this era survive, some of its content does because other papers copied it for their own pages. New York's *The World We Live In* reprinted "Ned Buntline's New, Explanatory Modern Dictionary," a tongue-in-cheek guide that included sample definitions such as: "Education.—Teaching the young men how to shoot; buying a piece of parchment written in Latin, and tacking A.M. instead of A.S.S., to the owner's name; teaching a young lady how to talk French, walk Spanish, faint gracefully and dance the Polka" (15 Aug. 1846: 59). *Scientific American* also reprinted this definition of "Education" except without the risqué "A.S.S." section, showing that Ned's humor was popular but a bit racy (3 Oct. 1846: 10). And in May of 1846 papers from Vermont to Ohio reprinted "The Veiled Lady; or, Who Can She Be?" by Ned Buntline (*Middlebury Gazette* 7 May 1845: 1; *Huron Reflector* 20 May 1845: 1). Most attributed it to the *Knickerbocker*, Ned's usual publisher, but this story never appeared in its pages—it must have come from *Ned Buntline's Own*. The theme of the story matches the reality of Ned's life at the time: it is about a young Spanish bride who tricks her wandering husband into falling in love with her all over again and then shaming him for neglecting her. Throughout this period Ned was constantly travelling, leaving Severina behind in Nashville where she continued to suffer from ill health. He was back in Nashville in June, however, and his friend, George Allen, was surprised to find that besides writing, Ned was also dealing with slave traders and hanging around at horse racing tracks (Larsen 115).

Given Ned's later support of abolition and his frequent condemnation of gambling, it seems odd that he had become friendly with Nashville's slave-traders and track-side gamblers, but the events that followed show what he was up to. Ned had taken a page from George Lippard, the writer he had scolded in the *Literary Journal* for risqué writing while simultaneously praising him for his thinly-veiled exposés of corrupt officials. In 1845 Ned worked with his friends, William and George Allen who were masters of steamboats, and was conned twice in one voyage—tricked with a counterfeit \$10 bill and swindled out of a \$9 barrel of whiskey (Larsen 112). He was also aware of the ease with which people could be taken in by "confidence men"—indeed Ned himself was engaged in this behavior, for during this time he continued to promote the *Literary Journal* though he knew it was collapsing, collecting its three-dollar annual subscription fee for himself (*Republican Banner* 23 Jul. 1845: 2). This gave him an idea for his own paper—he would dress as an awe-struck farmer travelling for the first time, or as a prosperous but naïve Easterner, and thus lure-in and expose the con-artists and confidence men of the region, publishing their names and games in his paper (Halttunen 16–18; Monaghan 104).

By that summer, after three months of Ned ignoring the *Literary Journal*, and with no new issue on the horizon, Ned's partners called it quits. On 22 July Lucius Hine announced that he had ended his partnership with E. Z. C. Judson and that the "*Western Literary Journal and Monthly Review* is this day dissolved" (Hine, *Huron Reflector* 22 Jul. 1845: 2). He apologized to subscribers and offered reimbursement noting: "I feel compelled to say, that this unfortunate event has not been occasioned by any fault of mine, as I believe—although the loss is all my own, and makes me poor indeed" (2). He explained: "The Journal was once in a flourishing condition, and would be so now, had that constancy, industry, energy, economy and zeal, pledged to it, been maintained" (2). Upon seeing this announcement, the journal's other partner, Hudson Kidd, feared people would think his lack of zeal had killed the journal and thus published a follow-up statement, printing a letter in which Hine praised him and emphatically placed the blame where it belonged: "The faithless conduct and reckless instability of E. Z. C. Judson, partner in the concern, caused the death of the journal" (Kidd, *Republican Banner* 23 Jul. 1845: 2). Kidd added: "I, also, am justified in saying [that Judson] . . . is as unprincipled, and at the same time as plausible a scoundrel, as was ever received and tolerated in good society" (2).

These statements, combined with the slanderous remarks he made about prominent Nashville residents in *Ned Buntline's Own*, made things a bit hot for Ned, so he once again packed up Severina and moved downriver to Smithland, Kentucky, renting rooms at the inexpensive Gordon House that overlooked the confluence of the Cumberland and Ohio Rivers. Smithland had a press that was happy to print his paper, and once he had new issues in hand, Ned would make the day-long steamboat trip back up the Cumberland to Nashville, selling issues at every wharf along the way (*Republican Banner* 16 Jun. 1845: 2; "Smithland"). This was an exciting new way to run a publication and it suited Ned's frenetic energy and love of adventure. He was constantly traveling and cavorting with scammers and scoundrels. He was also perpetually writing stories, humorous sketches, and public exposés that allowed him to adopt an air of civic-minded reform while graphically describing the salacious actions of supposedly upstanding citizens—Lippard's scandal-as-reform style. But as the summer ended, Ned decided he needed to re-connect with the *Knickerbocker* because his success was largely dependent on his literary reputation and it would be nice to have more pay coming in during the winter months. He sent a proposal for a series of autobiographical sketches and was thrilled by Clark's public reply in the October edition, thanking "our esteemed and gifted friend, 'NED BUNTLINE,'" and announcing the publication of "Ned Buntline's Life-Yarn" (Clark, "Editor's Table" Oct. 1845: 382).



Pleased with his new contract, Ned continued to travel, gathering gossip and writing stories for *Ned Buntline's Own*. That November, when the *Knickerbocker* printed the first part of his "Life-Yarn" (Buntline, "Life-Yarn, Part I" Nov. 1845: 432–42), Ned was busy making material for future chapters. At the wharf in Eddyville just up-river from Smithland, he learned that three fugitives wanted for a gruesome murder in Gallatin, Tennessee and with a \$500 reward on their heads, had fled downriver and were thought to be in the area. Arming himself, Ned set out after them. Remarkably he found and apprehended two of them, and after tying them to a tree, set off after the third who escaped after an exchange of fire. The *Knickerbocker* excitedly reported all of this via a correspondent who encountered Ned on his way to Gallatin with his two prisoners to collect his reward (*Knickerbocker* Nov. 1845: 27). Surely readers thought this was just a talltale to help promote Ned's "Life-Yarn" series—he was becoming known for his entertainingly stretched stories—but in this case, it was true. Tennessee's treasury report for 1845–46 includes an expenditure line: "E. Z. C. Judson, for apprehending fugitive, \$333.33"—two-thirds of the \$500 reward ("Conditions and Operations").

From the time Ned and Severina left Nashville amidst controversy in July, Ned was constantly on the move. He doted on his wife when he was home, but such domestic times were rare. Severina spent most of her time alone in Smithland and often lacked funds for basic expenses (Larsen 115). The income from *Buntline's Own* was sporadic at best, and though the *Knickerbocker* promised money, it often lacked funds itself and fell behind on payments. Furthermore, Ned was far from financially responsible—his *Literary Journal* partners had learned that the hard way. As 1845 drew to an end, Ned was still using their meager resources to print *Ned Buntline's Own* in Smithland, but he distributed it primarily among Nashville's 8,000 residents who were alternately thrilled and horrified by the sometimes valiant, sometimes scandalous activities he reported about their fellow residents. As both the "editor of a scurrilous paper" and a nationally-known writer, he gained regional notoriety, cheered for his daring and ability, but also scorned for his lack of propriety, for he often reveled in the same scandalous behaviors he exposed in others ("Great Excitement"). When he showed up in Nashville during the Christmas season he paraded about in a Spanish cloak and a Panama hat as the living embodiment of the "Ned Buntline" who, in the first part of his "Life-Yarn," had defied his oppressive father and sailed to the Caribbean, courting beautiful señoritas from Cuba to Florida. Not surprisingly, such swagger made him a hit among the younger members of the community, especially the women. He attended Nashville's many Christmas festivals, writing poems, speaking in Spanish, and cultivating an air of mystery dressed as a Fortune-Teller at masquerade balls (Blakey). One



young mother of two, Mary Porterfield, was especially attentive—she noted later that she “had a partiality for literary characters” and thus found this “gentleman of high literary attainments” quite dashing (Blakey).

With January came the second part of “Ned Buntline’s Life-Yarn,” and in it Ned took time to again malign the sea tales of J. H. Ingraham.<sup>5</sup> He wrote: “Some foolish land-lubbers have *Ingrahamatically* described a sea-voyage as being *monotonous!*” and then continued with a commentary on his own change of life circumstances. He exclaimed:

Go to! go to! Show me the dull scribbler in his musty garret; cob-webs for his rigging, dust for a sweetener to his atmosphere; dirty walls in quarto before his aching eyes, and a manuscript for which he’ll scarce get enough to pay for the crackers and cheese which has fed his flickering life-lamp; and then I’ll tell you if there’s *monotony* afloat or ashore. (Buntline, “Life-Yarn, Part II” Jan. 1846: 37–38)

This passage helps explain Ned’s constant movement, as well as the frustration he felt when he had to coop himself up to write, scrounging pennies for his prose. It also signals where he was headed—later he would move to Boston and usurp Ingraham as the foremost writer of sea-adventures for the popular serial-papers of the day. But this change in career was not to come easily—tragedy and scandal were its impetus, and in January of 1846 these motivators began to play out.

Ned was again travelling at the start of the year, and while he was away his friend George Allen stopped to visit Severina while his steamboat was docked in Smithland. He found her sick and desperately lonely and ended up staying with her until nearly midnight as she poured out her worries and woes. In his journal he recorded her frustration with Ned’s family’s “sneers at her religion and their contempt for her because she did not work,” noting that she broke down amidst the telling of these tales, exclaiming: “Oh God if I had health!” (Larsen 115). She longed to return to Florida to visit her recently married sister, and he offered to get her to Baltimore where she could then head south, but she refused, saying she had no funds for such a journey. In the end, George left her with five dollars and a promise to soon return (115). Good to his word, two weeks later he stopped again, but was shocked by what he found: “I went up for Mrs. Judson & they told me she was dead!” (116). Severina had passed away three days earlier on 22 January 1846 and, uncertain what to do with the body, the community buried her in an unmarked grave on Cemetery Hill (116).

<sup>5</sup> Ingraham actually had been a sailor before he began writing, but his books were understandably shallow and poorly constructed—surviving copies show that in 1845 alone he wrote over twenty novellas for the popular press.

Ned heard the news of Severina's death on his way down the Ohio River toward Smithland. George's sister wrote him that she had seen Ned and that he was devastated. George wrote in his journal: "Poor Edward—I have tried to write him a letter of consolation but I am not equal to it—I will let his bitter grief subside a little ere I do" (116). He then wrote to his brother William saying: "Poor fellow—his wife's death will unfit him for writing for a few weeks" (116). George received a letter from Ned that was almost incoherent, though noted that "some of his broken sentences are most eloquent" (116). On the first of March, Ned sent another brief note to George acknowledging that he had received his condolences, but replied: "I cannot write you now—for my heart is in my wife's grave and I cannot dig it up" (117). But apparently he was able to write, for onboard his steamboat that same day, William Allen saw a copy of a new edition of *Ned Buntline's Own* entirely dedicated to Ned "mourning for his wife." He thought there were "some good pieces in it" but that Ned clearly "wrote in distraction. . . a passenger on board who knows him says he is dissipated now" (117). William understood that Ned's pain was as much from guilt as from the loss itself—his journal concluded: "sorry for it—he neglected her" (117).

By the second week of March, Ned returned to Nashville and soon met up again with Mary Porterfield for the two of them had something in common—grief. While Ned was mourning his wife, Mary was mourning a child—her infant daughter had passed away during the cold early months of the New Year. These shared losses made them sympathetic toward each other; whether they were also more is difficult to say, but how it was perceived is very clear. As papers later noted, "rumors of a painful delicate nature" soon reached the ears of Robert Porterfield and he "traced them to a Mr. E. Z. C. Judson, a man grown somewhat notorious of late" ("Lawlessness"). The rumors centered around an anonymous report that claimed Ned had been bragging about seducing Mary. John Porterfield—Robert's brother, a local merchant who traded up and down the Cumberland River—took this news to Robert. Infuriated, Robert grabbed a gun, and with his brother following him, went and found Ned. Leveling his pistol at Ned's chest, he accused him of seducing his wife. Ned emphatically denied this, swore that the rumors were false, and, pulling open his vest to expose his heart, "told him to fire, saying that, if he did, he would shoot an innocent man" ("Great Excitement"). At this point a crowd gathered and forced Robert to put away his pistol and go home. That evening he met with his pastor and together they confronted Mary who emphatically swore her innocence. Her sincerity convinced Robert and they reconciled (Blakey).

Then, two days later, on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, Reverend Isaac Paul saw Mary and Ned in the cemetery where Mary's daughter was buried; they

were “talking intimately but not touching” (Blakey; “Review of the Report”). Following Mary back to her house he confronted her about what he had seen. She assured him the meeting had been accidental but that she had taken the opportunity to tell Ned they should no longer be in contact. When Robert arrived home she dutifully told him of the incident and he accepted her story and was pleased that the whole thing could now be put behind them. However, the next morning, Saturday 14 March, Robert’s brother John showed up with a few other men and insisted that Robert had indeed been wronged and that justice must be done. Robert’s temper again flared and, taking his pistol, he once again set out to find Ned with his brother trailing behind. Warned that trouble was brewing, Ned was armed when they encountered him at the edge of town. When he saw Ned, Robert immediately fired. All accounts note that Ned did not immediately fire back but instead again pled with Robert, insisting that the rumors were untrue, but Robert continued to fire and advance. After three shots had narrowly missed him, Ned, a noted marksman throughout his life, finally drew and fired one shot, hitting Robert above the right eye and shattering his skull. John Porterfield scooped up his brother and carried him to a doctor; Ned went directly to the Court House and turned himself in, declaring innocence on grounds of self-defense.<sup>6</sup>

That afternoon, as Robert Porterfield lay dying in bed, Ned appeared before Justice Josiah (J. P.) Ferris for preliminary examination and the courtroom was “soon thronged with an infuriated multitude” (“Great Excitement”). As the testimony began it quickly became apparent that Ned had acted in self-defense—all witnesses agreed that Robert had twice attacked him and that Ned had shown restraint and only fired as a last resort. But before any ruling was made, John Porterfield shoved his way into the court room and, armed with revolving pistols, opened fire on Ned. The crowd quickly parted, yelling: “Give Porterfield a chance at him!” and “let him Kill Judson!” (“Great Excitement”; “Tragedy at Nashville”). Two bystanders were struck by flying bullets as Ned fled from the Court House with John and others in pursuit—accounts vary, but somewhere between eight and twenty shots were fired at Ned as he ran across the square and into the grand City Hotel, but none brought him down. The mob followed and cornered him on the third floor. Ned

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<sup>6</sup> The series of events surrounding this shooting were covered by multiple newspapers, each with a slightly different version of the story. What follows is a composite that seems most likely. See “Awful Tragedy!”; “Drama of Saturday”; “Great Excitement”; “Lawlessness”; “Murder”; “Nashville Murder”; “Statement”; and “Tragedy at Nashville.”

tried to escape by sliding down a balcony post but lost his grip and fell to the flagstones below, severely injuring his hip in the process. City officials carried Ned's bruised and battered body back to the Court House and locked him away from the mob. But the events of the day were not yet over. That night about ten o'clock word spread that Robert Porterfield had finally succumbed to his wound. This news re-energized the crowd still milling about the Public Square and several armed men including some of Nashville's "most respectable citizens" ("Nashville Murder") pushed their way into the Court House, overpowered the jailor, and dragged Ned's broken form from his cell out into the square. A noose was hastily looped around his neck and he was hoisted up an awning post to hang. But while Ned was still kicking, the rope was cut and he fell to the ground, choking and gasping for breath. Later reports noted that "reason by this time began to resume its sway" ("Drama of Saturday"), and instead of attempting to lynch him again, Ned was "carried back to the jail and delivered into the hands of the keeper by the same party who had taken him out" ("Nashville Murder").

Papers across the country covered the "Nashville Incident" with shock and outrage. The *Knickerbocker* noted in its April edition: "There is great reason to fear that before the sentences which are now running from our pen shall have been placed in type, we shall have heard of the death of our frequent and always entertaining contributor, 'Ned Buntline'" ("Gossip with Readers"). But Ned was not dead, and he began defending himself as soon as he could pick up a pen. On 10 April, while still in the Nashville prison, he wrote Clark: "Your April number has just reached me; and I hasten to tell you that I am worth ten 'dead' men yet" (Buntline, *Knickerbocker* May 1846: 466–67). He then insisted: "As GOD is my judge, *I never wronged Robert Porterfield*. My enemies poisoned his ears, and foully belied me. . . . Gross injustice has been done me in the published descriptions of the affair." He insisted that the mob that attacked him "was raised by and composed of men who were my enemies on other accounts than the death of Porterfield. They were the persons I used to score in my little paper, '*Ned Buntline's Own*.'" Because no copies of his paper survive, it is difficult to prove that this was indeed true, but from other evidence recorded in Nashville's many newspapers, especially in those covering the later trial of Mary Porterfield who was excommunicated from her church over this ordeal, it becomes quite apparent that Ned and Mary had never engaged in more than flirtations during the holiday season and had then sought each other's company in March over the grief they both felt—Ned mourning Severina and Mary her infant child (Blakey; "Review of the Report").

What also becomes apparent is that several prominent people in Nashville worked very hard to get Robert Porterfield to attack Ned for reasons that had nothing to do with Mary. Just days before the incident, Nashville newspapers reported the postponement of Robert and John Porterfield's parents' estate (*Republican Banner* 11 Mar. 1846: 3). This sale included two large houses, several parcels of land, eleven slaves, and dozens of shares of stock of the City Hotel and the Nashville Turnpike-Road that in total were worth a small fortune. It is telling, then, that it was John Porterfield who kept pressuring his brother to attack Ned, and that after Robert's death he immediately worked to have his widow, Mary, expelled from their church via a trial that caused her to be publicly shamed out of town. His attorney also stripped her of the custody of her son and made John his ward. This attorney, Franklin Gorin, is exposed in the church trial as having manipulated statements to make it look like Ned and Mary had been having an affair—the “proof” that caused Robert to ultimately attack Ned (Blakey). Ned also claimed that one of the lynch mob was J. N. Armstrong—the son of the then US Consul at Liverpool and a former candidate for Governor of Tennessee—who led the mob in attacking him (“Statement”). Just a few months earlier Armstrong had announced that his prominently located dry-goods store, J. N. Armstrong & Co., was suddenly “anxious to close their business” and liquidated itself at bargain prices; it seems some scandalous news had wrecked his business (*Republican Banner* 19 Nov. 1845: 3).

Taken in total, and given Ned's assertions about the true motivations of “his enemies,” there is significant evidence to suggest that he was attacked and lynched not for an affair, but for the scandal and exposure caused by his provocative pen. It also seems that many in the community supported him. “One or two gentlemen” helped him escape John Porterfield in the courtroom (“Tragedy at Nashville”), the rope used to hang him “was intentionally cut” (“Nashville Murder”), the crowd's sentiment pushed against stringing him back up, and ultimately there was “no effort by Porterfield's friends to prosecute Judson” and he was allowed to peacefully leave town (*Louisville Daily Courier* 17 Apr. 1846: 2). Nashville residents saw Ned and his writing as provocative and even scandalous, but ultimately they defended him. Indeed a few months after the incident George Allen passed through on his steamboat and reported, “Buntline's reputation is improved in Nashville—many folks are believing his account of the story” (Larsen 118).

In the months that followed, Ned briefly moved to Philadelphia and then New York where he finished up his “Life-Yarn” series for the *Knickerbocker*, but his literary course was already changing. By the fall of 1846 he moved to Boston, then the center of the sensational story-paper

market, and, having learned lessons from Ingraham and Lippard, began mass producing thrilling stories at a break-neck rate—he wrote twelve novels in 1847 alone. One of them was *The Volunteer; or, The Maid of Monterey* that is thematically about the Mexican American War, but is also a thinly-veiled commentary on his time in Nashville. The story has as its hero, “George R. Blakey from Rural Choice, Kentucky”—the actual name and home-town of Mary Porterfield’s uncle who served as her attorney and defender.<sup>7</sup> Blakey’s published account of the “incident” in a Nashville paper largely exonerated them both in the court of public opinion (Blakey). And the villain of the story shares his name with John Porterfield’s attorney, Franklin Gorin. In the novel “Gorin” is a cruel, virtue-less miscreant who constantly tries to destroy the lives of the hero and heroine—he is ultimately hanged in a scene very reminiscent of the way Ned was strung up in Nashville. Ned made \$100 (roughly half a working-man’s yearly wage), for each of the stories he wrote that year, and thus by 1848 he began his own self-financed publishing efforts once again, moving to New York and delving into its underworld, repeating and refining the tactics he had learned in Nashville. He soon published a Lippard-like novel, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, that implicated and angered many prominent leaders while garnering him huge sales. New York men’s magazine, the *Spirit of the Times* noted it “excited quite a sensation,” and was “read with extreme interest, as almost any one ‘on town’ cannot fail to recognise the principal characters who figure in it” (536).

Thus, by 1848, Ned had taken the unconventional writing and publication styles he had learned and cultivated along the riverways of the West and transplanted them into America’s largest city, garnering him bigger markets. He relaunched *Ned Buntline’s Own* which again exposed and angered prominent citizens while cultivating the favor of the much more numerous working classes. This again led to an “incident” that rocked a city—the May 1849 “Astor Place Riot” pitted New York’s working-class against its elite residents and cost New York thousands of dollars in damages and twenty-five people their lives (Buckley). It also landed Ned (and only Ned) in jail for a year because he and his paper were blamed for inciting the riot. He was infamous once again, but also a nationally-known celebrity and one of the highest paid authors in the country. Edward Z. C. Judson had figured out how to become the literary rogue, Ned Buntline—a realization that began at the end of a rope in Nashville, Tennessee.

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<sup>7</sup> Note that Judson also praised Blakey in the dedication of another book that year, *The Curse! A Tale of Crime and its Retribution, Founded on Facts of Real Life*.


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## Men Without Fingers, Men Without Toes

# ABSTRACT

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What happens once the rogue rides off into the sunset? This cross-genre essay considers the figure of the rogue's decline and gradual dismemberment in the face of the pressures of the world. Beginning with the "rogue" digits and other body parts lost by the men who surrounded him in his youth—especially his grandfather—Dobson considers the costs of labour and poverty in rural environments. For him, the rogue is one who falls somehow outside of cultural, social, and political norms—the one who has decided to step outside of the establishment, outside of the corrupt élites and their highfalutin ways. To do so comes at a cost. Turning to the life of writer George Ryga and to the poetry and fiction of Patrick Lane, this essay examines the real, physical, material, and social costs of transgression across multiple works linked to rural environments in Alberta and British Columbia. The essay shows the ways in which very real forms of violence discipline the rogue, pushing the rogue back into submission or out of mind, back into the shadowy past from whence the rogue first came. Resisting nostalgia while evincing sympathy, this essay delves into what is at stake for one who would become a rogue.

**Keywords:** Canadian literature, masculinity, violence, labour, alienation.

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I circle back to the bridge, that bridge that I crossed again and again as a child, and this time consider it through the lens of the rogue. What does it mean to be a rogue, or to go rogue?

Roguishness can be variously defined. It seems to attach to masculinity—though it need not—and it also seems to have something to do with those who fall somehow outside of cultural, social, and political norms. The rogue is the one who has decided to step outside of the establishment, outside of the corrupt élites and their highfalutin ways. The cowboy is a rogue; the outlaw is a rogue; Billy the Kid—a rogue. Kit Carson—a rogue.

To go rogue, too, is to go missing—to be Absent Without Leave, AWOL, to step into the shadows. It is easy to romanticize the rogue, like the Western hero who comes to town out of a shadowy past. The hero will re-right the “proper” order of the town, putting the villains to rest, and then, roguishly, will disappear back into the horizon from whence that hero first came. What happens once the rogue rides off into the sunset? It’s seldom that the sunset equates with a happily ever after, after all.

At that moment, to me, the rogue becomes interesting. I grew up around many men whose digits had, for lack of a finer term for it, gone rogue. Throughout childhood, there they were: men missing fingers, missing toes, missing teeth. They were missing bits of their bodies and smiling all the same. These were rogues, living in the afterglow of the Western’s sunset endings. The women around whom I grew up were often missing parts of their bodies as well, but more often in connection with the medical establishment of the day. But that is a topic for another time, and it is perhaps one that others might be able to speak to better than I ever could.

So take a former farm hand whom I often used to see as a child. He was missing the ring finger on one of his hands. He loved to scare us children with his missing digit, the absence providing a shock every time that I saw him. Late in life, when he lost his leg to complications from diabetes, even though I could tell that he was suffering, he joked about that too, and he did so from behind a cloud of smoke and the stubble of a two-day beard.

Or take my late grandfather’s friend, a farmer who had lost much of one hand in a threshing accident. Clutching a cup of coffee in his good hand, he would laugh over some ridiculous nothing that the cattle had done until his asthma got the best of him. He never hid his mangled hand, yet neither did he flaunt it. His flannel and denim had bits of straw clinging to it, and his ball caps sat high on his thinning pate.

Everywhere I turned, there was another roguish character, laughing through the disfigurements of labour. There, the end of a finger had been lost in a slammed truck door—there, a chunk of skin had been flayed off

of a knee—there, a finger was shorter now, in the middle, after having been cut off accidentally by a mitre saw, and then reattached, badly, by the bone-saw.

The world of labour asks that we—at times literally—sacrifice our bodies to the toil. Surplus labour, surplus digits. I have long thought over it, as I watched all of those aging rogues, living in the afterlives of a once-heroic moment, undergoing hip and knee replacements, rotator cuff surgeries, and spinal fusions. I think of the final pain that my grandfather endured as they removed what was supposedly the largest tumour ever taken out of an Albertan—one that was about the size of a turkey—as he stepped toward his final exit.

I also think of my grandfather's coffee cup, festooned with the mug of a grizzled old cowboy. The cup read: "Neither drouth, nor rain, nor hail, nor blizzard / will quell the joy-juice in this ol' gizzard!" And it was true. I was particularly taken by the spelling of drought, and the idea that my grandfather, and perhaps all of the rogues around me (in a way that set them apart), also had gizzards, the stones therein providing the gravely timbre of their voices.

All of this takes place in northern Alberta, in and around the town of Athabasca. A young, soon-to-be writer from a farm north of town, a young George Ryga, also had some of his digits go rogue on him, way back on a cold winter's day in 1951. George Ryga would later write the controversial play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, a play that helped to bring Indigenous issues to light for settler audiences in the 1960s. He wrote novels, plays, and radio scripts for most of his life after leaving the hardscrabble north. The Ryga farm was just up the road from the one on the maternal side of my family.

The story goes that he lost his fingers in a concrete-pouring accident while serving as a construction worker on the bridge that would soon cross the Athabasca River, but I never thought of it quite like that. I always imagined his fingers, instead, as being stuck in the bridge, as holding the whole works in place, heroically maintaining their grip long after the death of their former owner. George Ryga has passed on, and his novels set in the region of his youth are too often forgotten, but the bridge stands. I liked, for a long time, to imagine that it does so only because of those missing fingers, stuck between two spans, dextrously holding it all in place.

Instead, I learned from reading his biography that the story was a little bit different. Here is how his biographer describes it:

One day in mid-March, with the temperature at minus forty, he was required to work on a large crane-operated container that was filled with concrete near the shore, then hoisted out over the river to the caisson footings that were the main supports of the bridge. Ryga's job was to

ride atop this huge bucket and unlock manually a tripping device to dump the load of concrete. A chain ran from the lid below to a pulley above where Ryga stood. With the load suddenly dropped, the bucket lurched upwards, the chain raced towards the pulley—and Ryga’s hand was caught. (Hoffman 53)

Ryga would later write a novel—unpublished and now in the University of Calgary archives—called *The Bridge*, and the event left a mark on him beyond the literal one. Ryga hides his absent digits in pretty well every subsequent photo of himself that I have seen—his right hand is usually out of view. He would go on to maintain fervent Marxist commitments and to write, not always popularly, from the interior of British Columbia where he lived for much of his life. There remains a prize named for him that is awarded to a writer who demonstrates strong “social awareness” in a book.

Digits, missing digits, and the labours that pull bodies apart: these show up, again and again, throughout the lives of those around me.

A few years ago, I tried to write a very different, much more hoity-toity “academic” version of this story, focusing on the missing digits that show up with regularity in the work of the recently deceased British Columbia writer Patrick Lane. While I thought that I was onto something there, when I delivered it as a talk, one audience member strongly disagreed with my take on labour and the afterlife of the rogue, arguing instead that these symbols of sacrifice could or should be read as allegories of Jesus Christ, or something to that effect. Perhaps we were both right—or both wrong. But the rogues whom I have known might have been most likely to use the Lord’s name when it was in vain, during an accident—they were seldom regular church-going men. I still see that rogue digit as a price paid to a too often uncaring world of work that will extract from you every possible price—and then still repossess the farm.

Patrick Lane’s work, George Woodcock notes, takes “its roots in Canadian working-class life,” but it expands from there (8). Or, as Dermot McCarthy puts it, “Patrick Lane’s poetry often seems to be . . . the flesh seeking an escape to spirit through words, but always failing, falling back, exhausted, frustrated, and ashamed” (52). The flesh, indeed, seems to lock in the spirit; I will go further to suggest that the world of work in Lane’s writing alienates both the flesh and the spirit. While there is a surprising number of examples of severed or deadened body parts in Lane’s writing, I will focus on a few ones that are, I think, important to understanding his fascination with this motif. These will, in turn, allow me to link back to the rogue, and how the rogue lives on in the afterglow of aging, fumbling past glory and failure.

This motif, I think, actually contradicts Lane's best-known poetic statement of intent, "To the Outlaw," from 1971, in which he affirms a Nietzschean vision of the poet as someone who "has no place within the law" because she or he is "the outlaw surging beyond the only freedom [s/]he knows" (211). The severed hand, it seems to me, suggests that the opposite might be true. It shows us that the rogue has neither origins nor originals—no Nietzschean outlaws who blaze their own trails—but, rather, an experience of alienation and failure that comes from the world of work and struggle.

The productive act, the act of work, exists either literally or metaphorically in the hand, but what happens when the hand no longer functions or exists? Can you be a farm hand without hands to farm with? Hands, of course, also do the physical work of writing, either metaphorically or literally, and may not be separable from either the creative act or the worker's toil, too. My first example from Lane's work is the poem "After," which appears first in Lane's 1973 chapbook *Passing Into Storm*. It appears again in the 1978 book *Poems New and Selected*, a book that collects much of Lane's early work published in small press runs. The poem appears as well in the 1987 collection *Selected Poems*. It is about a man who has lost the sensation in one of his arms. It reads as follows:

After the machine on the gypo show  
caught his arm in its mouth  
and chewed the nerves dead  
from elbow to finger-tips  
he sat in the bar  
telling stories for drinks

His best the one about  
how he'd lost the use of his arm  
changing it every other day  
until he ran out of variations  
and no one would listen to him  
the arm getting in his way  
bumping into things  
and hanging useless

until the only way  
he had of getting a drink  
was to lay the dead piece of meat  
across the table  
and stick pins in it  
saying:

*It doesn't hurt at all*



men laughing  
and buying him a drink  
for every pin he could hammer in

with his empty glass. (Lane, *Passing Into Storm* n.pag.)

This poem, in its violence, both self-inflicted and shared, as well as its emphasis on emptiness—the emptied glass emphasizing a spiritual emptiness as well—could be said to be typical of Lane’s earlier work. The “gypo show”—a slang term referring to a small logging operation—reinforces Lane’s concern with workers. The poem is, certainly, in its raw, minimal, and factual descriptions of the man’s life, a harsh, vivid poem.

At first read, this poem connects to a wide range of works that focus on the deadened or fragmented body. Possible links would include texts such as Dorothy Livesay’s “Lament: For J.F.B.L.,” for her father John Frederick Bligh Livesay, in which she notes, in particular, her father’s dead hands. Or we could link the poem to the key smear of white paint on the hand of the corpse of John in Sinclair Ross’s “The Painted Door.” Or we might invoke the one-armed restaurateur in Irene Baird’s *Waste Heritage*. Or this image might connect—indeed it seems more readily to connect—to the breakdown of the body that is so prevalent in Margaret Atwood’s writing, such as the novel *Surfacing*, published a year before Lane’s poem, in which Atwood’s unnamed protagonist notes that she feels as though she is “nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb” (108). This context seems to account for one important aspect of Lane’s version of this numbness. For Atwood, this severing is primarily linguistic in nature. It is “language,” her narrator notes, that “divides us into fragments”; she wants, instead, “to be whole” (146), and she rejects language as a result. This language is patriarchal in nature; it is an oppressive representational mechanism that limits the range and possibility of the body, restricting it, or, worse, chopping it up according to sexist norms. Think, for instance, of the woman-shaped cake in Atwood’s 1969 novel *The Edible Woman*, and the ways in which patriarchal culture, in much of Atwood’s early writing, divides the self from the body.

Lane’s vision of dead, numb, and severed hands and limbs, it seems, can be partly explained thinking about the body in this way. The linguistic and metaphorical dimensions of writing are, of course, important to the work of storytelling. After the worker of his poem loses the use of his arm, he is able to stick pins in it for drinks. He is also able to substitute his role as a storyteller for his former work in the logging camps, though his financial returns seem to be much diminished. These roles can’t be separated: he must tell, over and over, and with increasing variations, the

story of his injury, of damaging his arm. So too, it seems from reading his work over time, must Lane tell, again and again, the story of the severed hand, each time with new variations. The hands work to beget the lucre that allows them to continue to work another day. No hands, no lucre. Value, in other words, resides in the hands and, by extension, in the body. When the body is fragmented, meaning is lost.

This point, however, needs to be guided by a reminder of how very masculine this representation of the worker is, and by recognizing how the ideal of the complete body that we find in Lane's works is also metaphysical. Doing so through my next example will connect this poetry to, as critic Adam Carter puts it, "Lane's overlapping concerns with struggle, violence, disempowerment, class, and history" (1).

Machinery and work appear again in this second key example, the poem "Just Living." This poem first appears in book form in *The Measure* in 1980, is reprinted in the 1987 collection *Selected Poems*, and again in the 1997 collection *Selected Poems 1977–1997*. The short story "Mill-Cry," in Lane's book *How Do You Spell Beautiful?* relates a parallel yet different incident. Lane's penchant for vivid, gory, yet factual description is again abundantly displayed in "Just Living." In its opening, Lane specifies, though, that his writing "isn't just violence," but, rather, is "just another story I no longer know / the truth of" (Lane, *Selected Poems 1977–1997* 22). The meat of this poem occurs in the following stanza:

We were five hours over mountain roads,  
the tourniquet wet red and him in the seat  
lifting the stump of his arm each mile  
looking by the glow of the dash-board lights.  
*Jesus*. he kept saying between cigarettes.  
In the pink ice-cream bucket between us  
the severed hand sloshed in the melting ice.  
He never looked at that.  
And then the usual madness, the nurse  
wanting his name and birthdate, demanding  
his wallet's proof until I lifted his sleeve  
and showed her. He grinned at that.  
The sight of those veins and tendons  
made her turn away. The doctors got him then.  
I asked one if he could use the hand  
but he said it was probably dead. Too many hours  
and, anyway, they couldn't put it back. (22)

Although the nurse turns away, as does the man who has lost his hand, the speaker never shies away from the details of the severed hand, the veins,

and the tendons. The contrast between the bureaucratic hospital and the fact of the severing is highlighted, and the poem goes on to describe “the saw and the flesh still / hanging from the teeth” that removed the hand (22). The saw is not even washed; it will, by itself, “cook” off the remnants (22). The speaker of the poem is left with the worker’s severed hand, now that it’s been deemed useless. He wonders what to do with it. Eventually, he throws it off a bridge. The final, painful irony occurs at the end of the poem, with the outcome for the man who lost his hand:

Him? Oh, he came back. They’d healed him up.  
 His wife and kids had left by then.  
 Gone off with the trim-saw-man to Edmonton.  
 He hung around for a few days  
 but there was no work for a man  
 with a stump. And Claude, the boss,  
 didn’t want him there. You can see why. (24)

This final turn, in which the man loses everything, points to the crux of my concern, in that his value seems to have consisted entirely in his hands, in his having hands. Once one is gone, his value diminishes, he loses his wife, and he is quietly shunned not merely by the boss, Claude, but also by the nonchalant speaker of the poem and, by extension, the reader, the “you” who “can see why” it was appropriate for him to be sent on his way. The afterlife of the rogue, it seems, is likely to be a lonely one.

It seems, indeed, to be a deeply masculine valuing of the body as a complete entity that leads to how Lane thinks about work. In the absence of the complete body, value trickles away. The original self no longer exists, and the solution is departure, exile, or death. Such a structure of alienation is something that I see in other texts, such as bpNichol’s *Selected Organs*, when, in the poem “The Tonsils,” Nichol notes that he misses his tonsils and also states that their removal marked his “first real lesson in having no attachments” (230). Severing marks, in other words, an entry into being an individual, being alone, and, even though Nichol feels in the poem that he is being paranoid, the possibility exists that other pieces of his body and self can be taken, too.

But an even more immediate link is to Earle Birney’s poem “David.” This very well known and often anthologized poem records the narrator Bob and his friend David’s perilous mountain climbing exploits. This poem seems to place a value on the body as a “complete” thing too. At the crux of the poem, the narrator stumbles as he and David ascend an unmapped crag that David dubs “the Finger.” David, reaching back to help the narrator, loses his footing and falls off the mountainside. When the

narrator reaches David, still alive but badly injured, he swabs his “shredded hands” and observes his body, crushed against the rock. After the speaker asks David to summon his strength for a rescue operation, David answers “For what? A wheelchair?” and asks the narrator to push him over the adjoining drop, a fall of six hundred feet that will make sure that he’s dead (58). The narrator, reluctantly, pushes David over. While the poem rightly displeases critics because of its focus on being able-bodied, the violence seems primarily to reiterate the importance of the vitality and virility of the body. When the body’s whole self is challenged, the solution—to David, anyhow—seems to be death. In the disruption of wholeness, in other words, the only apparent alternative is absence. The reality is of course otherwise, but black or white thinking puts that fragmented body of the rogue into unknown territory.

It is worth noting that Lane appears to have been particularly influenced by Birney. In a poem entitled “For Earle Birney,” he focuses, again, on hands. Lane, addressing Birney, states the following:

You wrote me back in 62 and told me  
To keep writing. I was up north, a First-Aid-Man in a nowhere  
Milltown, nursing the dregs of cheap whiskey, tapping out  
Poems about bears at burning barrels, a cougar at the door,  
A man with his hand cut off, ordinary things in the tired nights  
When my children slept and my wife had given up on me.

The reference is surely to the poem “Just Living,” as well as some of his other early work. The focus for Lane remains the body in its severed and broken forms, which he lists among the world of “ordinary things” that he then experienced. This violence is ordinary, he suggests, yet also noteworthy—noteworthy enough to constitute a narrative poem—and noteworthy enough to be among the key events that are retold in Lane’s lamentation for the body, for what is left of the body in the world of work. Lane’s is a lamentation of the body in fragments. The body, however, is rarely, if ever, whole.

If we want to psychologize Lane’s fixation on hands, their disabling, and their severing—and if we want to trace them back, however problematically, to the author—it is useful to look, as I would like to do for my third example, at his 2004 book *There Is a Season: A Memoir*. Lane’s memoir is a dense, at times viciously violent book that pairs his narratives about his past with his then present-day experiences of his quiet, meditative garden on Vancouver Island. It reveals and documents the tortured artist and his flaws, and recounts, importantly for this piece, Lane’s experience of his time as a first-aid worker as follows:

I still hear the cries of the woman whose child I delivered, the man I drove out to Kamloops, his mangled hand in an ice-cream bucket between us packed in cracked ice from the river. I worked my days, slept my fitful sleeps, got drunk with my wife every Friday and Saturday night, played with my children as I could, and in the rare moments of dark while my family slept I sat at the kitchen table, drank Seagrams 83 I'd stolen from the boss's stock, and wrote the poems that began my life as a writer. . . . We were leading what I thought was an ordinary life. Even as I wrote my first poems, I had no notion that it would lead to a life's work. Poetry allowed me an escape. It let me enter an imagined world with its ordered reality a thing I could control. (187–88)

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The poem “Just Living,” then, as well as “For Earle Birney,” seem to report an event that Lane witnessed in his early days in the bush with his first wife. Particularly important to this instance of the severed hand, too, is that it leads directly to a consideration of poetry. This severing, which occurs in the context of industrial labour, leads somehow quite directly, though unexpectedly, to the life of writing in which Lane has engaged himself. This close link between industry and writing, I want to suggest with this example, shows how the two forms of work are not, at least metaphorically, all that different, and shows that the body, the working body, is necessarily fragmented, alienated, and broken. Forestry work leads to the alienation of the worker, best glimpsed when the worker loses his hand and can therefore no longer exist in the workforce. The work of poetry is also an exile, or an “escape” as Lane puts it, a distance-taking from the world around him, and, he discovers, a source of alienation from the world that he has known.

By way of a conclusion, I would like to circle back to the shadowy figure of the rogue with which I opened. I find the rogue, too, to be instructive for understanding how poetry and the creative process can be a labour of alienation from the self and the body in much the same way as physical work—at least at a metaphoric level. I'll do so through a final, though minor, example in Lane's writing, because the trope of the disabled or severed hand returns, yet again, in his 2008 novel *Red Dog, Red Dog*. This novel continues many of Lane's ongoing themes, and contains a back and forth between its sensual, violent descriptions of the interior of British Columbia and early poems like his often-anthologized “Albino Pheasants.”

The novel follows the lives of the Stark family, especially brothers Tom and Eddy. Eddy, a heroin-addicted ex-convict, runs up and down the Okanagan in search of something ineffable, creating havoc and ruin behind him that his brother, Tom, cleans up. At one point, Eddy and his friend Harry go to an old man's house in order to rob him, and end up killing him. Tom goes to the house in order to dispose of the body and, while “going up

the steps, he tripped on a sprung plank and fell, his left hand skidding on the boards, a nail-head ripping the skin of his palm” (159). The torn palm, it seems to me now, absolutely invites us to look at the book as being about sacrifice, the injury a form of stigmata. In the scene that follows, Tom suppresses the pain and takes care of the corpse. In the following scene, however, Tom is depicted back at work, in a local lumberyard stacking two-by-fours. When a hand is injured, its impact on work is never far behind. Later, Tom is asked what happened to his hand and he claims that he had “an accident” with a chisel (222). The novel, beyond this part of the story, abounds with partial, disabled bodies: Tom’s love interest Marilyn has a bad eye, and readers are told that Tom and Eddy’s father once left a man with “a crushed hand” after an argument (114). The body, working and scraping out a living in the harsh B.C. interior, fragments, comes apart, and collides with other bodies. The results in Lane’s work are rarely pretty as people and animals fight over the scraps of life that are afforded to them in an open-ended rush to colonize the land.

Bodies are routinely dismembered in Patrick Lane’s work, allowing him to connect his writing to a broad network of Canadian literature, but also allowing us to consider the question of where value resides. Hands do not simply generate value, they are themselves reservoirs of potential value and are themselves valuable. While, on the one hand, this idea is self-evident—I value my hands, as I do my person—on the other, this equation in Lane’s poetry and prose means that hands are *also* inseparable from money. Labour generates value, but labour resides in the hands. Hands are therefore valuable and are therefore part of the exchange process.

This set up is, at least in Lane’s writing, not just part of the world of work. It is also part of the writing life. That proximity between work, hands, their injuring or severing, and storytelling indicates how writing similarly becomes a form of work that alienates the self from the body. To go back to Dermot McCarthy’s assessment of Lane’s work as a process of “flesh seeking an escape to spirit through words,” we might see instead how words disrupt the flesh, making the body, the written about body, part of the work.

As I come back to those old rogues in northern Alberta who passed through my childhood with such regularity, I see, too, how those hands, fingers, toes, all of those bodies become parts of stories. These were the stories of the men around whom I grew up, the heroic fingers of George Ryga holding up the Athabasca bridge, opening the land to cultivation, operating at the behest of imperial powers elsewhere that dictated that those vulnerable bodies should do the work of the state and that would, in turn, make it possible for someone like me to do the work of interpreting their stories.

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# **(SUB)VERSIONS AND (RE)VISIONS**

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“Let me hear Thy voice”:  
Michèle Roberts’s Refiguring of  
Mary Magdalene in the Light of  
The Song of Songs

## ABSTRACT

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The article engages with the protagonist of *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* by Michèle Roberts, first published in 1984 as *The Wild Girl*. Filipczak discusses scholarly publications that analyze the role of Mary Magdalene, and redeem her from the sexist bias which reduced her to a repentant whore despite the lack of evidence for this in the Gospels. The very same analyses demonstrate that the role of Mary Magdalene as Christ’s first apostle silenced by patriarchal tradition was unique. While Roberts draws on the composite character of Mary Magdalene embedded in the traditional association between women, sexuality and sin, she also moves far beyond this, by reclaiming the female imaginary as an important part of human connection to the divine. At the same time, Roberts recovers the conjunction between sexuality and spirituality by framing the relationship of Christ and Mary Magdalene with *The Song of Songs*, which provides the abject saint from Catholic tradition with an entirely different legacy of autonomy and expression of female desire, be it sexual, maternal or spiritual. The intertext connected with *The Song of Songs* runs consistently through *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. This, in turn, sensitizes the readers to the traces of the Song in the Gospels, which never quote from it, but they rely heavily on the association between Christ and the Bridegroom, while John 20 shows the encounter between the risen Christ and Mary Magdalene in the garden whose imagery is strongly suggestive of the nuptial meeting in *The Song of Songs*.

**Keywords:** Michèle Roberts, *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, *The Song of Songs*.

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In her “Author’s Note” to *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (first published in 1984 as *The Wild Girl*) Michèle Roberts writes that she has chosen “to follow the tradition of centuries” and create “a composite character” despite the fact that “many modern scholars distinguish separate figures in the Gospel accounts” (ix). As a result, her “scriptural metafiction” (Mączyńska 4) is based on the conflation of three different women from the Gospel tradition. Ingrid Maisch identifies actual Mary Magdalene as Mary of Magdala, her name Magdalene being an identification clue. Magdala (Migdal) was a prosperous city in the Land of Israel in the times of the Roman Empire (Lofenfeld Winkler and Frenkel 103). Mary of Magdala was its inhabitant who may have abandoned her home/family in order to follow Christ (8:2–3). Her portrait as an independent and self-reliant woman has emerged only recently. Mary Magdalene’s arbitrary connection with prostitution rests on the testimony of Luke who mentions a woman from whom Christ cast out seven demons (8:2–3). Maisch conjectures that the seven demons signified a serious psychosomatic condition, which gave rise to different interpretations throughout centuries, among them the association with the seven deadly sins or the reduction of seven demons to seven devils. The biased readings were countered by what Maisch calls the New Age interpretation in light of which Mary Magdalene was possessed by “the feminine Holy Spirit” (177). In her insightful *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor*, whose first edition preceded the book by Maisch, Susan Haskins discusses the role of Gnostic texts in which Mary Magdalene is “an aspect of Sophia or wisdom of God” and “Christ’s chief interlocutrix,” which makes her role completely different from that in “mainstream Christianity” (38).

Roberts’s Mary Magdalene is literally Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and the devoted listener to Christ’s words who gains praise for her attention in the Gospels, while her sister Martha is rebuked for her preoccupation with mundane, domestic tasks. In the analyzed novel it is Mary of Bethany (rather than an anonymous sinner from Luke 7:36–50) who anoints Christ’s feet and wipes them with her hair. Also, Roberts’s fictional portrayal revolves around the apocryphal texts about Christ’s favorite female disciple. In the note preceding the novel the author admits that the recreation of this protagonist dovetailed with her search for “the alternative version of Christianity” (ix). The Nag Hammadi Code and other writings, especially *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Mary*, which have remained the narrative periphery to the canonical center offered an important inspiration in this respect.<sup>1</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Schaberg does not see *The Gospel of Mary* as a part of the Nag Hammadi Code (357).

century has seen a resurgence of interest in Mary Magdalene, which is often regarded as a result of Dan Brown's thriller *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) rather than that of Roberts's novel *The Wild Girl*, which has not claimed comparable attention, just like its protagonist. Whatever the reasons for the return of the repressed, the process of unearthing knowledge about Christ's "first apostle" (Haskins 10) has resulted in new texts, among them *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (2002) by Jane Schaberg, which remains a milestone on the excavation site of Mary Magdalene research, to use an archeological metaphor from Schaberg's final pages.<sup>2</sup>

Schaberg discusses a brilliant analysis of John 20 by Alison Jasper (330), according to which Mary Magdalene is a woman sinned against rather than sinning, because John's text exposes her loneliness, ignorance and rejection (Schaberg 330). If the Johannine narrative had been meant to foreground Mary's discipleship, it would not have shown her in this light; this seems to be the implication of the analysis. On the other hand, "the amount of energy which a culture expends in order to suppress or marginalize a voice 'forms a reliable index to the effectiveness of that voice as posing threat to the hegemonic practices of that culture'" (Schaberg and Boyarin qtd. in Schaberg 349).

During the discussion concerning two alternative titles of the novel at the conference dedicated to her fiction,<sup>3</sup> Michèle Roberts admitted that she had changed the title from *The Wild Girl* into *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* after the publication of *The Da Vinci Code*. Dan Brown referred to a text by Margaret Starbird entitled *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail* (1993). In this text, which was published later than Roberts's *The Wild Girl*, and in her next work entitled *Mary Magdalene: Bride in Exile* (2005), Starbird deconstructed the image of a penitent whore, transforming her into Christ's bride in the New Testament hierogamy. Hers was also the contention that Da Vinci placed Magdalene in the painting of the Last Supper as Christ's bride.

Brown's fiction obliterated Roberts's earlier contribution even if her "breakthrough commercial success" had come with that novel (Fisk, *Sex, Sin, and Our Selves* 161). Yet it is Roberts's novel that needs to be recognized for its pioneering use of the Gnostic sources, but above all, for conflating

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<sup>2</sup> Schaberg's contribution, which went unacknowledged, in her lifetime is emphasized in a chapter concerning Roberts's Mary Magdalene by Anna Fisk ("Stood Weeping Outside the Tomb" 166–67).

<sup>3</sup> The conference was organized by Tomasz Dobrogoszcz and Marta Goszczyńska from the Department of British Literature and Culture, Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź, 7–8 September 2017.

the bridegroom and the bride from *The Song of Songs* with Christ and Mary Magdalene respectively. This identification heals the old-time rift between the body and spirit, which resulted in the denigration of physicality in the writings by church fathers. Refiguring Christ and Mary Magdalene's union in light of *The Song of Songs* makes it possible to overcome the mutilated representations of women, which have dominated the official discourse of Christianity ever since the Gospel canon was formed.

The fictitious construction of a penitent whore, or else "the mad woman . . . in Christianity's attic" as Jane Schaberg puts it (8), Mary Magdalene has inspired generations of painters who dwelled on the mystery of her sexuality which remained attractive despite being contained under the patriarchal lock and key. Due to such paintings her allurements could be condemned and ogled at the same time. Ingrid Maisch contends that Mary Magdalene "became a symbol of all women whose fate she shared throughout history: honored, buried in silence, pushed to the margins, elevated to unreality, degraded to an object of lust" (ix). Mary R. Thompson states that the identification of Mary Magdalene as a harlot resulted from a sexist bias (1). It rests on a popular misconception which has remained pervasive despite the lack of evidence in the Gospels. Jane Schaberg calls this process "the harlotization" of Mary Magdalene, which resulted from reading traces of her presence in the Gospels through the black legend (9). Roberts chose to navigate the gap between the black legend and discipleship. In order to deal with the binary opposition implied by it, she turned to *The Song of Songs*, which was the favorite book of early Church Fathers (like Origen), but they refused to interpret it as a text about erotic love.

Whereas the Gnostic and Jungian undertones of *The Secret Gospel* by Roberts were explored in criticism (Rowland 35–42, Falcus 56–57), *The Song of Songs* has not been duly acknowledged as a potential framing for the novel. Falcus argues that one can "see in Mary's descriptions of her experiences with and feelings for Jesus the explicitly sexual and sensual tone of *The Song of Solomon*" (58). This begs for further interpretation. Through this intertext Roberts foregrounds the old association between Mary Magdalene and the Bride that has always existed in Christian tradition, which is reflected in European art (Howell Jolly 38). Significantly, on the feast day devoted to Mary Magdalene on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, the Catholic liturgy makes use of the crucial passage from *The Song of Songs*:

Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave; the coals thereof are coals of fire, *which hath a* most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be condemned. (8:6–7)

The quoted passage is followed by an excerpt from The Gospel of John (20:1,11–18) which tells the story of Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus after his resurrection culminating with the words: "Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and *that* he had spoken these things unto her" (*King James Version*).<sup>4</sup> The choice of texts proves the long-lasting connection between Mary Magdalene and the bride from The Song of Songs: "as the bride goes about seeking the beloved in the nighttime (Song 3:1–2), so Mary remained by the tomb at night not as an individual but the embodiment of the holy Church" (qtd. in Maisch 31). Schaberg stresses the influence of The Song of Songs in her discussion of John 20, stating that the implications of the woman's presence in the garden should not be overlooked (335). At the same time Schaberg agrees with Rhinehartz that the inclusion of a quotation from The Song of Songs in the liturgy of Mary Magdalene's feast day Mass is entirely "nonthreatening," because in light of the Johannine text she cannot possibly represent the leader of a Christian community (335).

The Song of Songs is connected with more than one paradox in the history of its interpretation. It is an explicitly erotic text about secular and sexual love which has been elevated to an exceptional status. Arguing for its inclusion in the Hebrew Bible Rabbi Aquiba states: "all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (qtd. in Stievermann 364). The rabbi perceived the Song as an expression of God's love for Israel (Stievermann 364). For Christians the Song became the text praising Christ's love for his church, but interestingly enough, the New Testament does not contain a single quotation from this book even though many other biblical books are referred to there. Despite this singular omission the imaginary that associates Christ with the bridegroom and his follower with the bride persists throughout the New Testament, and it is this element that is singled out and translated back into an erotic and mystical union in Roberts's novel prior to its being used by Starbird, who also conflates Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and the Bride from The Song of Songs.

The affinities need to be unpacked in a detailed way in order to show that the message of Roberts's novel is continually informed by echoes of The Song of Songs and thus provides a commentary which makes it possible for the reader to see traces of the Holy of Holies in the editorial palimpsest of the canonized Gospels. The Song of Songs is characterized by the powerful voice of the Beloved who speaks her female desire in an unabashed way, and it is her voice that is particularly appreciated by her

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from the Bible come from *King James Version*.



lover: “let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet *is* thy voice, and thy countenance *is* comely” (2:14). Mary Magdalene is first heard and then seen by Jesus in Roberts’s novel: “I liked your singing, he said: it was beautiful. It was you, wasn’t it, out in the garden earlier. . . That was an old song . . . but you gave it a new meaning, so full of power” (29). In his comment Jesus recognizes the archaic message of the song and its explosive potential which cannot be contained by censorship or discontent. Also, his comment intimates to the reader that the song in question might just as well be one of the many versions of The Song of Songs which bears affinity to the Mesopotamian “hymn to Ishtar” (Exum 227), because the complex text was generously informed by the pagan elements that Judaism and Christianity aimed to suppress. The pagan quality of Mary’s song surfaces as early as in her childhood: “I found I was singing a song whose words and music I did not know. . . What are you singing?—her mother asks angrily—they are forbidden, those words and that music. They belong to the rites of pagans, may the Most Powerful forgive you” (Roberts 4).

When Mary is preparing for the arrival of the guests who include Jesus himself she finds that “a song” suddenly starts “to grow inside” her (27). There is an explicitly somatic meaning to the song which can be juxtaposed to the moment when Mary Magdalene’s daughter by Jesus is born: “I named her Deborah, since she had issued forth like a strong song” (162). The choice of name is far from accidental. Esther J. Hamori argues that the status of Deborah, who is remembered in the Bible as the prophet and the judge, is similar to that of Moses rather than that of Miriam, while her characterization shows freedom from stereotyping (90). In Roberts’s novel the baby becomes a celebratory song made flesh. The mother hopes that Deborah will become one of the disciples, and the song will go on in body and in spirit. Deborah’s name promises that she will not be pushed to the margins the way her mother was as a result of her confrontation with Jesus’s male disciples.

When Mary Magdalene is visited by her song prior to Jesus’s arrival she describes it as a miracle because the gift of songs returned to her after years of absence in the darkness of the fragrant garden. As she returns to the house she notices that “the little oil lamps were lit” (Roberts 28). Her sister, like the wise maidens from Christ’s parable, keeps the lamps aflame for the one who will turn out to be Mary Magdalene’s mystical and physical bridegroom. Ironically, Mary had become the provider of oil and other necessities to the family; she exchanged her sexual favors for the things Martha needed in the household.

Unlike her mother, Jesus praises Mary for the meaning and power of her song. This makes her a woman of authority who speaks in an

autonomous way through the song, which places her on a par with the Beloved, whom Exum calls "the most autonomous of biblical women" (15). Interestingly, Mary bristles at the suggestion of Lazarus and refuses to entertain the male guests with her song at her brother's bidding. Her song is too private and too profound to be contained by the convention that aims at making a woman either a plaything or a tool in male hands. Referring to a scene of intimacies between Jesus and herself in the novel *Mary Magdalene* says: "He asked me to sing for him, and I complied, and this set the seal on my love for him, that he said he was in awe of the power of my songs, and saw in them the same mystery that he followed and tried to understand himself (Roberts 41). The excerpt goes with the attempt of the Beloved to be recognized as "the subject and not an object of love's work," to use the words of Pamela Sue Anderson about the interpretation of the Beloved in the writings of Luce Irigaray (64).

The scenes that show Mary singing or thinking about the song are invariably connected with the garden setting and pastoral imagery. Francis Landy argues in his interpretation of *The Song of Songs* that the text conjures up a scene of the return to Eden in which "the Beloved replaces the garden" (218). The critic dwells on the series of sensuous images that pervade the song, and that are connected not only with visual and auditory sensations, but also with the sense of smell and touch. In Cheryl Exum's commentary on *The Song of Songs* the lover enters "the garden of eroticism" at the invitation of the Beloved whose desire for lovemaking matches his own (40–41).

All of this throws light on the scene of Mary's encounter with Jesus after the crucifixion. The well-known passage from *The Gospel of John* states that in her despair she mistook Jesus for a gardener, which is precisely one of the roles that the lover from *The Song of Songs* adopts. Like Jesus in Bethany, Mary first hears his voice and only then does she pay attention to his face. In his hands there is a basket full of figs, another allusion to *The Song of Solomon*: "The fig tree ripens its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away" (2:13). *The Song of Songs* that later became an element of Jewish Passover rituals overlaps with the time of Christ's crucifixion and the time of spring in the pagan rejuvenation of nature. According to Haskins, the famous words uttered by Jesus in the scene of his last encounter with Mary, i.e. "Touch me not" (John 20:17) are far less brusque in the Greek original: "do not seek to hold onto, cling to or embrace me" (10). They also gain new significance in the novel since Mary needs to sublimate her desire for the sexual reunion with Jesus into mystical communion. When he imparts his message to her and disappears to leave her only with "a trace of fragrance of spices and aromatic oil . . . in

the air under the trees” (Roberts 109–10), a sensuous signature of The Song of Songs in the novel is sealed. Mary begins her frantic search for Jesus, and thus acts out the words: “I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me” (5:6–7). In Roberts’s novel Mary Magdalene states: “I was that bride—and accosts men in the street asking each—Are you my husband?” (120), which leads first to propositions and then to insults. Also, the condition of the distraught Beloved throws light on Mary’s earlier pursuit of freedom and autonomy which took her on to the road and rendered her defenseless against itinerant merchants who raped her because an unescorted woman was denied personhood and became an object of sexual invasions. The Song does not state what really happened to the Beloved when the watchmen wounded her. However, the very gesture of taking away her veil meant reducing her to a prostitute because mostly prostitutes went around unveiled in order to attract attention (Wight 84). The euphemism may have covered up sexual violence experienced by the Beloved. When young Mary Magdalene hits the road in Roberts’s novel, her rapists-cum-protectors immediately notice her vulnerability and unspecified status, and use her brutally until she manages to escape their clutches in Alexandria and survives on the strength of her male disguise before she is rescued from homelessness and imminent hunger by an empathetic woman.

Mary’s distress after Christ leaves her upon Resurrection can be compared to what the biblical authors of Psalms call “the waters of death” (e.g., Psalm 90:5–6). In the Psalms the phrase was commonly used to signify liminal situations fraught with the danger of death (McGovern 350–58). Mary identifies the waters as maternal and thus resexes what was unsexed in the Hebrew Bible. Also, Mary’s experience connects with Christ’s confession before death: “I am going back to my Mother” (Roberts 100). Roberts’s Mary Magdalene goes back to the mother, just like Jesus before her. She enters the waters of death, which are the image of Sheol underneath the earth: “Her waters took me. I was carried in a black torrent, icy and fast, that foamed between high rocky banks and that turned me numb and cramped me until I thought I should sink like a stone and drown and die” (121). Like Ishtar, Mary Magdalene goes to the underworld and tries to pit her love against death.

In her book *The Gnostic Gospels* Elaine Pagels attempts to reconstruct the process which resulted in the total rejection of female imaginary in the Christian descriptions of God. She points out that the Hebrew word *ruah*, which came to be identified with the Holy Spirit is feminine (102), while God is both male and female not only in the imaginary from the Gnostic

Gospels (e.g., The Gospel of Philip), but also in the writings of greatest Christian mystics like St Clement of Alexandria (Pagels 102–03, 121). The description of creation in Genesis was influenced by the Phoenician, Egyptian and Mesopotamian myths which revolved around goddesses (Synowiec 136, 176). The anthropomorphic tendency is continued in the Yahwist source in Genesis, but God is shown as a male potter, and the female element in creation is entirely suppressed.

The emphasis on God who is the mother and the father means bringing back the elements that Judaism and Christianity suppressed, that is, the connection between Godhead and femaleness which was ousted from religious discourse as a result of reprisals against paganism. The Song of Songs offers an adequate framing for the recovery of this conjunction. Strikingly enough, it is the sole text in the Bible in which only the mother and not the father is mentioned (Exum 25). The bridegroom describes the Beloved as “the *only* one of her mother.” She, in turn, says: “I would lead thee, *and* bring thee into my mother’s house, *who* would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate” (8:2). The mother’s house is the womb, and “sexual awakening is a reminiscence of birth” in the Song, as Francis Landy argues (119). Both Lazarus and Jesus respectively are brought back into “the mother’s house” in the literal sense of death. When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, the man emerges from the grave as if from the womb. After all, Mary’s previous pagan incantations above his body equated his death with a sojourn in the mother’s womb. The same takes place in the scene of resurrection. Jesus, who looks like a gardener, points to the meaning of the seed that died in order to release new life. He was buried but he rose like the seed that needs to die in order to bring forth the fruit, which is alluded to through the image of Christ’s basketful of figs. Following Landy’s interpretation, Mary Magdalene is the metaphorical embodiment of the garden that is now rife with Christ’s message, and literally pregnant with it.

After Christ’s resurrection Mary experiences a mystical vision in which Salome prepares her for the encounter with the bridegroom. Her psychosomatic condition is thus summed up by Martha when Mary wakes up: “you suddenly ran out into the garden. We found you stretched full-length, senseless, on the Lord’s empty bed in the tomb” (Roberts 134). Discussing the encounter of Mary Magdalene and Jesus dressed as the gardener in the Johannine Gospel, Cynthia Bourgeault calls it “the nuptial meeting”; thus the tomb becomes “the bridal chamber” (230–31). Interestingly, the imagery of John 20 and of the relevant passages in Roberts’s novel bring to mind the connection between funerary rites and eroticism demonstrated by Pope in his analysis of The Song of Songs,

which is “expressive of the deepest and most constant human concern for Life and Love in the ever present face of Death” (Pope 229).

This is exactly the case in Roberts’s book. Yet before Mary can experience mystical and sexual closeness with her bridegroom, she has to go through the ordeal of fire, which connects with the apogee of *The Song of Songs*, where love is “the flame of God,” and it cannot be quenched by “many waters” (Landy 129–30). The opposition between anarchic “waters of death” and the divine flame is illustrated in Roberts’s novel by Mary nearly drowning in waters, which is followed by her experience of purifying fire. After these ordeals she is washed and arrayed in fine clothes by Salome. Then she is led to “the bridal pavilion,” where she awaits the bridegroom who soon joins her and they both discard their wedding clothes. The fragrance that surrounded Mary in the garden “sweet and heavy as incense in the air” (Roberts 128) is now replaced by the taste of “almonds and figs, persimmon and pomegranate, all washed down with a strange wine” (130). The sensuous tone of *The Song of Songs* that is conflated with the garden scene from John is additionally enriched by the allusion to the messianic banquet in the Bible, that is, an image of the feast for those who enjoy divine closeness (Psalm 23:5). Mary is fed by her bridegroom and she drinks from the “sacred vessel” (130). Thus the messianic banquet is conflated with the Eucharist. At the same time the rift between the body and the spirit is healed. “Love fused us” (131), Mary confesses, and became the source of knowledge. In contrast to the story of the fall this was not the knowledge that would result in “sin and sorrow,” to use a famous expression from Mieke Bal’s analysis of Genesis 1–3.

To say that the imagery in Roberts’s book is simply Jungian is to fall short of its potential. Jung played a worn out patriarchal card when he identified man with logos and woman with eros. The book not only records the exchange of stereotypical attributes as a result of which Jesus opens himself to eros, and Mary to logos. The novel makes Mary the one who gives a new meaning to an old song. She becomes an active and restless interpreter whose word resides in both corporeal and mystical experience. She gives birth to it the way she gives birth to her daughter. “The first other which I encounter is the body of the mother,” states Luce Irigaray pointing out that all other encounters are modelled on this one (qtd. in Deutscher 161). This is intuitively grasped in *The Song of Songs* where conception and birth of the bride take place in the space that provides the setting for her later lovemaking. Mary Magdalene also becomes the beloved in her mother’s place; and this is where she makes love to Jesus for the last time before he is seized by his oppressors. The experience of the other also means communion with God, which is translated into corporeal reality and voiced in terms marked by sexual difference: “All

of us, men and women alike, are the ovens and wine-skins of God, I tell my daughter, and we are God's wells in which God kicks and swims like a fish" (Roberts 171). Mary translates the mystical experience into the image of being pregnant with God, whose word is like a foetus swimming and kicking, as the *logos* grows inside transforming the inner world of an individual. Roberts's imagery continually reminds the reader of the need to reclaim the possibility of voicing religious experience in female terms that reintegrate corporeality with spirituality. Her image translates the ancient concept of *logos spermaticos* into inclusive terms combining the male and female aspects. The concept of *logos spermaticos* used by Justin Martyr (Karkkainen 56–57) to refer to seeds of divine reason planted in every human being, reflected the ancient and medieval misconception about men's sole role in transmitting life which was planted in female wombs, regarded as passive vessels until modern times when the discovery of ovaries completely changed the understanding of the reproductive process. Roberts's Mary combines the image of foetus with her translation of human bodies into ovens and wineskins of God, i.e. both men and women become vessels carrying the Eucharist bread and wine, and the potential for subsequent transformation.

But Mary Magdalene remains a liminal figure on the outskirts of the Christian community. Her representations (e.g., by Georges de la Tour) show a woman meditating and shorn of female desire, which renders her a safe model for imitation. By way of example, the woman in de la Tour's painting entitled *Magdalene with the Smoking Flame* is still young and beautiful but frozen into contemplation. Her belly is girdled with a rope that is meant to cut her off from her female desire. The snake symbolizing the sin of Eve, or else, the snake symbolizing wisdom, and therefore worshipped among the followers of Gnosticism (Haskins 35), is now a lifeless tool of control. Christ's sexual banter to Mary about allowing him to be a snake in her tree makes it possible to read de la Tour's representation in a different way: not as a *memento mori* but as a meditation on loss that is not only spiritual. Only the candle flame is a distant echo of God's flame in The Song of Songs, a symbol of love that can defy death illustrated in the Golgotha skull that Mary is cradling in her lap as if she cradled a baby.

Her passivity in such constructions defies her earlier restlessness and insight that was potentially dangerous, and which she shared with the Beloved from The Song of Songs and Sophia, i.e. the divine wisdom described in The Book of Proverbs (8:1–36). Schaberg compares Mary Magdalene to Shakespeare's sister Judith, imagined by Virginia Woolf as the one who lies buried at the crossroads. The choice of this particular image from *A Room of One's Own* completes Schaberg's archeological imaginary in the book, which refuses an unambiguous conclusion. Re-visioned by Roberts, Mary

lives on in her own enclave and enjoys both motherhood and discipleship. Yet her message goes underground just like she did after Christ's death in her tormented vision. But whatever is buried can be retrieved because the seed germinates as a result of the gardener's efforts. "The daughter of the daughter" will eventually dig up the text of "an old song" and give it "a new meaning." The final sentences of the novel are a paradoxical flashback from the future that has already started. While theologians are at a loss in the excavation site, Roberts lets the reader hear "a voice." Is this a utopian hope for a Christianity in which the sexes are equal? If so, it fits with Schaberg's inconclusive ending to her book. In the last lines Schaberg recounts a meeting with Harvey Klein, who praises the manuscript and states the following:

Well, Magdalene Christianity: we—you—have to invent it. Maybe it wouldn't have been called Christianity; something new, outside. I might even. . .

"Yeah, I might even too." (356)

That is precisely how the reader may feel after navigating the gap between John 20 and The Song of Songs on the strength of Roberts's refiguring, which ends with the hope of "Magdalene" Christianity.

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## Heresy and Orthodoxy Now: The Zigzagging Paths of the Lawful

# ABSTRACT

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In this article I consider a certain characteristic of our times as a “secular age,” namely, a series of complications in our understanding of transgression. *Transgression* implies the presence of some *rules* and *laws* which can be violated. As long as the rules and laws are perceived as *right*, as a way of protecting the values which would otherwise perish, transgression appears to be a *wrong* thing to do, a misdeed, a criminal act. Needless to say, the very conceptual structure makes sense only provided that the distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil, lawful and lawless are not arbitrary, which, in turn, depends on the presence of the concept of *truth*.

In the secular age, though, the concept of truth becomes not only difficult to handle, since it is incompatible with the modern frame of mind, but also assumes some derogatory connotations, up to the point when to insist on the distinction between (truly) right and (truly) wrong is in itself a wrong thing to do. That is the state of contemporary societies which G. K. Chesterton examines in his work *Heretics*. The effect of Chesterton’s reflections is a new map of right/wrong, good/evil, lawless/lawful permutations. After Chesterton, I comment on the character of a new *heretic*, one for whom transgression, understood as the attack on buried-for-long orthodoxy, is too easy a thing to do. To illustrate the mentioned changes of perspective, I refer to an exemplary criminal figure of the West, that is, the biblical serpent, and its criticism.

**Keywords:** G. K. Chesterton, heresy, orthodoxy, the biblical serpent, secularization.

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1.

Apparently, a prototypical criminal figure of the literary West is the biblical serpent. The serpent persuades the first woman into the originary act of transgression; the serpent stands behind the scene of disobedience and effectively encourages others to cross the boundaries of the lawful; the serpent is afterwards judged and punished by God, cursed by Him and condemned to eating the ashes and crawling on the earth to the end of its days, the verdict in itself telling a story of downfall, degradation and exclusion. But the serpent remains an ambiguous figure and has provoked in the cultural history a whole spectrum of responses, many of which would suggest something more like a rogue identity than simply that of a criminal. If the biblical transgressor and seducer does not turn overtly into a lovable creature, admired for the adroitness of its naughty conduct, it may still appear to be less detestable than the rules imposed on the first humans by the demanding voice of their Creator. Before I reach that particular point about the biblical serpent, I will present an exemplary selection of contemporary analyses of its character and mission.

In the essay “Sexuality, Sin and Sorrow” Mieke Bal admits that the biblical serpent was “an ambivalent creature, ontologically, morally, as well as narratologically” and explains that it was ambivalent ontologically as the animal which talked (31). In regard to its narrative position, Bal notices, in turn, that the appearance of the serpent brings the possibility of action whose clarity is yet effectively blurred: who is the actant? the protagonist? the antagonist? are the ongoing questions (35–36). As to the moral ambivalence, symbolized by the proverbial slyness of the animal, in Bal’s view the serpent’s conduct “implies cleverness, but not necessarily deceit” (32). It is worth noticing how the last point, the claim about the relative arbitrariness of the cunning animal’s speech, is made. While commenting on the serpent’s key interrogation (“Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?”, Gen 3,1b) in the way that she does—“[p]resenting God’s interdiction as so absolute, so tyrannical, the serpent provokes revolt” (32)—Bal seems to take the transgressor’s side. Even though she notices that what God said was about *one* and not *every* tree, it is stated in a rather tentative manner: “Yahweh said seemingly the opposite,” and followed by a complex philological and philosophical elaboration on the one-or-two-tree(s) issue (32–33). In consequence, one thing remains clear: God did include some “no” or “not” in His first description of man’s position in the world, and that alone may suffice to present man’s negative reaction to His commandment as more than natural. I have to admit that my presentation of Bal’s argument may have been slightly exaggerated, but the fact is that the difference between

“cleverness” and “deceit,” as presented in her analysis, comes down to nothing more than a subtle distinction between speaking in an allusive rather than straightforward manner. Is it really a difference in kind? If not, the serpent can easily be saved from infamy.

André LaCocque, in his philosophical study co-written with Paul Ricoeur, draws our attention to the same descriptive formula of the serpent—its *cunning* nature—and maintains that in purely linguistic terms the description is not necessarily pejorative (29). He recalls the use of the same word in Proverbs (14,15.18; 22,3; 27,12), where “cunning” assumes the positive meaning of “prudent” (29). What LaCocque adds to the reading of Hebrew *arum* (cunning; prudent) is its possible correspondence with *arom* (naked), the connection which opens space for the sexual reading of the serpent and woman’s encounter. It is also due to the similarity between the two terms, *arum* and *arom*, that the animal nature of man is brought into play and the serpent’s attack assumes the meaning of man’s inner struggle with sexual instincts (29–30). LaCocque does not consider, then, the criminal potential of the serpent but discusses instead its symbolic meaning, in the larger, mythical context and, specifically, in Genesis, chapter 3.

The interplay between *arum* and *arom* is also recognized by Zdzisław Pawłowski, who gives a more developed commentary on the way in which the cunning animal speaks. To Pawłowski, the serpent is primarily a voice. The serpent is the voice which comes from the outside of the God–man relationship, from the outside of any relationship, in fact, and thus, deprived of subjectivity, it assumes the tone of pure objectivity. The major rhetorical strategy of the serpent is to include God within the confines of its speech. Then, the subject matter is still of some importance, but God’s status and His relationship with man are, significantly, altered. Man finds himself in a position enabling him to discuss God’s ways in front of another earth creature brought to life with the Creator’s breath (Pawłowski 389–90).

To bring one more approach into this presentation, let me mention Phyllis Tribe, who in her work *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* disembodies the serpent even more, saying that it was “a villain in portrayal,” but “a device in plot” (111). In her view, the serpent is, certainly, a villain, but the story as such is not about the villain and its victims, even less about evil. Evil is an abstract term, and rather powerless unless some concrete meanings become a part of its semantic realm. *Why* should man obey God? *Why* should he observe the rules beyond his comprehension? Tribe claims that the story develops mainly to inform about man’s existential position. More than about the malicious deeds of a sly creature it speaks about human obedience to God understood as life and human disobedience to God understood as death (111). The character of the serpent serves as

a tool in this respect, as a means of exposing the most fundamental tension inscribed in the human condition. In regard to this larger objective, the ambiguity of the serpent's literal description may remain unsolved.

2.

Needless to say, the scene under scrutiny, the so-called scene of temptation, is the first place in the biblical text where we read about good and evil and thus, possibly, a reference point for the discussion of moral and ethical issues. Yet the critical approaches just outlined are a mixture of theological, philosophical, philological and linguistic tropes. None of them aim at the formulation of a clear ethical message, nor promote a specific reading of the serpent's conduct; their function is not to teach morals but to perform a professional reading of the biblical lines. Regardless of their personal views and beliefs,<sup>1</sup> the authors shun a style which could be labelled as personal or even stigmatized as confessional. Does it matter? How does it matter from the perspective of my argument?

What I want to note at its preliminary stage is, first, that nowadays, with the exception of the texts whose authors represent so-called cultural minorities, critical pieces should not display personal beliefs. This seems to be an all-too-obvious profile of an academic text now. Secondly, and not without some logical connection to my first remark, when opinions and statements are attributed purely political significance, the participants of public debates may feel discouraged from holding and formulating truly personal ideas. More and more often worldviews count as commodities in public exchanges rather than as precious life directions which one is ready to protect and fight for. And even though I thereby name a tendency and not the *status quo*, one may say "a tendency and not the *status quo*—yet," which is disturbing enough. But let me also say clearly that, personally, I do find all these serpent-centred debates fascinating and by no means do I opt for replacing them with moral tales. So—what is the point?

My point is that in the world where the very presence of clear-cut distinctions (like good and evil, lawful and lawless, true and false) is not taken for granted any longer, the concept of "a bad guy" maintains its negative connotations in the legal context alone, if at all. Everywhere else it may become subject to endless negotiations. The (good old?) times when "God" connoted simply "goodness" and "Satan" "evil" are long gone. What theology names the Fall and perceives as the first lost battle of

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<sup>1</sup> Let me note on this occasion that Pawłowski, for instance, is a scholar, but also a Catholic priest.

humanity, the tragic moment when love is betrayed and “the hope of God is gone” (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 34), in contemporary critical discourse is likely to be approached in a much more light-hearted manner: for instance, as the encounter between the (impersonal) Law and the (personal) all-too-human longing for the fulfilment that the Law persistently forbids, or, more specifically, as the combat between the law and . . . the apple. Here, to complete my list of biblical readings, I refer to a widely known representative of the mentioned cultural minorities, a French feminist, Hélène Cixous, and her presentation of the scene in question:

What is at stake here is the mystery assailed by the law, the law which is absolute, verbal, invisible, negative . . . its force is its invisibility, its non-existence, its force of denial, its “not.” And facing the law, there is the apple which is, is, is. It is the struggle between presence and absence, between an undesirable, unverifiable, indecisive absence, and a presence, a presence which is not only a presence: the apple is visible and it can be held to the mouth, it is full, it has an *inside*. And what Eve will discover in her relationship to simple reality, is the inside of the apple, and that *the inside is good*. (133)

One will easily notice in Cixous’s argument a playful composition of binary opposites as if dancing in front of our eyes, a misty (misty-serious?) replacement of the former world founded on mystery, yet clear and harmonious in its outward design. No division into good and evil, reality and non-reality, truth and lie, life and death, presence and absence, in the former senses, but instead the evil Law, associated with non-existence and absence, is contrasted with a good (presence of the) apple, the evil law with good fulfilment, the evil presence of law (God is not even mentioned, the law is the only trace of Him) with the good presence of the apple (and the mouth). Man is the mouth in need of the apple and a bad guy (law, God) stands in the way. A nice story, artistic and persuasive, but where will it bring us? The abandoning of moral distinctions for the sake of satisfying one’s immediate appetites is a thought to be seriously considered. When subject to artistic processing, it loses all its sharpness and depth.

### 3.

One of the most exhaustive and acclaimed studies of our times as affected by growing secularization is Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. There he gives the preliminary meaning of secularization, pointing at three directions which the process may assume. First, it is about the “public spaces emptied of God” (2), that is, the receding of religion from the public square, the division between



the State and the Church; secondly, Taylor takes into account the liveliness and vigour of the religious practices themselves and recalls another well-known factor of today's cultural landscape: the falling away of belief in God, "people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church" (2); finally, as the third direction assumed and the third sense of secularization, Taylor outlines the proper subject of his study, that is, the most thorough change in the very conditions of belief: the transition from the former societies, where "it was virtually impossible not to believe in God," to one in which God is one of multiple, contested options (3). When faith is "one human possibility among others," even in the eyes of staunch believers their belief is nothing more than "an embattled option" (3). Taylor insists that a society should be considered secular, or not, in terms of its *pre-ontology*: "the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search take place" (3), that is, on the basis of the third criterion. In his view, the West (the North Atlantic world) has been secular in the pre-ontological sense at least since the mid-nineteenth century.

What Taylor also suggests is that in a world in which God is one of many possible choices, "an option among options," "an alternative among alternatives," nothing can be reckoned absolute, ultimate, unconditional; things, ideas and deeds are prone not to have definite meaning, so that the concept of *truth* also gradually becomes obsolete and out of place. Then, life is not regulated any longer, the rules become arbitrary, choices—dictated by changing historical and cultural conditions. That, in turn, radically transforms the very concept of rebellion and affects our understanding of what is lawful and what is not. We used to associate rebellion with an attack on the *status quo*, the questioning of the existent law, breaking the rules. But what if the rule is that there are no rules? And the only law is that no laws should govern our lives?

It is time to proceed to the actual inspiration for this paper, a text published in 1905, written by a man born in 1874, where he speaks, in his inimitable style, both playful and sharp, about "an enormous and silent evil of modern society." The text and the man that I have in mind is *Heretics* by G. K. Chesterton, and the complete sentence goes: "Nothing more strangely indicates an enormous and silent evil of modern society than the extraordinary use which is made nowadays of the word 'orthodox'" (3).

#### 4.

Among other concepts, Chesterton reflects on rebellion and rebels. But the cultural and social scene which he examines is so disorganized that the use of those terms should by no means be automatic. To be

able to call somebody a rebel or not, we have, first, to clearly see what has happened, what changes the modern man has undergone in relation to the rules themselves. What is, then, “the extraordinary use which is made nowadays of the word ‘orthodox,’” what is significant about the change with the description of which Chesterton opens his argument? The meaning attributed to “orthodoxy,” valid for ages, was *truth*, so that being orthodox implied being *right*, being on the side of truth, knowing what is true. Consequently, the opposite term of “orthodoxy”—that is, “heresy”—meant simply “falsehood”; heretics were reckoned to hold false beliefs about reality, about the matters which really mattered. Then, during Chesterton’s times (but I assume that also since then) to be orthodox does not mean being right any longer, but its exact opposite: being wrong; heresy, in turn, is not what others are blamed for, but names a position which many a man, willingly and eagerly, claims for himself. People call themselves heretics with pride and self-satisfaction, while only a few would accept the stigma of orthodoxy. Certainly, when heresy and orthodoxy changed places in the manner thus outlined, the terms must have altered in the very process. Or, more precisely, the reality in which heresy and orthodoxy operated has altered so significantly that its descriptive terms could not remain the same.

It hardly needs recalling that the major factor behind the mentioned reversal of meanings was the spreading of scientific positivism and the consequent waning of the concept of truth in the metaphysical sense of the word, the end of the belief that the distinction between true and false is at work also outside the logical-mathematical and scientific context. When truth and falsity are subject to scientific examination, views on reality in its deeper, metaphysical sense appear to be meaningless and of no value. In this way the modern man, before he lost his religious beliefs, was deprived of the motivation to possess any kind of philosophy, a coherent and consistent world-view of things in their entirety. “Everything matters—except everything” (Chesterton, *Heretics* 5). This is how it becomes possible that somebody “says with a conscious laugh, ‘I suppose I am very heretical,’ and looks round for applause” (4). This is how “[t]he word ‘heresy’ not only means no longer being wrong; it practically means being clear-headed and courageous” and “[t]he word ‘orthodoxy’ not only no longer means being right; it practically means being wrong” (4). Having a philosophy, pronouncing a definite world-view, has become so obsolete that in the face of the new cultural standards it is almost shameful and unruly to admit in public that you still have one. This is the new mental environment which Chesterton names for us and in which one may seriously wonder where the former act of rebellion should be allocated.

But Chesterton names yet another paradox and permutation. The concept of truth, he reminds us, was banned from public space for the sake of another ideal: the freedom of speech. The concept of truth was abolished so that *everybody* could freely voice their views: “When the old Liberals removed the gags from all the heresies, their idea was that religious and philosophical discoveries be made. Their view was that cosmic truth was so important that everyone ought to bear independent testimony” (*Heretics* 6). Still, the perverted effect of the postulate of the freedom of speech being realized is that people, free to say anything, do not say anything important, because nothing *is* important any longer. At times when freedom of speech is the only absolute, people have opinions, not beliefs. So, as Chesterton ironically remarks, they will engage themselves in passionate debates on the weather, Botticelli and tramcars (5). In a way, silence falls, because the phatic, meaningless babble does not count as words.

I have to admit that my presentation of the problem was not very nuanced, which I realize. Life is always more complicated than its brief descriptions. But I hope that at least one thing was shown: indeed, nowadays, we have to be careful when speaking about transgression, crossing the borders, being lawful or lawless. Contemporary rebels, rebels at hearts, not by name, can be very orthodox. They do not attack but defend. And Chesterton himself, along with others like him, was very much in that fashion.

## 5.

One of Chesterton’s biographers refers to him as a man fighting against “the tyranny of his age.” An element in that fight was, no doubt, Chesterton’s conversion to Catholicism, the culmination of a long process, not left unnoticed by the London community, with the ceremony of Chesterton’s baptism commented on in newspapers and noted in public debates (Pearce 88–101). But there were many others like him. In his lengthy study *Literary Converts. Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief*, Joseph Pearce gives a detailed historical and sociological account of the literary people of the nineteenth and early twentieth century who made the uneasy decision of leaving the Anglican Church and joining the Catholic community, or, more generally, “came out” as Christians. Even after J. H. Newman’s famous conversion, the decision demanded personal courage and determination. Catholicism still provoked grim associations with the utterly mistaken religious position, while religion itself was, in Aidan Nichols’s words, something “low-key—not to be mentioned aloud in good company” (160). Holding religious beliefs could, then, be accepted, but only as a matter of

little significance, and not as the pronouncement central to the life of an emancipated individual. The atmosphere of that kind can be clearly sensed in Virginia Woolf's famous statement about T. S. Eliot's conversion:

I have had a most shameful interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is, I mean there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God. (Woolf 457)

Woolf's words hardly call for a commentary. It is quite explicit that "poor dear Tom," one of the living dead after his reckless and inconsiderate step into the mire of religious superstitions, provokes in the enlightened minds not simply pity, but a mixture of disgust and apprehension. He crossed the boundaries of good taste and broke the rules of socially appropriate behaviour. Could it be said that "poor dear Tom" and his like embody the figure of the contemporary transgressor, and thus become a testimony to the endless permutations, the zigzagging paths, of our concepts of good and evil, lawfulness and lawlessness, the accepted and the unacceptable?

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## Joe Brainard's *I Remember*, Fragmentary Life Writing and the Resistance to Narrative and Identity

# ABSTRACT

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Paul Ricoeur declares that “being-entangled in stories” is an inherent property of the human condition. He introduces the notion of narrative identity—a form of identity constructed on the basis of a self-constructed life-narrative, which becomes a source of meaning and self-understanding. This article wishes to present chosen instances of life writing whose subjects resist yielding a life-story and reject the notions of narrative and identity. In line with Adam Phillips’s remarks regarding *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), such works—which I refer to as fragmentary life writing—emerge out of a profound scepticism about any form of “fixing” oneself and confining the variety and randomness of experience to one of the available autobiographical plots.

The primary example of the genre is Joe Brainard’s *I Remember* (1975)—an inventory of approximately 1,500 memories conveyed in the form of radically short passages beginning with the words “I remember.” Despite the qualified degree of unity provided by the fact that all the recollections come from the consciousness of a single person, the book does not arrange its content in any discernible order—chronological or thematic; instead, the reader is confronted with a life-in-fragments. Although individual passages could be part of a coming-of-age, a coming-out or a portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-man narrative, Brainard is careful not to let any of them consolidate. An attempt at defining the characteristics of the proposed genre will be followed by an indication of more recent examples of fragmentary life writing and a reflection on its prospects for development.

**Keywords:** *fragmentation*, life writing, experimental literature, narrative identity.

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This article will begin with a brief discussion of the importance of narrative and identity to life writing. It will then propose a new autobiographical genre—fragmentary life writing—which is based on the rejection of both of those paradigms. A brief discussion of the poetics and politics of fragmentary life writing—using the example of Roland Barthes’s anti-autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975)—will be followed by a closer examination of Joe Brainard’s *I Remember* as a representative of the genre. The article will argue that the postulated genre, situated within Irene Kacandes’s category of experimental life writing, is informed by a radical scepticism about the givens of autobiography and portrays life as an amalgam of arbitrarily interwoven shards of experience, not amounting to any coherent life-story and failing to provide a firm foundation for a stable self.

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#### NARRATIVE, IDENTITY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Perhaps the most important advocate of the interdependence of narrative and identity was Paul Ricoeur, whose conclusions have been synthesized by Karl Simms in the following statement: “we understand our own lives—our own selves and our own places in the world—by interpreting our lives as if they were narratives, or, more precisely, through the work of interpreting our lives we turn them into narratives, and life understood as narrative constitutes self-understanding” (80). Narrative is thus “the form of discourse which . . . is richest in human meaning” (Simms 83). That conviction became the foundation for Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity, which he formulates in his articles “Life in Quest of a Narrative” and “Narrative Identity” (both from 1991). The French philosopher understands it as a “durable character of an individual” based on a life-story whose coherence is imposed by plot, which, in turn, is conditioned by the individual’s desired self-image (“Narrative” 77). The vital link between identity and narrative has been recognized by scholars of life writing. In the tellingly titled book *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), Paul John Eakin goes so far as to equate the two concepts by stating that “narrative is not merely an appropriate form for the expression of identity; it is an identity content” (100). In their oft-cited primer *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson also assert the connection by defining “life narrative,” a subtype of life writing which includes autobiography, as a “set of evershifting self-referential practices that engage the past in order to reflect on identity in the present” (3).



The implicit assumption behind much of autobiographical writing—that one achieves a greater self-understanding by turning one's life into a narrative—has been challenged by thinkers who view this practice as limiting and dangerous. In the foreword to *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips articulates the hazards of what Barthes calls “constituting” oneself:<sup>1</sup>

You get stuck with the self you have made up; the story becomes compulsory. In an age of autobiography in which life stories—lives recovered in words—have become our inspirational literature, there is always the risk of fixing ourselves. The quest for singularity, the therapy of becoming oneself, might be a form of arrested development. (iv)

Autobiography emerges as “our modern myth par excellence”—a source of illusory and feeble reassurance, a “fantasy of describing an essential self where there is neither a self nor an essence” (Phillips ix). Barthes hints at his distrust of the notion of a stable subject when he asks himself and the reader of *Barthes by Barthes*: “You are a patchwork of reactions, is there anything primary in you?” (143, italics original).

The patchwork self,<sup>2</sup> Barthes appears to decide, needs to be represented in a corresponding manner. Hence *Barthes by Barthes* takes the form of an amalgam of arbitrarily arranged glossary entries—on subjects ranging from the adjective and exclusion to migraine and the poststructuralist journal *Tel Quel*. The glossary is preceded by forty pages of photographs from the family archive<sup>3</sup> (accompanied by concise, elusive captions)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In a section of *Barthes by Barthes* in which the author discusses his work routine, he meditates about the risk of writing: “you constitute yourself, in fantasy, as a ‘writer,’ or worse still: you *constitute yourself*” (82, italics original). A similar insistence on the freedom from becoming something or someone and thus fixing oneself is conveyed by Andy Warhol’s adage: “I never fall apart, because I never fall together.”

<sup>2</sup> In “Roland Barthes, Autobiography, and the End of Writing,” J. Gerald Kennedy speaks of this “theory of subjective multiplicity” (391).

<sup>3</sup> Barthes prefaces them by the admission that “they are the author’s treat to himself, for finishing his book” (3).

<sup>4</sup> A full-page photo of Roland as a new-born child held in his mother’s arms comes with the caption: “The mirror stage: ‘That’s you’” (21), while an image of Roland as a student sitting on the lawn with a girl is accompanied by the inscription reading, “Where does this expression come from? Nature? Code?” (34). The captions very rarely serve the expected function of explaining the context of the photograph. Rather, they convey Barthes’s idiosyncratic reflections triggered by the images.

and followed by a two-page “Biography” section, whose surprisingly conventional layout and content is upended by the closing summary of Barthes’s existence: “(A life: studies, diseases, appointments. And the rest? Encounters, friendships, loves, travels, readings, pleasures, fears, beliefs, satisfactions, indignations, distresses: in a word: repercussions? . . .)” (183). Life is thus—to quote a maximum attributed inconclusively to various authors—“one damn thing after another,” devoid of a teleology or a narrative pattern. Therefore the most appropriate strategy to represent life is parataxis—the collage-like method of juxtaposing elements without any discernible logic. In a section “I like, I don’t like,” Barthes offers one of the book’s many lists:

*I like:* salad, cinnamon, cheese, pimento, marzipan, the smell of new-cut hay (why doesn’t someone with a “nose” make such a perfume), roses, peonies, lavender, champagne, loosely held political convictions, Glenn Gould, too-cold beer, flat pillows, toast, Havana cigars, Handel, slow walks, pears. . . . *I don’t like:* white Pomeranians, women in slacks, geraniums, strawberries, the harpsichord, Miró, tautologies, animated cartoons, Arthur Rubinstein, villas, the afternoon. . . (116)

Barthes gradually abandons the thematic arrangement of his likes and dislikes: after the initial list of favourite foods and flowers comes the haphazard cluster of “loosely held political convictions, Glenn Gould, too-cold beer.” When food reappears (“toast”), it is sandwiched between “flat pillows” and the duo of “Havana cigars” and “Handel.” The latter seems to be an alphabetically motivated juxtaposition, yet the order in which “Havana” and “Handel” are enumerated is not right. The consistent denial of a pattern, warily associated with the illusions of a coherent self and a comforting life-story, is one of the most characteristic traits of Barthes by Barthes.

The reader of Barthes’s book comes away with a hazy grasp of the chronology and the key events in the author’s life. There is little reference to what Phillips identifies as the “musts” of a self-narrative, including a focus on parents, childhood recollections and sexual relationships. Whereas the autobiographical story “must make some sense of life, find a meaning or a pattern,” in Barthes by Barthes neither a story nor a meaning could be said to emerge (Phillips vi). What the reader gains instead is a greater insight into the mind, or intellect, of the writer. Irene Kacandes regards the book as a rare example of life writing—alongside Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* (1951) and Georges Perec’s *W or the Memory of Childhood* (1975)—which puts its author’s “mind in action” at the “center of the work” (387–88).

## FRAGMENTARY LIFE WRITING

In *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, Kacandes proposes the critical category of “experimental life writing,” in which she situates Barthes by Barthes together with works including Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991), Dave Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2001) and J. M. Coetzee’s *Summertime* (2009). They are “experimental” in the sense that they use devices not customarily employed in autobiography—such as “techniques to render the layers of the human psyche, split subjectivity or the human experience of time and space—or a non-standard medium (such as the comics) in order to “enhance, reinforce or draw attention to the referential level” (382). Their formal audacity cannot, however, in any way violate the autobiographical pact as prescribed by Philippe Lejeune—“the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical” (5). Referencing the notorious cases of fictionalized memoirs by Bruno Dössekker/Binjamin Wilkomirski and James Frey, Kacandes stresses that any technique whose aim is to “heighten the drama of the story” or “aggrandize the individual” is not acceptable (382).

Such texts resort to “experimental” means driven by their ambition to “convey some aspect of the ‘realness’ of certain experiences that could not be conveyed as well without pushing at the form itself” (382). Kacandes cites the example of Spiegelman’s decision to recount the story of his parents’ survival of the Holocaust in the form of a comics using animal characters as motivated by the ambition to assert (more convincingly than by any standard means) the truth that during the war “Jews were as vulnerable as mice in the presence of cats” (383). The choice of an unconventional medium (such as comics) is one out of the four kinds of (auto)biographical innovations considered by Kacandes, the other ones concerning experiments with time, the focus of the work and the “entanglement between the writer and the subject” (385).

To that short list of categories I wish to add one comprising texts which adopt a radically fragmentary form in order to defy the expected coherence of a self-narrative and its illusory effect—a stable identity. In its refusal to consolidate and yield to the whole, the fragment is governed by “a superior rule: that of the breach (heterology): to keep meaning from ‘taking’” (Barthes 146–47). The arbitrariness of their arrangement—in accordance with the principle of parataxis—prevents the reader from “settling into a conventional autobiographical narrative” and the “perfect intelligibility of a remembered life” (Phillips xii). The renunciation of the continuous text in favour of unnaturally short paragraphs, the denial of chronological order and the frequent use of quotation and enumeration are among the principal means employed

by fragmentary life writing to convey the sense of the self as a complex constellation, mosaic or patchwork, irreducible to being enclosed in the neat parameters of a story.

### JOE BRAINARD'S *I REMEMBER*

The only significant literary work by the American visual artist associated with the New York School,<sup>5</sup> *I Remember* has never earned wide recognition but it has gained cult status in certain artistic circles in the United States. The illustrious group of its champions includes Georges Perec, Harry Matthews, Edmund White and Paul Auster. Perec and Matthews even wrote their own volumes following Brainard's remarkably simple formula.<sup>6</sup> The Library of America's publication of Brainard's *Collected Writings* in 2012, eighteen years after his death from AIDS, testifies to the success of their efforts to secure Brainard a place in the extended canon of twentieth-century American literature. Edinburgh University Press's release of Yasmine Shamma's *Joe Brainard's Art* (2019)—a collection of academic essays with an afterword from Marjorie Perloff—reinforces Brainard's status as one of the most important artists of the post-war New York avant-garde.

*I Remember* was first published in 1970 as a 32-page booklet of one-paragraph entries beginning with the words "I remember. . ." It was well received, and its seven hundred copies sold quickly, as a result of which Angel Hair Books agreed to publish subsequent instalments of Brainard's peculiar autobiographical project entitled *More I Remember* (1972), *More I Remember More* and *I Remember Christmas* (both 1973). In 1975 all the parts were assembled into a complete edition of over 160 pages, which is the point of reference for this article. My discussion of the book will first

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<sup>5</sup> Brainard was a friend of all the most important representatives of this movement: John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, Anne Waldman and Ted Berrigan. Ashbery, who like most of the others is mentioned several times in the book, called Brainard "one of the nicest artists" he has ever known—"nice as a person and nice as an artist" (1).

<sup>6</sup> Following the publication of the Polish edition of *I Remember* in 2014, Brainard's formula gained popularity in Poland. Among the most evident inspirations are the volumes *Wrocław. Pamiętam, że* (2015) and *Szczecin. Pamiętam, że* (2016)—both created out of individual memories submitted by the cities' inhabitants. A possible influence of Brainard can also be traced in Paweł Marcinkiewicz's collection *Majtki w górę, majtki w dół* (2015), which contains the poem "Pamiętam"—an assemblage of 46 fragmentary memories, each opening with the phrase "Pamiętam."

concentrate on its fragmentary form and the arbitrary arrangement of its material. I will then examine the autobiographical content of *I Remember* and the work's correspondence with the earlier outlined principles of experimental and fragmentary life writing. Finally, I shall review the strategies used by Brainard in order to prevent his book from becoming a record of experience reducible to a single or dominant life-narrative and its autobiographical subject from assuming a specific identity.

The complete edition of *I Remember* consists of close to one thousand five hundred autobiographical snippets which invariably begin with the titular phrase and continue with the content of Brainard's memories, as in the following excerpt from the opening of the book:

I remember my first erections. I thought I had some terrible disease or something.  
I remember the only time I ever saw my mother cry. I was eating apricot pie.  
I remember how much I cried seeing *South Pacific* (the movie) three times.  
I remember how good a glass of water can taste after a dish of ice cream. (8)

The consecutive entries, as can be seen above, do not engage with one another in any discernible way and do not constitute a chronological or cause-and-effect sequence. The only common denominator, besides the remembering "I," is the focus on childhood, although even that is not certain since the second and fourth entries could also refer to later periods in the author's life.

The random arrangement of recollections could be interpreted as mirroring the often incomprehensible mechanisms of memory. Such a reading would situate *I Remember* alongside B. S. Johnson's autobiographical novel-in-a-box *The Unfortunates* (1969), whose 27 unbound sections present the author's recollections of his dead friend Tony Tillinghast. Johnson's experiment, as his biographer Jonathan Coe argues, was the wish to "record with absolute fidelity" the "randomness" and "lack of structure" of memory (ix). Although both the title and the opening words of the book's formula emphasize the process of remembrance, no critic to date has pursued that interpretive avenue.

As for the arrangement of entries in *I Remember*, many of them take the form of a paratactic list—a grouping of remembered objects arbitrarily juxtaposed, reminiscent of the "I like, I don't like" section in *Barthes by Barthes*:

I remember canasta.  
I remember "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?"  
I remember butter and sugar sandwiches.  
I remember Pat Boone and "Love Letters in the Sand." (13)

This manner of incorporating intertexts such as songs, films and celebrities, grants the text a collage-like quality.<sup>7</sup> Works of pop culture and iconic personages (such as Marilyn Monroe, who features in seven entries) from the 1950s and 60s function in *I Remember* as readymades—similar to the appropriated newspaper cuttings in the backdrop of Pablo Picasso’s and Georges Braque’s first collages. They also provide a cultural and historical anchoring of Brainard’s more personal memories.<sup>8</sup>

Besides collage, critics have likened Brainard’s arrangement of his recollections to an assemblage (Laing), a mosaic (Fitch 78) and a litany (Epstein). While most of those propositions seek parallels in various genres of visual arts, Paul Auster, in his introduction to *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard*, suggests the musical analogues of “counterpoint, fugue, and repetition, the interweaving of several different voices.” Auster argues that *I Remember* is “a concerto for multiple instruments,” in which “a theme is picked up for a while, then dropped, then picked up again.” Among the dominant themes which recur throughout the entire work he numbers family, food, clothes, popular culture, school and church, the body, sex and “dreams, daydreams and fantasies.” Rather than see *I Remember* as a random mixture of all kinds of memories, Auster traces a subtle polyphonic pattern. His argument can be substantiated by the fact that Brainard does occasionally group several memories focusing on a specific topic. At one point, across five consecutive passages three concern Frank O’Hara. The first gives an account of Brainard’s first encounter with the poet (and his later artistic collaborator), the second—coming after two irrelevant snippets—is a memory of learning bridge in order to play with O’Hara, and the third is a recollection of actually playing bridge with him (15). The infrequent occurrence of such blocks does not seem to justify the parallel with the form of the fugue, which is one of the most regular and meticulously structured musical forms.

In his discussion of the recurrent themes in *I Remember*, Auster mentions “autobiographical fragments” as a strand amounting to merely twenty entries but “fundamental to our understanding of his project, his life.” Out of those scattered passages, the reader can construct a biographical overview of Brainard’s life—the uneventful childhood in

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<sup>7</sup> Collage was also Brainard’s adopted strategy in most of his best known visual works such as *I’m Not Really Flying I’m Thinking* (1964, co-authored with Frank O’Hara), *Collage with Pressed Poppy* (1976), *Untitled (Heinz)* (1977) and his series of works featuring Nancy—a character from Ernie Bushmiller’s comic strip.

<sup>8</sup> In “Blowing up Paper Bags to Pop: Joe Brainard’s Almost-Autobiographical Assemblage,” Andrew Fitch considers *I Remember* as an example of what he calls “popography”—a life writing genre stressing the dependence of individual experience on the mass media and popular culture.

Tulsa, the arrival in the dazzling New York City, the discovery of its gay scene, the brief stints at the Dayton Art Institute and in Boston, and the choice of artistic vocation. However, I would argue that the number of autobiographical fragments is much greater than twenty; in fact, it could be said to equal the total number of entries in *I Remember*, however trivial (e.g., “I remember playing ‘doctor’ in the closet” [12]) or impersonal (“I remember the day John Kennedy was shot” [9]) they might seem. Brainard’s “cute childhood memories”—to use Fitch’s phrasing (80)—also contribute to the reader’s understanding of the autobiographical subject, as they offer an intimate insight into his formative years. The evocations of external events, celebrities and popular products—despite their apparent outward rather than inward focus—are all preceded by the “I remember” formula and thus filtered through Brainard’s perspective. As mentioned before, they provide the social and cultural backdrop against which the more overtly personal memories emerge.

A substantial part of *I Remember* is constituted by what Auster calls “dreams, daydreams, and fantasies,” “insights” and “musings . . . which track the various stray thoughts that come flying in and out of consciousness.” Those categories are exemplified by the following passages:

I remember daydreams of being a singer all alone on a big stage with no scenery, just one spotlight on me, singing my heart out, and moving my audience to total tears of love and affection. (29)

I remember not understanding why people on the other side of the world didn’t fall off. (46)

I remember being disappointed in Europe that I didn’t *feel* any different. (51)

I remember, at parties, after you’ve said all you can think of to say to a person—but there you both stand. (149)

If such meditations do not belong in a traditional autobiography, they are a staple ingredient of experimental life writing such as *Barthes by Barthes*. In both books, as has already been suggested, it is the mind of its subject, rather than their achievements and exploits, that becomes the focal point.

Perhaps the most important parallels with Barthes, especially in the context of this article, are the resistance to the temptation to turn one’s life into a story and the related wariness of “fixing” or “constituting” oneself by embracing a specific identity. Although many of Brainard’s individual memories could be subsumed under particular conventional autobiographical narratives—such as coming-of-age, the gradual acceptance of one’s homosexuality, moving from the provinces to a metropolis and becoming an artist—he is careful not to allow any of them to consolidate and reduce his experience to a formula or a cliché.



Brainard resists the wiles of narrative and identity in three ways. First of all, by fragmenting the record of his experience into individual glimpses and shuffling their order, he invites the reader to perceive his past as an amalgam of moments and events rather than as a sequence leading up to the emergence of Joe Brainard—the artist, the New Yorker, the homosexual.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, he incorporates entries which subtly undermine the coherence or consistency of the above-mentioned autobiographical narratives. The scattered fragments of a potential Künstlerroman story-line, for instance, contain descriptions of failures rather than successes (“I remember the day Frank O’Hara died. I tried to do a painting somehow especially for him. . . . And it turned out awful” [13]) and refer to art with playfulness rather than reverence (“. . . I tried to do an oil painting using my dick as a brush” [10]). Most importantly, they do not culminate in the author’s realization of his artistic talent, which would single him out from the rest of society. On the contrary, Brainard notes, “I remember when I thought that I was a great artist” (21). The refusal to deliver the expected narrative resolution is also frequently evident on the level of the individual passage, such as this micro story of adolescent love: “I remember getting up at a certain hour every morning to walk down the street to pass a certain boy on his way to work. One morning I finally said hello to him and from then on we said hello to each other. But that was as far as it went” (165). The final, anticlimactic sentence disappoints the expectation of a development of the relationship and denies closure.

The third strategy through which Brainard opposes “fixing” himself and his life-story is presenting much of his experience as universal rather than unique and self-defining. *I Remember* abounds in accounts of memories which are highly relatable to Brainard’s contemporaries, as well as to readers born decades later and in countries very different from America.<sup>10</sup> Here is a small selection of such entries:

I remember daydreams of dying and how unhappy everybody would be. (29)  
 I remember staying in the bathtub too long and having wrinkled toes and fingers. (54)  
 I remember being embarrassed to buy toilet paper at the corner store unless there were several other things to buy too. (61)

<sup>9</sup> Brainard’s lack of self-importance and his capacity for satirizing himself can be gleaned from the following passage: “I remember changing my name to Bo Jainard for about one week” (166).

<sup>10</sup> My experience of teaching *I Remember* over four consecutive years to undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Wrocław in Poland allows me to conclude that such transgenerational and transnational relatability does indeed apply in the case of Brainard’s memories.

I remember walking home from school through the leaves alongside the curb. (88)

I remember the fear of not getting a present for someone who might give me one. (90)

In those entries, Brainard articulates a number of minor anxieties, realizations and passing thoughts that would have been experienced by most of his readers. For that reason, Gary Weissman sees *I Remember* as a work that “questions just how unique and idiosyncratic are one’s most private and personal experiences and sentiments” and evokes a “sense of how much one is like others” (78).

Brainard’s letter to a fellow writer from 1969 bears witness to the fact that the author was aware of creating more than a mere record of one’s own past and that his ambitions were very high, if not grandiose:

I feel very much like God writing the Bible. I mean, I feel like I am not really writing it but that it is because of me that it is being written. I also feel that it is about everybody else as much as it is about me. And that pleases me. I mean, I feel like I am everybody. And it’s a nice feeling. It won’t last. But I am enjoying it while I can. (qtd. in Padgett 171)

Brainard admits to entertaining a utopian wish to render his life in such a way as to embrace everyone and assume a collective subjectivity, thus renouncing, or at least suspending, his individual self. The realization that this sense of communing with humanity cannot be made to last does not, for Brainard, render his project futile.

It is curious that this Whitmanesque ambition to “contain multitudes” and be the spokesman for the entire humanity is harboured by a writer whose formative years must have been markedly different from most people on account of his homosexuality, which, in Oklahoma in the 1950s, was far from accepted. Brainard does not downplay his queer experience; on the contrary, he is very forthcoming and explicit about his failed heterosexual attempts, his homoerotic infatuations, homosexual exploits and fantasies, and his struggle with shame—the foundation of queer experience according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Despite the occurrence of these motifs, *I Remember* should not be classified as a gay autobiography, which would be too narrow a label for what Brainard aims to achieve, as Krzysztof Zabłocki argues in his afterword to the first Polish edition of the book (232).<sup>11</sup> According to

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note the surprising lack of a sociopolitical dimension in *I Remember*. After all, the Stonewall riots, regarded as the beginning of the gay rights movement, took part in New York City in 1969, which is where and when Brainard was living and working on the book.

Auster, regardless of the unavoidable disparities between Brainard's and his readers' experience, the "self-effacing" author's portrayal of his life is "so precise and uninhibited in its telling" that readers "inevitably begin to see [their] own lives portrayed in his."

To conclude, *I Remember*, Brainard's life-in-fragments, employs several strategies regarding the formal arrangement of its components, as well as their content, which are meant to resist the conventional reliance of autobiography on a coherent life-narrative and its product—a single and stable identity. In line with the politics of fragmentary life writing, it does not aim to make sense of the existence it represents or suggest any interpretive patterns. The definition of life offered in the final sentence of *Barthes by Barthes*—"encounters, friendships, loves, travels, readings, pleasures, fears, beliefs, satisfactions, indignations, distresses"—could serve as an apt summary of *I Remember* and other examples of the genre, such as Gregory Burnham's "Subtotals" (1989). In this humorous 321-word register of autobiographical facts, significant and trivial, Burnham evokes the sense of life experience as an accumulation of random incidents:

Number of refrigerators I've lived with: 18. Number of rotten eggs I've thrown: 1. Number of finger rings I've owned: 3. Number of broken bones: 0. Number of Purple Hearts: 0. Number of holes in one, big golf: 0; miniature golf: 3. Number of consecutive push-ups, maximum: 25. Number of times I've kicked the dog: 6. Number of times caught in the act, any act: 64. Number of postcards sent: 831; received: 416. . . (Burnham 207)

In both "Subtotals" and *I Remember*, an intimate insight into a life is afforded by means of a part-for-the-whole synecdoche—an autobiographical detail, or fragment. A similar artistic strategy was adopted by Brainard in his drawing entitled *Self-Portrait (My Underwear)* (1966), where the artist's crumpled pants have been arbitrarily, and playfully, chosen to stand for the artist himself.

As attested by the popularity and critical recognition of Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* (2009)—a memoir composed of 240 numbered meditations on loss, heartbreak, depression and the colour blue—and *The Argonauts* (2015)—the award-winning and genre-bending exploration of gender prompted by Nelson's relationship with her partner Harry Dodge, the development of fragmentary life writing is gaining momentum. And so is the recognition earned by *I Remember*, which is used these days as a creative exercise "wherever writing courses are taught, whether for children, college students, or the very old" (Auster). According to Weissman, it is because

Brainard has tapped into the current Zeitgeist. His entries—“in their brevity and co-mingling of the candid, the idiosyncratic and the banal”—may be viewed as anticipating the sort of autobiographical writing practised today through social media such as Facebook and Twitter (98). The more recent and future examples of fragmentary life writing may also take advantage of the twenty-first-century reader's increasing preference for texts broken down into bite-size portions and help this niche, experimental genre enter the literary mainstream.

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“A right kind of rogue”:  
Lisa McInerney’s *The Glorious Heresies*  
(2015) and *The Blood Miracles* (2017)

# ABSTRACT

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The following article analyzes two novels, published recently by a new, powerful voice in Irish fiction, Lisa McInerney: her critically acclaimed debut *The Glorious Heresies* (2015) and its continuation *The Blood Miracles* (2017). McInerney’s works can be distinguished by the crucial qualities of the Irish Noir genre. *The Glorious Heresies* and *The Blood Miracles* are presented from the perspective of a middle-aged “right-rogue” heroine, Maureen Phelan. Due to her violent and law-breaking revenge activities, such as burning down the institutions signifying Irishwomen’s oppression (i.e. the church and a former brothel) and committing an involuntary murder, Maureen remains a multi-dimensional rogue character, not easily definable or even identifiable. The focal character’s narrative operates around the abuse of unmarried, young Irish mothers of previous generations who were coerced to give up their “illegitimate” children for adoption and led a solitary existence away from them. The article examines other “options” available to “fallen women” (especially unmarried mothers) in Ireland in the mid-twenty century, such as the Magdalene Laundries based on female slave work, and sending children born “out of wedlock” abroad, or to Mother and Baby Homes with high death-rates. Maureen’s rage and her need for retaliation speak for Irish women who, due to the Church-governed moral code, were held in contempt both by their families and religious authorities. As a representative of the Irish noir genre, McInerney’s fiction depicts the narrative of “rogue” Irish motherhood in a non-apologetic, ironic, irreverent and vengeful manner.

**Keywords:** Lisa McInerney, Irish noir fiction, motherhood, Magdalene Laundries, the adoption discourse, the rogue discourse.

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“[Y]ou’re a right rogue—maybe too much of a rogue to go to bingo with my nana, after all” (McInerney, *TBM* 114). These words are addressed to Maureen Phelan, a nearly sixty-year-old irreverent contemporary Mother Ireland figure forced to give up her “illegitimate” child for adoption, a revenge-seeking arsonist and an accidental murderess. Although Ms Phelan committed murder in self-defence, in an unpremeditated way, she became a deliberate, serial arsonist, acquiring a preference for this extreme form of civil disobedience. While setting fire to the institutional establishments which have oppressed Irishwomen, Maureen believed that “the smoke would belch into the air but everyone would feel cleaner after it. It had worked for the [Magdalene] Laundry, it had worked for Jimmy’s brothel, and it would work for the Catholic Church” (McInerney, *TGH* 293). To some extent, Maureen Phelan, one of the focal protagonists in Lisa McInerney’s novels *The Glorious Heresies* (2015) and *The Blood Miracles* (2017), constitutes a voice of conscience for an entire generation of unmarried Irish mothers, ignored, mistreated and silenced in the past.

In the main, McInerney’s fiction can be distinguished by the local, urban, working-class, specific socio-historical context, Hiberno-English dialect, and a distinctive way of relating events, simultaneously with detachment and reverence. *The Glorious Heresies* and *The Blood Miracles* are narrated from an ironic, non-pitiful, tragi-comic standpoint, as is evident, for instance, in the remark about Maureen: “Easier get a taste for arson than murder” (McInerney, *TGH* 280). With a wry wit which should not be mistaken for so-called British black humour, McInerney’s books belong to a socially-grounded condition of Ireland genre, otherwise defined as “Irish Noir.” Peterson explains that “Emerald Noir—aka Celtic Noir and Hibernian Homicide—has its roots in Ireland’s traumatic past, including the blip now known as the late Celtic Tiger” (108). Killeen admits that “[t]he Celtic Tiger turned out to be all shine and no substance, and beneath the surface glamour dark and mysterious forces continued to operate.” In line with that, Peterson cites Kincaid’s diagnosis, according to which, the Irish noir genre unearthed the layers of “the disillusionment and self-doubt,” hidden beneath apparent personal and economic success (108). Killeen remarks bitterly: “Indeed, eerily empty houses, malevolent patriarchs and clerics, abused innocence, all seem to be with us once more.” Among key structural features characteristic of the Irish noir genre, Mannion distinguishes “witty dialogue, atmospheric settings and rich characterisation. . . . murder as the most common crime, a focus on fractured families” (2) and, in general, the “engagement with contemporary social issues” (9). She rightly observes that “[t]he majority of Irish detective series touch on historical scars or legacies of nation” (Mannion 3–4). Mannion stresses that a crucial part of the Irish Noir



genre operates around its scrutiny of the Catholic Church’s role in the past and in the present life of the country: “Examination of nation-Church complicity in the legacy of domestic violence and clerical abuse of children is also commonplace, as are, with increasing frequency, the austerity of economics of the post-Celtic Tiger years” (4).

Since McInerney’s novels possess all of these attributes and more, it is due to her unique perspective on the present-day Irish reality that the author was granted by the *Irish Times* the honourable rank of “the most talented writer at work in Ireland today” (Doyle). As stressed by Mannion, Ireland-based realities have recently become a sought-after quality in (crime) fiction (9). The two-year later continuation of *The Glorious Heresies*, titled *The Blood Miracles* (2017), strengthened McInerney’s position not only as a promising new novelist but also as an established writer.

Before becoming a novelist, McInerney had made a name for herself as an author of the famed blog *Arse End of Ireland* which, instead of depicting Cork as a picturesque, two-cathedral historic city with the National University of Ireland education, high-tech business and European IT centre, focused on its less prosperous regions, lowlife, prowlers, precariat and destitute inhabitants. In an interview with *The Guardian*, McInerney declares: “it was Cork city that made a writer out of me. . . . [I] was . . . interested in the peculiarities of Corkonian Hiberno-English and the geography of the city” (McInerney, “If cities have characters”). Referring to Cork in *The Blood Miracles* (2017), the narrator admits:

This city, like all cities, hates its natives. It would rather be in a constant state of replenishment than own up to what it has warped. Ryan sees it well enough: tribes in town, hipster baristas and skinny suits and the tides of students pushing the rest of them back up the hills. . . . the men who sleep on the street are alcoholics, the girls who stop you and ask for money are alcoholics; that’s Cork’s damage. . . . People lose their jobs, people can’t pay their rent. . . (54)

While looking back critically at Irish history, McInerney’s novels are set in present-day Cork’s shady districts, rookeries and impoverished social housing areas. The particular location and types of dwelling are of great significance in this essentially regional fiction. The murder in *The Glorious Heresies* takes place in a building where, until recently, the brothel owned by Vietnamese criminals used to operate. Maureen’s son, Jimmy Phelan, one of Cork’s leading criminal bosses, placed his mother there, and it is where she killed Robbie O’Donovan, a petty crook and

a drug addict, who broke into her house. Hence, McInerney's readers get to know "a right rogue," Maureen Phelan, after her fatal deed and mostly due to that action.

What is more, Maureen enters the narrative not only as a murderess but also as a believer. The protagonist's faith in God and in the existence of the spiritual world equals her disappointment with the organized religion in Ireland. Maureen's attitude toward the Church is symptomatic of her generation. Hilliard's study proves that "many women ceased to go to mass or to receive sacraments. Some of these, although alienated from the Church, continued other forms of religious observance, including personal prayer, the use of holy water and veneration for statues and blessed medals" (156). Ms Phelan collects the "holy souvenirs" connected with Catholic faith, and it is with such an object that she strikes a burglar. Relating the course of events to her son, Maureen responds mordantly: "Belted him," she said. "With the Holy Stone. I wasn't giving up the upper hand on the off-chance he was Santy Claus" (McInerney, *TGH* 15). The high register ("the Holy Stone") becomes intermingled with its low, slang idiom of "belt," meaning to strike. As shown, the narrator enunciates the line of the religious discourse, signalled by the type of the weapon seized upon during the murder, and extended by negation upon the image of an intruder (not being a saint). It is precisely the unusual lethal object that Maureen employed in her self-defence, and not so much her murderous deed, that attracted the attention of her felonious son, Jimmy. And even at this early stage, one can formulate the main argument of the narrative: phoney religion can be a deadly armament against people.

In *The Glorious Heresies*, the Holy Stone is rendered with much attention to the detail:

A flat rock, about a fistful, painted gold and mounted on polished wood, with a picture of the Virgin Mary holding Chubby Toddler Jesus printed on one side in bright Celtic colours, and the bloody essences of the dead man on the kitchen floor smeared and knotted on top. (15)

Due to his criminal mind, Jimmy suspects that the rock was painted by a swindler who wanted to take advantage of religious people's naivety. Following this line, he envisages "a car boot sale" for which the object could have been generated. Maureen's kitsch stone seems to belong to cheap Catholic worship souvenirs, such as "[r]ows of Virgin Mary barometers; her fuzzy cloak would change colour depending on the weather, which was very miraculous. Toy cameras with preloaded images of the shrine; . . . many sticks of rock" (McInerney, *TGH* 20). Even at this stage, shoddy commercialization of the spiritual indicates the fall

of the principles for the sake of the business venture. By contrast, in McInerney’s account, the remains of the living tissue and human blood spilt upon the rock/murder weapon appear to subscribe to the mystery of transubstantiation. What is more, in *The Glorious Heresies*, the inadvertent “sacrifice” performed by Maureen leads to the spiritual transformation of numerous characters in the course of the novel. The imagery of the blood tissue (compare with “the Christian fissure”) resurfaces in the concept of the nation’s open wound: the generation of Irish children given away to enforced adoption, coerced by the Catholic church. Maureen comments upon it: “So many other boys and girls grew up with holes in their chests gaping as wide as the Christian fissure that had spat them into the world” (McInerney, *TGH* 189).

During the post-murder scene, the readers’ attention is diverted from the act of killing to a mother-son bonding conversation during which they struggle to re-establish the connection and get to know each other better. Because Jimmy and his biological parent were separated for a long time, they are uncertain of what to expect of each other. They each use the fatal opportunity to find out more about the other. This way, the critical moment is also a cognitive one for them. Jimmy begins: “I didn’t take you for a Holy Josephine.” “You wouldn’t want to, because I’m not” (McInerney, *TGH* 15), his mother replies. According to Catholic Online, before joining the Canossian Daughters of Charity, Saint Josephine Bakhita of Sudan (canonized in 2000 by Pope John Paul II) was a slave kidnapped by Arabs, tortured for years and sold from hand to hand. Despite her emotional and physical ordeal, Saint Josephine remained a forgiving, merciful and compassionate person, due to her conversion to Christianity. Her “gentle voice and smile” contributed to the appellation of a “black mother” (“St. Josephine Bakhita”). With the above in mind, one can see clearly why Maureen has established her own “rogue” identity in negation of that self-sacrificial motherly image.

From the way the conversation is recounted in *The Glorious Heresies*, it seems that Jimmy and his mother have problems in relating to this unexpected turn of events. The son dryly confronts his mother: “You just collect bulky religious souvenirs to use as murder weapons, is it? No one ever suspects the heavy hand of the Lord” (McInerney, *TGH* 15). Maureen quickly resumes the similar ironic rhetoric to subvert the Church saying: “The Lord works in mysterious ways” (15). As argued by Purdy, the original citation is derived from William Cowper’s hymn “God moves in a mysterious way.” With drug lords, his immediate superiors, in mind, Jimmy derides his mother’s religious idiom to shift the narrative into the familiar world of crime: “I know a few lords like that all right” (McInerney, *TGH* 15). This way, the idiom of corruption and wrongdoing

gets textually equated with religious discourse. Both mother and her son have got powerful bosses who govern their lives and determine their fate. They both correspondingly feel powerless in the face of a mighty force, whether supernatural or criminal. As tends to happen with complicated family relationships, guilt and hurt resurface in mutual accusations and blame. When Maureen complains that her son should not have left her alone in the disreputable house, Jimmy retorts: “‘It’s you who made it like this.’ ‘. . . I’ll get you a cat’” (16). That final, seemingly offhand remark indicates that Jimmy does not really know how to be “a son” to his mother and how to take care of her in an affectionate way.

As a hardened criminal, Jimmy does not seem to be stunned by Maureen’s violent act but rather by his mother’s capability of it and its effectiveness. He admits: “So how Maureen had managed to kill an intruder was beyond him” (14). To some extent, he even admires his mother for her instant reaction: “she was such an odd fish as to be capable of impromptu executions” (17). Considered from a different angle, Jimmy is apprehensive about his own reputation and his endangered prestige in the underworld, which will be diminished, if news about his bloodthirsty mother is to spread among his fellow criminals. Then again, it is Jimmy to whom the narrator attributes empathetic understanding of how much the stone might have, symbolically, meant to his parent. Viewed from this perspective, the stone signifies Maureen’s alleged sin of illegitimate motherhood. The speaker in *The Glorious Heresies* speculates:

And so supposing the Holy Stone symbolised something to Maureen. Repentance. Humility. New beginnings. Supposing smashing it off the skull of an intruder set her back forty years. How much healing did a fallen woman require, if she had the whole of Ireland’s fucked up psyche weighing her down to purgatory? (21)

Maureen’s decision to inform her delinquent son about the murder and her subsequent request for his assistance to dispose of the dead body seems a practical way out of the challenging predicament. The casualty, Robbie O’Donovan, was an intruder and a drug addict who tried to rob an older woman. Maureen is fully convinced that she needed to protect her life, referring to Robbie as: “‘Dirty tramp. Robbing all around them. I’m just the type they target’” (16). On the one hand, one may comprehend that a senior citizen, living alone and surprised at night by an intruder, decided to defend herself. On the other hand, readers, earlier acquainted in the narrative with the deceased, are aware that O’Donovan was not a violent, toughened criminal or a callous person. It even remains plausible to assume that the burglar may not have constituted a real

threat to Maureen’s life. Bearing this in mind, Ms Phelan’s behaviour may be *post factum* interpreted as excessively violent; and the woman’s subsequent composure does not aid her case either. Taking into account the catastrophic circumstances, Maureen appears to be in total control and capable of thinking in a logical way. What may strike one is Maureen’s consistent reluctance to report the incident to Gardaí. Even though Ms Phelan is aware that she has taken somebody’s life, she does not consider turning herself in and facing the consequences of her lethal act. As shown, McInerney does not make it unproblematic for the audience to sympathize with Maureen instantaneously.

Maureen herself does not try to minimize the fact that she has killed a man. To Tony Cusack who came to remove the corpse, she responds sarcastically: “I see you looking at me like I might crack you open too, but I’m telling you, ’twasn’t the way I’d planned to spend my morning” (McInerney, *TGH* 47). She yearns for deliverance but, at the same time, is aware that she is not entitled to it:

Maureen was seeking redemption. Not for herself. You don’t just kill someone and get forgiven; they’d hang you for a lot less. No, she was seeking redemption like a pig sniffs for truffles: rooting it out, turning it over, mad for the taste of it, resigned to giving it up. (79)

Ms Phelan does not give herself the right to be forgiven. In her own sense of right and wrong, as a murderess, she does not deserve it. Maureen killed Robbie because she no longer wished to be a victim. Other people abused her in the past, and she finally decided to stand up for herself. And although she did it with a fatal outcome, Maureen does not repent. As she says, over the past forty years, she atoned enough for the rest of her life.

The discourse of penance brings one back to Catholic doctrine. Ms Phelan believes in the afterlife and she regularly engages in an active dialogue with the victim of her self-defence. Hilliard proves that “although the relationship between the Church [could] . . . be raptured, it was by no means the case that they had no longer any means of religious expression or abandoned a spiritual dimension in their lives” (158). Robbie O’Donovan, as an imaginary ghost, haunts and lives with Maureen in the former brothel where he died. The deceased man becomes an emanation of the murderer’s sense of morals. She admits with honesty “How easy it was to kill someone, really, much easier than it had any right to be” (McInerney, *TGH* 79). Furthermore, it is via her monologues with Robbie that readers become acquainted with the personal details of Maureen’s life. She talks to the dead man, trying to appease the ghost by telling him the story of her woe. With the course of time, she embraces the ghost like her

long abandoned son. Ms Phelan befriends Robbie and confides in him; she mothers and mourns him. Moreover, in her soliloquies, she preserves the memory of Robbie. And instead of indulging in self-pity and contrition, Maureen focuses her compassion on the departed: “*Robbie O’Donovan*, said her conscience. *Poor craitur*. *Had a name once, and a body, before you offered both to the worms . . .* No guards, no wives, no mammies. *Poor craitur*,” (79, emphasis added). In Hiberno-English the sound “i:” can be realized as the diphthong “ei.” In *Accents of English*, Wells clarifies that this feature happens most often in “old-fashioned . . . speech [and] the usage is recessive” (425). Furthermore, Wells provides an example of the stereotypical, clichéd *Jaysus* pronunciation, employed as “a joke or as a conscious Hibernicism” (425). As for other examples of Irish-English variation, McInerney’s novels include, for example, the popular *eejit* for idiot (i.e. *TGH* 6, 91).

It is the lack of family support and closer connections that incites in Maureen sympathy for the dead Robbie. It indicates that, for Ms Phelan, relations with others constitute the sense and the essence of human existence. On the symbolic level, as hinted in the introductory paragraph, Maureen is an iconic Mother Ireland, whose personal fate (and faith) is intertwined with the highs and lows of the whole nation. Talking of his mother, Jimmy admits: “She’s got your children’s history. . . . Ireland’s history in there” (McInerney, *TGH* 19). Valiulis reminds one that “the ideal Irish woman . . . was first and foremost a mother who inculcated in her children, her sons in particular, a love of country, of Gaelic culture and tradition, of freedom for Ireland” (117). She argues that womanhood was seen as synonymous with motherhood, and motherhood as tantamount with rights for women as vital parts of the Irish society (117–19). Maureen in McInerney’s fiction is defined by motherhood denied to her; her (lost) motherhood has affected her entire life. For unprincipled Jimmy, being estranged from his parent led to him losing his ethical standards. Maureen blames her own parents’ preoccupation with religion (“much in cahoots with the Man Above” [McInerney, *TGH* 126]), and her shattered reputation for the fact that her son “has no morals at all and he’s turned to a life of crime” (126). Jimmy’s last trace of uncorrupted humanity is the bond with the mother he has recently reunited with. The narrator ironically admits that Jimmy Phelan “had a yearning for: imported flesh, Cognac, his long-lost mother” (13). The mocking order of this list reveals the priorities in his life: human traffic of women from abroad for sex, drinking for pleasure, and maternal love for his emotional stability. In addition, Jimmy’s ultimate and maybe sole act of decency is realized in finding his mother in London, bringing her back to Ireland and protecting her at any cost. “Rogue” motherhood remains the central theme of the first, and to

some extent, the second of McInerney’s novels. With all the reservations against “biographical analysis,” the author suggests and problematizes this trope in her interview titled “If cities have characters then this one’s a brilliant brat”:

I don’t have a fixed origin story. I was born to an unmarried 19-year-old and quickly adopted by her parents because Ireland would otherwise have classed me as illegitimate. I’m either the cherished baby of the family or a symptom of my country’s troubled relation with religion.

In *The Glorious Heresies*, Maureen Phelan gave birth to her “out-of-the-wedlock” son Jimmy when she was of the same age as McInerney’s biological mother and the child was also adopted by grandparents for the same reason, as stated in the interview above. As shown by Conway after Kirk, adoption in case of “illegitimate,” non-marital birth was recommended as “the optimum solution,” both with regard to the child and the mother who was expected to act as if nothing had happened, leave the past behind her and never look back (186). However, mothers forced to give up their children had to struggle on their own with “the pain of relinquishment . . . [that] shattered their lives” and “the loss intensified over time, linked to a lack of knowledge about the development of their child” (Conway 186), as was the case with Maureen in McInerney’s novels. Jimmy’s father, Dominic Looney, abandoned her and their unborn child, never to return. His desertion, as the woman admits, in the eyes of the world, “made a whore and a charlatan out of the pair of us” (McInerney, *TGH* 81). Nonetheless, Ms Phelan did not regret being left by a man whom she regarded as a coward, and she courageously confronted the situation on her own, bearing in mind all her “options: the stairs, the coat hanger, the boiling baths” (187). But regardless of social ostracism and the stigma of shame, she decided to keep her “illegitimate” baby, and she “announced her misdeed with the bravado of scientific detachment” (187).

With reference to her Cork-based study, regarding the period of the 1950s and the 1960s, published in the article “Motherhood, Sexuality and the Catholic Church,” Hilliard claims that at that time in Ireland “[h]aving a child outside of marriage was particularly censured” (149). Maureen’s parents, especially her devout Catholic mother Una, defamed their pregnant daughter as a “fallen woman.” Hilliard proves that such an approach was not uncommon among mature, married women who followed the teachings of the Catholic Church in Ireland including in the sphere of procreation. In the early to mid-twenty century, women had limited knowledge of their own bodies, female sexuality or even conception, not to mention birth control



(Hilliard 140–42). Sexual activity was discussed mostly with regard to marital relations, and it was not perceived to have “a recreational dimension” (143). In *The Glorious Heresies*, from Una’s viewpoint, sex was only allowed in marriage, otherwise it became a “stain” (McInerney, *TGH* 186). In line with the above, Una was ashamed of her daughter who “had brought the devil into the family” (187). Hence, forsaken by her man, condemned by the Church and the conservative society, Maureen suffered from the additional trauma of rejection and humiliation from the people who should support her. With regard to Una, “[h]er own daughters she saw as treacherous vixens. . . She hated the hair under their arms . . . the blood that confirmed they were ready for sin” (186). Shortly after Jimmy was born, “it was decided that I give him up in atonement so that my mother and father could raise him in the stable and proper home” (81). Addressing Robbie’s ghost, Maureen exclaims: “I’ve done all my redeeming, forty **bleddy** years of it, why in God’s name do you think I should be seeking redemption for you?” (81, emphasis added). Over again, Maureen’s speech, especially when she becomes emotive or relates to the times of “Old Catholic Ireland,” discloses the conspicuous Hiberno-English patterns. The separation from her son is what comes as the worst, formative life experience from which Maureen never fully recovered. As the person who allegedly disgraced her family, she was sent abroad to seek employment in London. Before Jimmy found her, she lived “on exile,” alone, shamed and separated from her the rest of her family. However, what happened to Maureen was not the worst development that could occur to a young, unmarried mother in Ireland in the 1970s. Una’s first preferable choice was to refer her daughter to the convent “*behind the high walls*” “to appease sour-faced nuns” (187). But, as the narrator reminds, “the tide was turning” (187) and social codes in Ireland began to change.

Maureen’s subplot in *The Glorious Heresies* and *The Blood Miracles* is the narrative of many young Irishwomen who, in the past, were not allowed to raise their “illegitimate” children. Women like Ms Phelan were expected to hide their “sin” from the world and deny their “illegitimate” motherhood; such self-deception would result, however, in serious psychological traumas and irrecoverable emotional damages (Milotte). The most dismaying possible scenario involved infamous Magdalene Laundries where “fallen women” worked beyond human endurance for many years and where many died prematurely because of chlorine, malnutrition or neglect.

From the time of the Potato Famine until the early 1970s, the “fallen women” of Ireland, unmarried mothers, who had broken the sixth or ninth commandments, scrubbed the society’s dirty clothes. Betrayed by lovers, signed in by families or guardians, they lived a spartan and loveless existence. (Burke Brogan 161)

Ms Phelan was ready to take her own life if she were compelled to do “her penance up to her elbows in soap and steam in the Laundry” (McInerney, *TGH* 187). She admits: “if it weren’t for the Magdalene Laundry being on its last, bleached-boiled legs I would have been up there scrubbing sheets for the country. Instead I was exiled” (127). In theory, the aim of Magdalene Laundries was to “protect, reform, and rehabilitate” young women before reinstating them in the society. In his monograph *Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Confinement*, Smith explains that

Ireland’s architecture of containment encompassed an assortment of interconnected institutions, including mother and baby homes, industrial and reformatory schools, mental asylums, adoption agencies and Magdalene laundries. These institutions concealed citizens already marginalized by a number of interrelated social phenomena: poverty, illegitimacy, sexual abuse, and infanticide. . . . In a still-decolonizing society . . . the prescribed national narrative . . . emphasized conformity, valued community over the individual, and esteemed conservative Catholic moral values. (xiii)

Smith underlines that apart from features that could be found in other Magdalene institutions worldwide (“a regime of prayer, silence, work in a laundry, and a preference for permanent inmates”) what distinguished Irish Magdalene establishments was their uninterrupted endurance until the 1980s (the last establishment of this sort is reported by Cooper to have been closed down in 1996), their being more involved in the national discourse and less open to public scrutiny (xv). In her book *Origins of Magdalene Laundries: An Analytical History* McCarthy elucidates that in Ireland, the process of magdalenization acquired a more extreme formula, because it was believed that “a women’s worth could only be measured as unpaid labor in the home as wife and mother first. . . . [i]f a woman rejected these roles, she forfeited her rights as a citizen” (9). Thus, as emphasized by McCarthy, the damage to the so-called respectable status of womanhood, involved damage to woman’s social, national and constitutional rights. Drawing upon Inglis, Smith argues that in post-famine Ireland,

the unmarried mother and her illegitimate child presented a serious threat to the economic stability of men newly converted to the benefits of capital accumulation. Illegitimacy tolerated under the Ireland’s indigenous Brehon Law, became strongly prohibited, transforming the unfortunate mother and child into social pariahs. (27–28)

Power in *Sex and Marriage in Ancient Ireland* reminds one that under the Brehon Law the concept of an illegitimate child did not exist (33). It

happened because “[a]ll children born to a woman, no matter what the circumstances of their conception, were legislated for and their rights recognised” (33). After Connell, Smith states that in modern Ireland the dishonour of illegitimacy was transferred (“inherited”) from one generation of children to another (28). The reason for such long-lasting and irredeemable shaming results from the fact that women were seen as “responsible for providing the mainstay of a new bourgeois Catholic morality, [and] they were severely punished for the failing to uphold the implicit, requisite standards” (Smith 28). One needs to add the dishonour of prostitution connected with the inmates of this place.

Smith notes that the history of Magdalene Laundries in Ireland goes back to as early as 1767 when the first establishment, re-educating and morally rehabilitating in its goals, designed specifically for “fallen women”<sup>1</sup> was founded in Dublin (25). The agenda behind choosing the name goes back to the Bible: “the name appropriates Mary Magdalene as a role model for repentance and spiritual regeneration” (Smith 25). McCarthy claims that Jesus’s forgiveness and his absolution of sins involved “the masculinization of Magdalene,” which required of her renouncing womanhood and un-gendering (20–21). “Her ‘sins’ have been forgiven but stains of her sins remain” (Burke Brogan 164). Smith clarifies that apart former prostitutes, Irish Magdalene Laundries comprised a much more diverse spectrum of inmates, i.e. women whose morality was questioned, women who were deemed as socially incorrigible, mentally disabled, sent by court order, or who were expelled from other kinds of reformatory schools (xv). Explaining the rationale for his full-length study, Smith defines Magdalene’s women as “the nation’s disappeared”:

They did not matter, or matter enough, in a society that sought to negate and render invisible the challenges they embodied: they were sexually active when Irish women were expected to be morally pure; they were unmarried mothers of “illegitimate” children when the constitution rendered motherhood and marriage inseparable; they were women who killed their babies when the symbolic icon of Mother Ireland would not allow for this material contradiction, they were the victims of physical and sexual abuse by men under a legal double standard that evaded male culpability and condemned female victims as criminals. . . . the Magdalene asylum existed as a place to contain and/or punish the threatening embodiment of instability. (xvii)

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike in some studies (i.e. Smith) that tend to employ this strategy selectively, the article uses consistently inverted commas of the stigmatic terms of the past throughout.

In his study, Smith stresses the scarcity of the available written record concerning Magdalene Laundries from the twentieth century onwards (24). He argues that the official discourse wishes to present them as nineteenth-century institutions rather than modern ones. Although apologies to Magdalene Laundries’ victims were given by Bertie Ahern in 1999, and by Taoiseach Enda Kenny in 2013, the state seems reluctant to provide the women in question with appropriate financial compensation (Smith 184–85). Moreover, only one Irish religious congregation (Sisters of Mercy) openly acknowledged their culpability in 2004, others seem unwilling to admit their involvement, or even to co-operate by opening their archives to the public inquiry (Smith 185–86). Despite relatively comprehensive media coverage of this phenomenon, both in documentary and fictive forms, the lack of justice paid to the survivors, or even “local initiatives to memorialize the victims of Ireland’s Magdalene laundries suggests a resistance to claiming ownership of this more personal and immediate history” (Smith 187). After all, as Smith reminds us, Irish families used to send their unmarried daughters, and local communities supported such establishments by giving them dirty washing to clean (186). As stated by Raftery,

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Irish society was deeply complicit in the incarceration of women and girls in the laundries. In what has been described as a culture of containment, Ireland locked up more of its citizens per capita than anywhere else in the world—not in prisons, but in psychiatric hospitals, Magdalene laundries and industrial schools. Anyone who did not fit within the cruelly narrow definition of good behaviour was in danger.

Therefore, in the light of the above, Maureen’s rogue crusade in *The Glorious Heresies* and *The Blood Miracles* becomes more understandable. Hilliard reports that, among interviewed Cork women who became mothers in the mid-twentieth century, “the feelings of hurt, confusion and, eventually, anger” with regard to the Church’s approach to the regulating of female sexuality was prevalent (150). She further adds, as if bearing Maureen in mind: “In some cases, the desperation of their lives and the perceived harshness of the Church elicited a more immediate sense of injustice and anger” (Hilliard 150).

*Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Confinement* highlights that it was no sooner than in the 1990s that the truth about Magdalene Laundries was brought to light (Smith 87). This was also a time when female victims of sexual violence, domestic aggression, molestation, illegal and enforced adoptions, and incest-related traumas could disclose their hurt openly in public (Smith 88). McCarthy reminds us that, in 1993, since the Church sold the land remaining within

the jurisdiction of the sisters of Our Lady of Charity, they exhumed 133 corpses<sup>2</sup> of Magdalene laundresses buried there, cremated their bones and put their ashes in an anonymous, collective grave (8). A million pound transaction with the developer involved removing the remains of the dead women and trashing them like disposable waste. How the suppressed narratives and bodies of Magdalene inmates came to light indicates the extent of the conspiracy of silence that continued for generations. As stated in Gavan Reilly's article "In Their Own Words: Survivors' Accounts of Life inside a Magdalene Laundry," even after all the years, not all women who were in these institutions, seem willing to give a testimony to what they experienced there. According to the article, apart from some reported cases of sexual, physical abuse, humiliating women on the grounds of their illegitimacy was a common strategy as much as their involuntary, prolonged indefinitely containment in the corrective institution. Lloyd-Roberts stresses that Magdalene inmates could stay there for as long as fourteen years (Mary Merritt) up to over fifty (Mary Brehany). Redmond openly defines their status as convicts who sometimes remained on the premises for their whole lives. They were exposed to various forms of mistreatment, including starvation and working arduously beyond their strength. One of the survivors, Elizabeth Coppin, sums up the situation: "It was slave labour" (Lloyd-Roberts). Lloyd-Roberts explains the rationale for this unpaid exploitation, extended over many years, frequently performed by juvenile staff, ten hours daily. Drawing upon *The Irish Examiner*, due to the commissions from local entrepreneurs, unpaid women's work provided the church an enormous gain over the years (in 2012, the capital of Orders profiting from the laundry-related business was estimated at around 1.5 billion euros) (Lloyd-Roberts).

In her foreword to Redmond's study, Clare Daly makes one aware of the scale of the procedure of mistreating "illegitimate" children in Mother and Baby Homes in Ireland:

Approximately 100, 000 girls and women lost their babies to forced separation since independence in 1922. Church and State considered the illegitimate babies as barely human. At least 6,000 babies died in the nine Mother and Baby Homes where some 35,000 girls as young as 12, and women as old as 44, spent years of their lives, and almost no one cared. Even now, mothers and babies still cry out for remembrance and justice.

Furthermore, in McInerney's novels, Maureen speaks about/for women whose "out-of-the wedlock" children were sent away for adoption

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<sup>2</sup> Cooper provides a number of 155 exhumed bodies.

to America, as a part of an extensive and structured procedure conducted with the highest Church (the former archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid) and state officials’ approval (The Department of External Affairs), as evidenced by Milotte in his book.<sup>3</sup> Ms Phelan refers to such children as “the exported generation” (McInerney, *TGH* 189). The mothers of these babies were frequently separated from them “at an hour’s notice,” with their “breasts still heavy with milk” (188). Recurrently, “[n]atural mothers had died, returned unto dust by the chemicals in the laundries” (189). According to Milotte, illegal and frequently enforced adoptions of not just orphaned but in most cases “illegitimate” Irish children (arranged by nuns) were not properly supervised with regard to screening future American parents. Milotte’s study indicates that single mothers were either lured by unverified visions of the better American life for their children or simply coerced into giving their offspring away. Moreover, the whole problem was dismissed for years because “[a]doption was seen as . . . not part of the continuum of abuse and domination” (Milotte). “Illegitimate” babies (referred to as “tainted outcasts,” as argued by the author of *Banished Babies: The Secret History of Ireland’s Baby Export Business*) conspicuously signified women’s moral fall, and, therefore, they had to be removed from public view—preferably sent away abroad. Unmarried pregnant women were pushed to the margins of the Irish society due to their sexuality and their forbidden, “unspeakable scandalous act”—as their motherhood was labelled at that time, according to Milotte. In *The Glorious Heresies* Maureen recalls those times in her confession with a priest:

Times were tough and the people were harsh and the clergy were cruel—cruel, and you know it! The most natural thing in the world is giving birth; you built your whole religion around it. And yet you poured pitch on girls like me and sold us into slavery and took our humanity from us twice, a third time, as often as you could. I was lucky, Father. I was only sent away. A decade earlier and where would I have been? I might have died in your asylums, me with the smart mouth. I killed one man but you would have killed me in the name of your god, wouldn’t you? (128)

As argued before, Maureen believes in God but she does not believe in institutional religion, especially the Catholic Church. Clergymen in Ireland represent to her the power that judged and condemned women unfairly. She accuses the clergy of hypocrisy, asking: “How many lives did you destroy with your morality” (128). With regard to principles, Ms Phelan notices: “the ritual is more powerful than the killing. What’s

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the whole procedure’s secrecy and the lack of available to scrutiny records, the exact figures of exported children cannot be provided (Milotte).

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tied to the earth is less important than what's tied to the heavens. You're crosser about my language in the confessional than you are about the fact that I killed a man" (127). Maureen, with her own bitter experiences of denied motherhood and the knowledge of scandals involving clergymen, "withdrew acceptance of the validity of the Church's claims to authority and the willingness to be bound by this authority" (Hilliard 157). She proved herself capable of critical thinking and pointing out the Church's own flaws and vices. It was not only due to "paedophile priests, abuse of authority," "irresponsibility" but also "bullying and lack of compassion" that made the Catholic Church lose "the position of moral authority" in Ireland and the trust of its believers (Hilliard 156–57).

Being "a right kind of rogue," Maureen remains the voice of integrity in McInerney's *The Glorious Heresies* and *The Blood Miracles*: her life and her choices are always grounded in some moral imperatives. For her own self-respect, Maureen had to rely upon her own ruling of what is right or wrong. The authority of the Church has failed and Maureen mistrusts priests and their guidance. The tendency is representative of what has been going on in Ireland for the last twenty years. It started with disclosing a number of paedophile and sex scandals, involving prominent clergymen in Ireland, especially the famous Bishop Casey case (Hilliard 152). During her confession, Ms Phelan shows no reverence for or fear of the priest who hears her. The study conducted by Hilliard reveals Irish women's rage at "the hypocritical stance taken by priests," and their "sense of betrayal and loss at length," "[c]oupled with . . . a sense of disillusionment with societal leaders in general as role models" (152). Maureen owns up to murder, knowing that the clergyman will not be able to report it to the police. It is her act of defiance. In her alleged declaration of guilt, Maureen mockingly states: "A sixty-year-old woman. . . . Do you think that's how the bingo brigade get their kicks? Confessing crimes to priests?" (McInerney, *TGH* 125).

Apart from becoming an involuntary murderess, Maureen is a deliberate arsonist who believes in purification through fire. She is attracted to the ceremonial aspect of purging. If Catholic confession is supposed to purge sins from one's soul, the fire started by Maureen is intended to cleanse the sins of the Church in Ireland. The idea comes from visiting, in Cork, a place burnt to the ground where the Magdalene Laundry used to be in the past. Hearing her declaration of intention "[t]o set another fire" (McInerney, *TGH* 190), Ryan Cusack reaffirms Maureen: "Nothing as cleansing as a fire" (190). Walking away from the location, Maureen feels the heat of the place, "she felt uneasy walking away, like the bitterness soldered to the past and to the ground the past was built on had touched her, and marked her. There were places this city wanted no one to tread" (191). In *The Glorious Heresies*, such areas in Cork are compared to the putrid wound,



the places that were meant to hide from view the chastizing of women going on “*behind the high walls*” (186). Therefore, fire in McInerney’s fiction obtains a ritualistic, spiritual and “glorious” dimension.

With murder she found a definite crossed line, and it was hair-breadth. One second there was life, and the next it was gone. The ultimate in finality. Once you cross over you can never go back.

Arson was a different thing and a glorious thing. It was a monument to its own ritual. (TGH 280)

In an act of civil disobedience, Maureen burns down the former brothel where she once lived; where other women’s bodies were sold like commodities and where she killed a man with no intent. She “accidentally-on-purpose left the candles by the curtains and burned her house down” (280). The oxymoronic phrase “accidentally-on-purpose” renders the contradictory feelings in Maureen’s mind: on the one hand, committing a criminal act, on the other, denying the lawbreaking character of her revenge on Irish history. Fire is supposed to consume the sins of the nation, and it signifies to Ms Phelan her nearly political “statement into the sky” (280). Burning the place down also signifies a rebellion against her criminal son who forced her to stay there. With relief, she repeats after Ryan: “Nothing as cleansing as a fire” (284). The second object of Maureen’s arson is the old parish church in Mitchelstown. She does not hide her arsonist transgressions and she is proud of her cathartic deeds. When explaining her motives, Ms Phelan manages to shock even her criminal son with her law-breaking rationale: “It’s a pyre, isn’t it? For *that* Ireland. For *their* nonsense. For the yoke they stuck around our necks” (305, emphasis original).

Furthermore, in *The Glorious Heresies* and *The Blood Miracles*, Ms Phelan functions as a guardian angel that protects and saves the lives of other younger characters. She protects Georgie, a pregnant drug abuser and a former prostitute, despite the fact that it was in order to obtain money for drugs for Georgie that Robbie tried to rob her. Ms Phelan identifies with Georgie as with another Irish “unfit mother” tempted to sell away her child to his wealthy grandparents. In *The Glorious Heresies*, Georgie functions like a contemporary “little Magdalene, with a bellyful of sins,” “a fallen angel [who] came to the door, looking to earn back her wings” (244). Georgie’s mother was devotedly religious as Maureen’s parent, and Ms Phelan feels infuriated with the model of Catholicism that makes mothers condemn and reject their “disgraced” daughters: “ah for **feck’s** sake altogether. . . . what’s wrong with this country at all that it can’t stop birthing virtuous **ould** bags” (247, emphasis added). “Sentence First”

explains that Hiberno-English *feck* in its slang form can be used as a socially acceptable swear form. As devoid of sexual undertones, it is used by Irish writers in their fiction or even in standard advertisements. According to the same source, *feck* is claimed to denote “to steal or throw,” the word most likely comes from an Old Irish *fec* or *feic*, meaning “to see,” or Old English *feccan*, “obtain.” In the case of *ould*, Wells argues that “Irish oddity of lexical incidence whereby /au/ rather than /o:/ . . . may be restricted to jocular or non-literal use” (427). Accordingly, in *The Glorious Heresies* this usage brings one back again to the times of “Old Catholic Ireland” in its derisive and derogatory way. Ms Phelan calls Georgie’s mother “a Magdalene for her Christ,” “on her knees for the higher power. The Church craves power above all things, power above all of the living,” “Your mother, my mother. . .” (252). Maureen blames the Church-encouraged gender labelling, based on patriarchal standards, for Irish women’s misery: “The mummies. The bitches. The wives. The girlfriends. The whores. Women are all for it too, so long as they fall into the right class. They all look down on the whores. There but for the grace of God” (251). Georgie and Maureen, both ostracized and fated, establish a close bond with each other. Ms Phelan takes care of Georgie in a non-judgemental way that she has never experienced from her own parents.

As a guardian angel, Maureen prevents the suicide of motherless Ryan Cusack, another petty criminal in *The Glorious Heresies*, the small-scale dealer, who has been regularly beaten by his father for years. She makes a clear diagnosis: “A little gangster. Isn’t that all you are? Don’t you think how you make your money has plenty to do with wanting to drown yourself?” (370). She is the only person who sees Ryan’s waking conscience:

“Of course this place can pull you apart,” she said. “But this country’s done punishing me, and I can do what I like now, and so I choose to fix you, Ryan Cusack, and by God this pile will let me. . . Whatever’s bad we’ll burn it out.” (371)

To some extent, Ms Phelan believes that saving these “damned souls” could help her to save her own. Her religion is people and its practice in action not sermons. Maureen expresses her disappointment with the condemnatory Irish society: “*And shame on you, Ireland. . . four full decades later. You think you’d at least look after your own?*” (363, emphasis original).

In *The Blood Miracles*, Maureen unceasingly continues to protect the life and save the soul of Ryan Cusack. The second novel begins with Ryan’s expanding his criminal activity into cooperating with Italian

mobsters. As the narrator comments: “Ryan failed and failed gloriously” (McInerney, *TBM* 20). Referring to Maureen, Ryan declares: “she thinks she’s befriended a tough bastard and, coincidentally, has some wicked task too big a sin for one set of hands” (103). Ms Phelan wants to rescue Ryan through the last untainted things in his life: music and the memory of his dead mother. When Ryan contemplates committing suicide by jumping into the river, Maureen appeals to the authority of a maternal figure: “Great times we’re having, when you meet young fellas making eyes at the Lee in the early hours. . . . What would your mother say?” (28). She invites him to stay at her daughter-in-law house where his mother’s piano was sold and she asks him to play. Ryan admits: “I’m wound up,’ . . . . ‘It’s a big thing, playing that piano again” (114). Maureen is capable of seeing in Ryan the very same motherless void that she saw in children of the exported generation. Reminding Ryan of what his life was before he lost his mother awakens in him some sort of need for belonging. “It might be, Ryan thinks, that his getting reacquainted with his piano has fed a hunger in him. For a week or so after giving Maureen her recital his place in his city seems to make more sense” (115). Like Georgie and Robbie, Ryan becomes one more adopted son of Mother Ireland—Maureen—and she makes him feel accepted:

. . . . he gets fond of Maureen’s couch and her grumbling and it makes him feel better to have someone so alien to talk to. . . . They tell each other stories. His are of girls in whose labyrinthine affections he’s fond of getting lost. Hers are of old Catholic Ireland, Magdalene laundries, the tyranny of faith. It comes apparent to him why they get along so well. Something barely mended about Maureen. That raggedness qualifies her to recognise his gaping into the pit, gave her the strength to haul him out again. (150–51)

When Ryan finds it hard to be released from his criminal obligations, Maureen asks her son Jimmy to help the boy to get a fresh start. Moreover, Ms Phelan is the one who encourages Ryan to act decently when his beloved Karin gets pregnant, reminding him how important it is to do the right thing at the right time: “I’ve been abandoned and robbed and exiled and all at the same time and if that didn’t crush me, Ryan, back in the days when an Irish woman couldn’t go for a piss without the say-so of the Catholic church, then this won’t crush you. D’you think I don’t understand evil?” (261). Maureen can bring out the best in her protégé: she is aware that Cusack’s “fear is selfish in the most noble sense. He has given himself over to something tiny yet bigger than himself; she reads the primitive shapes of this devotion, she puts the notes right in his head” (261).

Although times have changed, the attitude towards unmarried mothers in Ireland still remains to some extent biased. “They have been castigated, punished, stigmatised, ignored, labelled and controlled” (Leane and Kiely 296). Contemporarily, this prejudice is not based solely on the grounds of the Catholic religion but also on economics: unmarried women with children are perceived as emblematic social security recipients, irresponsible or helpless individuals relying too much on the state support, “of weak moral character,” with “a higher than average risk of poverty” (Leane and Kiely 297, 301–03).

Against the bleak background of desolate council flats and shabby working-class Cork districts, Maureen Phelan constitutes an embracing, non-judgemental Mother Ireland for all “children” who need her maternal acceptance: former prostitutes, misfits, miscreants and crooks. Like many Irish mothers forced to give their own “illegitimate” birth children away, Maureen feels anger, but unlike them, she seeks not only justice but also revenge. The studies conducted by researchers prove that Irish women who, like Maureen, gave birth in the 1950s and the 1960s experienced the “process of moving from confusion and dismay to anger” (Hilliard 150) with regard to the Church’s attitude towards female sexuality and motherhood, especially the one regarded at that time as “illegitimate.” In Ms Phelan’s case, this crusade assumes the form of burning the symbolic institutional establishments that she holds responsible for her misery. She refuses to be further victimized even if that requires a murder in her own self-defence. As a “right rogue,” Maureen is irreverent about the Catholic church’s position in Ireland, unapologetic, and insubordinate to social and religious constraints to the point of breaking the law.

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## Three Layers of Metaphors in Ross Macdonald's *Black Money*

# ABSTRACT

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In his early career, Kenneth Millar, better known as Ross Macdonald, emulated the style of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. By the 1960s he had established himself as a distinct voice in the hardboiled genre. In his Lew Archer series, he conveys the complexity of his characters and settings primarily by the use of metaphors. In his 1966 novel *Black Money* the device performs three functions. In the case of minor characters, the author uses metaphors to comment on Californian society. Concurrently, metaphors describing major characters allow him to develop their dramatic arcs, whereas the recurring elements of the leitmotif serve to demonstrate the narrating detective's growing concerns with the ongoing investigation. Arguably, it was Macdonald's use of metaphors that helped define his unique voice.

**Keywords:** Ross Macdonald, Lew Archer, hardboiled fiction, metaphor, blending.

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*BLACK MONEY*

Ross Macdonald inherited the hardboiled tradition from his predecessors Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. His novels maintained their bleak realism, sense of nostalgia and metaphor-heavy style. Still, they proved an intellectual reconceptualization of the genre. For example, critics have found Macdonald's novels to be thematic reworkings of *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), as well as the Theban Plays (Nolan 122). His interest in psychology likewise influenced his treatment of crime. Being a psychoanalysis enthusiast, Macdonald wrote, "[Freud] made myth into psychiatry and I've been trying to turn it back into myth again in my own small way" (qtd. in Knapp 74). Indeed, the conflict of his later novels is structured primarily around psychological tensions that often afflict a family. His narrating detective, Lew Archer, is certainly "less of a tough guy than Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe," acting more as an analyst than the traditional fist-swinging "private eye" (Porter 108). Archer is certainly competent in his psychological assessment of both fleeting acquaintances and primary characters. He communicates many of his appraisals by the use of metaphors. It is perhaps the application of this device that allowed Macdonald to "elevate" the hardboiled genre by creating a "democratic literature that could be liked on different levels by all sorts of readers" (Nolan 122).

To demonstrate the complexity of the descriptions I borrow terms from Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (2003). Consequently, the "target domain" will identify what "is constituted by the immediate subject matter," meaning the described domain (traditionally "tenor"); the "source domain" will identify the domain "in which important metaphorical reasoning takes place and that provides the source concepts used in that reasoning," or the domain used to describe the target (traditionally "vehicle") (Lakoff and Johnson 266). Finally, the term "mappings" will identify the "systematic correspondences across domains" (traditionally "common ground") (246). Some metaphors will be said to be using "blends" understood as "mental space[s] that imaginatively combine elements of at least two other mental spaces that are structured by our ordinary long-term conceptual system" (261). Finally, the term conceptual metaphor will be used only in references to the non-poetic metaphors "grounded in everyday experience" (273).

The discussed figurative descriptions of characters and setting function on three levels: societal, dramatic, and reflective. The cited examples will address these layers in *Black Money* (1966). Published in the latter part of Macdonald's career, the novel coincided with the Space Race, the Cold War, the Vietnam conflict, the youth counterculture movements and a significant

power shift at the Hollywood studios. These societal changes function as a backdrop to the story that may be seen as a 1960s reconceptualization of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), a novel that Macdonald claimed to have read annually (Gale 24).

Upon *Black Money*'s release, reviews were mixed, with critics such as Sale Roger both hailing Macdonald as a novelist of "stunning psychodrama" and calling *Black Money* an innovative "failure" (Skinner 63). The story follows Lew Archer's investigation into the identity of Francis Martel. Martel, much like Jay Gatsby, has accumulated wealth by mysterious means. Archer learns about his fabricated identities, "regressing from a cultured French aristocrat to a Panamanian peasant" (Bruccoli and Layman 307). Eventually, Archer discovers that his employer has hired him to win back his ex-fiancée Virginia "Ginny" Fablon. Attracted to Martel's affluence, the beautiful Virginia is a character reminiscent of Daisy Buchanan. The woman's relationship with Martel turns out to be a triangle that includes her would-be mentor, professor Tappinger. By the end of the novel, the desperate academic kills both of Ginny's parents, as well as Martel before committing suicide.

### LEVEL ONE: SOCIETAL METAPHORS

During the investigation, Lew Archer encounters various minor characters. Customarily, he assesses their integrity based on their appearances, surroundings, and behaviour. The observations are telling of their psychological states but more importantly serve as a commentary on Californian society. These societal metaphors can be found, amongst others, in Archer's description of a lifeguard.

The narrating detective encounters the athletic man at a sports club. Its mostly rich and elderly members occupy the locale pool deck. The lifeguard, it seems, is there primarily for their viewing pleasure. Archer observes:

His smooth simple face was complicated by a certain wildness of the eye. His blond head had not been able to resist the bleach bottle. . . He reminded me of the dumb blondes who had cluttered up the California landscape when I was his age. Now a lot of them were boys. . . The trouble was that there were thousands of him, neo-primitives who didn't seem to belong in the modern world. But it came to me with a jolt that maybe they were better adapted to it than I was. They could live like happy savages on the beach while computers and computer-jockeys did most of the work and made all the decisions. (Macdonald)

Here, Archer compares the lifeguard to both a “dumb blonde” (metaphor one) and a “neo-primitive” (metaphor two). In the second metaphor, the source domain functions as a blend of the “modern man” and “the savage.” Both terms propose mutually exclusive features. The mapping must be selective, favouring those which compliment the “dumb-blonde” domain from the previous metaphor. The “neo-primitive” blend is, therefore, primarily “savage” and secondarily “modern.” If, on the contrary, the blend named “paleo-sophisticates” was produced, then the features’ precedence would be reversed. As it stands, the complex metaphor proposes an image of a blonde and pedicured-neanderthal. The inconsistency is that although being the product of a natural selection, the new cave-man is inherently detached from the wilderness. He is likely incapable of sustaining himself in the wild. Instead, he is, as the “dumb-blonde” domain proposes, a “vain,” “ignorant,” and “effeminate” consumer. Paradoxically, he is more adept at surviving in the modern world than Archer, who implicitly encompasses the contrasting characteristics of “knowledge,” “culture,” and “dexterity.” As such, he is less likely to be reliant on the consumeristic regime.

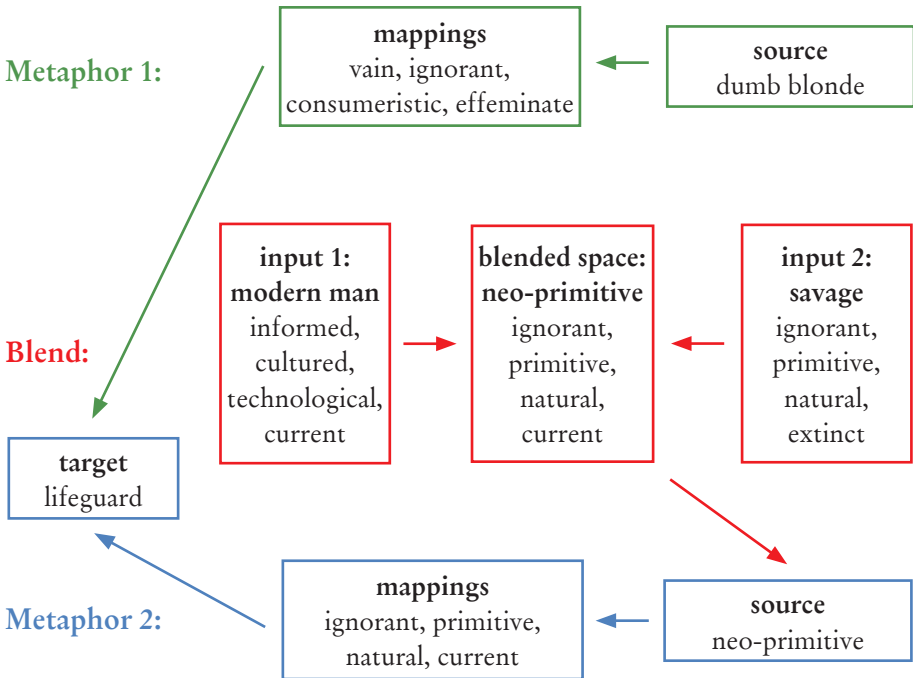


Fig. 1. The metaphors and blend describing the lifeguard as a neo-primitive.

The mention of the “computer-jockey” calls attention to Macdonald’s perspective on the United States’ scientific progress during the Space Age. Modern man’s evolution, Archer seems to suggest, is not facilitated by the booming technologies. On the contrary, computers aid his intellectual demise. The notion of the “happy savage” seems like a reference to the maxim that “ignorance is bliss.” But the threat of the “computer-jockey” making “all the decisions,” implies that the lifeguard’s willing self-degradation is not reactionary but engineered. At best, he is routed for consensual enslavement. Archer fears that the generation of people invested primarily in their physical appearance will make for an easily manipulated herd.

In a later passage, Archer draws out his speculations when comparing a shopping centre with the recently visited Montevista State College: “We drove to the Plaza in ticking silence. It was a large new shopping centre, like a campus with asphalt instead of lawns where nothing could be learned” (Macdonald). Submitting the “asphalt-lawn” relation as the defining contrast between a mall and an institution of higher learning, Archer proposes that the difference is cosmetic. Both establishments cater to the same demand for goods and services. Education is regarded as a product. The lifeguard’s connection to the above description lies in his admission of being enrolled at Montevista. His portrait of unintelligence is Archer’s final argument that education’s potential new line is to foster neo-primitive consumers and not intellectuals.

## LEVEL TWO: DRAMATIC METAPHORS

Archer’s assessments are impressive even when demonstrated during one-time encounters such as the one with a sports club lifeguard. However, his prowess is more evident in the interactions with characters he continuously engages over the course of the entire story. His descriptions reveal the motivations of a given character’s behaviour. The descriptions of the novel’s femme fatale, Virginia “Ginny” Fablon, effectively demonstrate Macdonald’s second (dramatic) level of metaphors.

As mentioned, Ginny is a young socialite with a presumably bright future. However, her promising façade hides a history of abuse and secrets. In the years preceding the story, she had an affair with her then college professor, Tappinger. Her father forced her to abort the resulting pregnancy, causing an irreconcilable rift in their relationship. The discord ended with her father’s murder at Tappinger’s hands. This event marked Ginny’s submission to the role of femme fatale. As the story opens, Ginny is engaged to Francis Martel, the man whom Archer was hired to investigate. Ginny sits in the car, while Martel threatens a minor character he caught

taking pictures of them. Archer describes the girl: “though I couldn’t see her eyes, she seemed to be looking back across the road at me. The lower part of her face was *immobile* as if she was afraid to react to the situation. It had the *dead beauty of marble*” (Macdonald, italics mine). Archer compares her face (target domain) to a marble statue (source domain), emphasizing the “dead” quality. Because the source domain maps connotations of Greco-Roman art, the target grants itself to an image of a dispassionate goddess. Archer’s instinctual observation is that she is a beauty no longer impressed by admiration. Her “deadness” is emotional, though at this point in the story Archer assumes it to be the results of fear.

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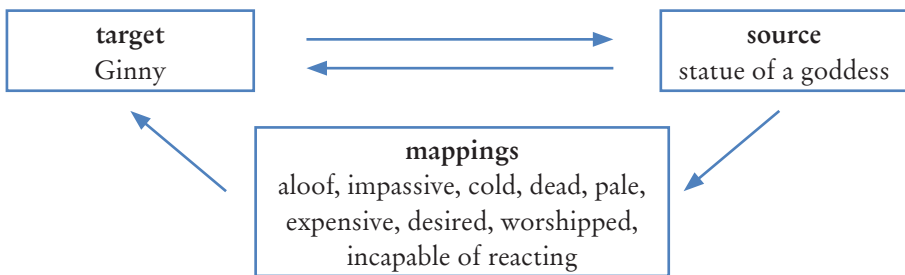


Fig. 2. Ginny as a statue metaphor.

The second time that Archer encounters Ginny is when visiting her fiancé’s house. The detective intends to unmask Martel as a fraud. Ginny appears in the door dressed in a “grey suit, the kind women use for traveling. Her movements seemed shaky and her eyes a little dull, as if she had already traveled too far and too fast” (Macdonald). Then he adds, “perhaps it was the brilliant light shining down on her face, but its skin appeared greyish and grainy. She had the sort of beauty—shape of head, slant of cheekbone and chin, curve of mouth—that made these other things irrelevant” (Macdonald). The description of her greyish, grainy skin and beauty references the statue-metaphor. It reaffirms Archer’s initial impressions of Ginny’s aloof grandeur. Archer is still unaware of Ginny’s past. Nevertheless, he capably assumes her remoteness to be a result of trauma rather than a pampered upbringing. He also notes the effect that her “sort of beauty” might have on her beholders. The fact that it renders her remaining qualities “irrelevant,” suggests that Archer recognizes that Ginny is prized primarily for her appearance.

Interestingly, the above metaphor (Ginny as a statue) builds on a conceptual metaphor. It is the metaphor of experience understood in terms of spatial progress, or more simply put “life [as] a journey” (Evans and Green 287). By noting that Ginny has “traveled too far and too fast” Archer is in fact referring to her life’s journey, despite her being dressed in a grey “traveling

suit." He uses her apparel as a point of departure for the life-as-a-journey metaphor. Thus his metaphor is compound. Life-as-a-journey serves as input one, that blends with Ginny (input two) providing the idea of "Ginny's journey." Next, the reader compares the "blend" with an augmentation of "life as a journey," in which the mode of travel is characterized by "reckless driving." The mappings reveal Archer's presupposition that Ginny's past has been traumatizing. The initial metaphor (source domain) is provided with the attributes of "speeding" and "overshooting." Thus the mappings of "recklessness," "missed destination" and "neglect of hazards" are carried over to "Ginny's life journey" (target domain).

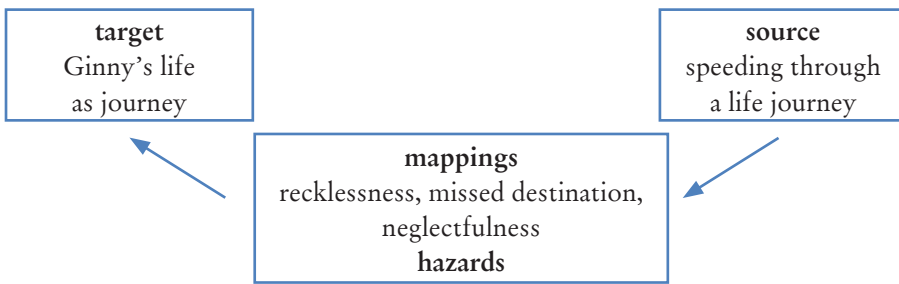


Fig. 3. Ginny's life-as-a-journey metaphor.

After Martel's murder, Archer continues to reference the life-as-a-journey conceptual metaphor in regards to Ginny. First, he notes that "the shock of Martel's death had pushed her back toward childishness. Her voice sounded just a little like a sleep-talker's" (Macdonald). He retains the idea of spatial correlation (being pushed back) to stages of Ginny's development (childhood). Then, three pages later, he admits that the girl surprised him:

I reminded myself that she wasn't a girl, but a woman with a brief tragic marriage already behind her. And what sounded like a long tragic childhood. Her voice had changed perceptibly, almost as though she had skipped from youth to middle age. (Macdonald)

Again the "life-as-a-journey" metaphor serves as the basis upon which Archer layers meaning. He maps her life events onto the previous blend of "Ginny's life as a journey." Thus, her husband's tragic death serves as the culmination point that divides her "youth" from "middle age." The image appeals to the reader's familiarity with a conventional lifeline that may consist of youth, teenage years, young adulthood, middle age, etc. This concept serves as the domain that provides the contrast by emphasizing the irregularities of Ginny's timeline. The reader may note that several

stages of development might have been overtaken by what Archer calls a “long and tragic childhood.” In other words, his point may be distilled to the notion that traumatic experiences have forced Ginny to grow up too quickly, but he expresses the idea by evoking an image of a traveler traversing their tailored-by-tragedy timeline.

Ginny’s subsequent characterization occurs soon after the story’s climax. As Archer drives the woman home she asks, “why do real things always have to be ugly and horrible?’ She was feeling the pain now, I thought, the cruel pain of coming home widowed after a three-day marriage” (Macdonald). The expression of Ginny’s disenchantment with childhood fantasies resonates with the reckless life-journey metaphor. However, the following description introduces a new metaphor to the same image:

The energy that had conceived the dream, and forced it briefly into reality, had all run out now. Even the girl beside me was lax as a doll, as if a part of her had died with the dreamer. She didn’t speak again until we reached her mother’s house. (Macdonald)

In this excerpt, Archer refers to Francis Martel. His version of the American Dream entailed a luxuriant life with Ginny. The metaphor once again is multileveled. Archer uses a simile to create a parallel between Ginny (target) and a lax doll (source). Her affinity with an inanimate figurine calls attention not only to her emotional depletion but more importantly to the idea that Ginny was merely a component of Martel’s dream. She was objectified even by the man who claimed to have loved her.

However, Ginny’s character arc does not end with her husband’s death. Her character is further revealed in the final confrontation with her ex-lover, Professor Tappinger. After Archer reveals that the man is responsible for the murders of Ginny’s father, mother, and husband, Tappinger commits suicide. The detective enters the room to find Ginny lying on the floor “face to face” with the dead professor. He describes seeing

their profiles interlocking like complementary shapes cut from a single piece of metal. She lay there with him, silent and unmoving, until the noise of the sirens was heard along the road. Then she got up and washed her face and composed herself. (Macdonald)

In this final comparison, the source of “interlocking metal shapes” maps “complementation” and “close resemblance” onto the target of their “profiles.” The same idea was planted in Archer’s earlier observation that, “they were very nearly the same height and weight, and they had the same fine regular features. They could have been brother and sister. I wished they had been” (Macdonald). Ginny’s comparison with the dead lover might



symbolize her lost potential to love. More interestingly, her expression of tenderness for the killer suggests her acquiescence to his actions. The dialogue exchange that precedes Tappinger's suicide, reveals the lovers' plan was "for [Ginny] to marry Peter [Archer's employer]. [Ginny] was simply to divorce him and get a settlement, so that Tappinger and [she] could go away" (Macdonald). The implication is that the professor committed the murders out of his passion for Ginny. Such an idea, Archer implies, seemed to have flattered the woman.

Importantly, in Tappinger's death scene, the two lovers are "complementary," not identical. The mirror image of their facing profiles epitomizes the thematic pursuit of an ideal self. Conceivably, both Ginny and Tappinger saw their improved reflections in each other. She saw him as a completion of her knowledge and culture; he saw her as a source of his depleting youth. Ultimately, both partners seemed to be in love, not with the other but with the idea of their idealized selves. The relationship was a form of narcissism, and in such a context their similitude, Archer thinks, rendered Ginny and Tappinger the only viable match.

Having witnessed several failed relationships (the Hendricks, the Tappingers, the Fablons, the Martels) Archer blames objectification of women as the cause of these breakdowns. He surmises: "I thought that Ginny and Kitty . . . had quite a lot in common after all. Neither one had quite survived the accident of beauty. It had made them into things, zombies in a dead desert world, as painful to contemplate as meaningless crucifixions" (Macdonald). The description consists of several metaphors. The first one uses the source of "accident" to map features of "fatal consequences" onto the target of "beauty." The idea is that the females' attractiveness results in their metaphoric death. Next, Archer maps qualities of "mindless presence" from the source of "zombies" on to the target of "women." By doing so, he delineates the consequences of the "death by beauty" metaphor to be a feeling of purposeless existence. He then provides a third metaphor comparing the female's perception of the world to a dead desert. They become "dead" to the world, while the world becomes dead to them. Being objectified, Archer suggests, deprives the likes of Ginny and Kitty of their humanity. They become *femmes fatales* in reaction to the males' superficial perception of them.

### LEVEL THREE: THEMATIC METAPHORS

*Black Money* establishes the theme of "man versus nature" in its opening passage. Archer enters an exclusive sports club noting a "fifty-meter pool which was enclosed on three sides by cabanas. On the fourth

side, the sea gleamed through a ten-foot wire fence like a blue fish alive in a net” (Macdonald). The composition of the club’s space might be betraying its members’ will to bridle nature. However, in the novel, such descriptions serve to delineate the narrator’s changing interpretation of the environment, and are less telling of other characters. Manifestations of the wind coincide with Archer’s investigation. This leitmotif is used to externalize the narrator’s condition and as such constitutes the third (thematic) layer of the discussed metaphors.

The first mention of the wind precedes Archer’s initial encounter with Martel. His anxiety comes through in the description. “Approaching the Tennis Club, I could feel a cool wind from the ocean on my face. The flag on top of the main building was whipping . . . The afternoon wind had driven away most of the sunbathers” (Macdonald). At this point, it is not apparent that the wind will act as a personified agent, though such an idea is suggested by its “driving away of sunbathers.” The element’s role is to evoke an atmosphere of disquiet.

The personification of nature becomes evident in the subsequent description. Approaching the place where “Fablon [Ginny’s father] had taken his final swim,” Archer perceives the location’s foreboding mood. “An unsteady wind carrying a gritty taste of desert was blowing down from the direction of the mountains. The eucalyptus trees swayed and bowed and waved in the gusts like long-haired madwomen racked by impulse” (Macdonald). The “gritty taste of desert” is likely a reference to the Santa Ana winds that descend to the Pacific Coast “from the inland desert region” (“Santa Ana Wind”). Interestingly the so-called “devil winds,” are believed to affect the inhabitants’ moods (see Stephenson 39; Medina). This seems to be Archer’s case. As the complex metaphor proposes, he envisions the wind as a supernatural presence. The target “eucalyptus” moving like the source “madwomen,” maps the idea of “possession” on to the trees. Because the wind acts as the trees’ animator, the metaphor compares it, the target, to the source of “possessor.” Having established the wind as an evil spirit, Archer relates,

as I drove along the windswept boulevard, my mind was so fixed on Harry that when I saw the Cadillac parked at the curb I thought I was dreaming . . . I looked around me. It was a lonely place, especially at this time, with a wind blowing. (Macdonald)

Archer’s seemingly altered consciousness (dreaming) might be a sign of a tampered perception. He seems to sense the wind’s interference with his uncovering of the truth.

Archer succeeds in overcoming the wind only temporarily. While questioning a minor character, Mrs Hendricks, he is revisited by a sense

of foreboding. The woman is the wife of a man that Archer is trying to locate. She is good-looking and seemingly interested in the detective. Archer observes as “she shook her head. Her hair flared out like fire. The wind, momentarily louder than the music, was whining at the window” (Macdonald). The wind’s accompanying of Mrs Hendricks’s seductive measures underscores Archer’s belief that the possessor has taken hold of the woman in an attempt to prevent him from learning about her husband’s murder. Once he escapes the allurements, the wind resorts to more desperate means: “we drove along the boulevard. The rising wind buffeted the car. Out to sea, I could make out occasional whitecaps” (Macdonald). The wind, Archer feels, is trying to physically push him off the road.

After consulting the sports club photographer, Archer comes to the brink of an important discovery. The wind again assumes its violent form:

I . . . drove back into the foothills. This was the direction the wind was coming from. It rushed down the canyons like a hot torrent and roared in the brush around the Bagshaw house. I had to brace myself against it when I got out of the car. (Macdonald)

Archer elaborates the possessor-metaphor, while his word choices—“rushed down,” “roared”—accentuate the impression of an attack.

Contrarily, the novel’s midpoint is marked by the wind’s absence. Having retired for the night, Archer notices that “the wind died just before dawn. I heard the quiet and woke up wondering what was missing” (Macdonald). The wind’s pervasiveness became an expected part of Archer’s environment. Its sudden withdrawal causes him to feel discomfort. This correlates to the plot’s tension. Archer soon acquires evidence that proves his suspect is lying. What follows is an intensified barrage: “the wind was making so much noise I didn’t hear him come up behind me” (Macdonald).

Since Macdonald’s detective follows in the tradition of the hardboiled loner, the wind metaphors provide the only access to his veiled fears. *Black Money*’s Santa Ana winds do more than just evoke a mood. They externalize the guarded detective’s psychological state. Moreover, they supplement the novel’s social commentary; nature seems to be acting in response to California’s inhabitants’ efforts to bridle its forces. Macdonald continued to develop environmentalist themes in his subsequent novels, notably in *The Underground Man* (1971) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1973) (see Gale 255, 291). Nevertheless, it was *Black Money* that solidified his unique use of metaphors, garnering him both critical and popular acclaim (Brucoli and Layman 278).


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# **NEGOTIATING TRAUMAS**

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## Spaces of (Re)Connections: Performing Experiences of Disabling Gender Violence

# ABSTRACT

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The article explores the potential “healing” role performance art can have when representing disabling trauma, and engaging, as part of the creative process, participants who have experienced in their lives significant trauma and physical, as well as mental health concerns arising from gender violence. It focuses on the show *cicatrix macula*, performed during the exhibition *Speaking Out: Women Healing from the Trauma of Violence* (Leicester, 2014). The exhibition involved disabled visual and creative artists, and engaged participants in the process of performance making. It was held at the Attenborough Arts Centre in Leicester (UK), a pioneering arts centre designed to be inclusive and accessible. The show *cicatrix macula* focused on social, cultural, mental, and physical representations of trauma and disability, using three lacerated life-size puppets to illustrate these depictions. Working under the direction of the audience, two artists attempted to “repair” the bodies. The creative process was a collaborative endeavour: the decision-making process rested with the audience, whose privileged positions of witness and meaning-maker were underscored. Fayard demonstrates the significance of *cicatrix macula* in debunking ablist gender norms, as well as in highlighting the role played by social and cultural enablers. She calls attention to its potential for mobilizing positive identity politics, including for viewers who had experienced trauma. For example, the environment of the participatory performance space offered some opportunities for the survivor to become the author or arbiter of her own recovery. In addition, the constant physical exchange of bodies within this space of debate was well-suited to the (re)connection with the self and with others.

**Keywords:** gender violence, performance art, disability, trauma, identity politics.

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Recent research on representations of the disabled body in museums and galleries has provided evidence of the fundamental social and political role played by cultural institutions in influencing public understanding of disability, as well as their responsibilities in encouraging both public and creative engagement. In the UK, increasing attempts are made nowadays to engage the audience in debates about human rights and social justice. Importantly, as institutions located in the public sphere in which different issues can be presented and debated, museums, art galleries, and theatres tend to be understood today as loci of active learning where the user constructs his or her own knowledge via direct engagement with such experiences (Sandell and Dodd 20). Combined research and activist practice in museal projects in the first decade of the millennium has drawn attention to the importance of focusing on both the individual voices and the lived experiences of disabled people in order to counter social stereotypes and facilitate new understandings (Sandell and Dodd 14–16). Awareness-raising about the mechanisms of exclusion and stigmatization, therefore, has to include the recognition that experiences of difference can be shared.

However, Richard Sandell and Jocelyn Dodd rightly warn that this knowledge will always be framed through the curation process:

There is no neutral position. Just as visitors will create meaning out of the purposeful interpretations they encounter, they will also draw conclusions from the marked absences, awkward silences and skewed representations surrounding disability that they currently find in most museums. (20–21)

The resulting “politics of absence and presence” (Carden-Coyne 69) that this creates especially affects the representation of disabling traumatic memories. Williams, Hughes, and Zelizer have all drawn attention to the risks of memorialization of trauma narratives for political purposes, as well as to the dynamics between selective remembering and forgetting. When images of disabled people and wounded bodies are framed in terms of their difference and their distance from contemporary viewers (Boltanski 3–13), this induces in the viewers a sense of detachment, causing them to fail to question the social structures that make violence possible (Carden-Coyne 68). Such visual strategies also tend to revert to medicalized portrayals of disabled and wounded people as sick and passive victims (Borsay), and the objectified needy recipients of the pity of contemplative audiences (Kudlick 768).

One such silence surrounds gender-based violence against disabled people, which is an issue which rarely makes it to the top of the social

and political agendas, let alone museums and galleries. While UK crime statistics reveal that over 1.2 million British women are likely to suffer domestic violence every year, with two women killed by their partner every week, latest surveys estimate that disabled women are “twice as likely to experience gender-based violence than non-disabled women” (The Nia Project).<sup>1</sup> According to a 2015 Public Health England report on disability and domestic abuse, disabled women are more likely to experience higher and multiple forms of abuse, often disability-related, and over a longer period of time. The violence is more frequent and severe than that experienced by non-disabled people (Dockerty et al.). People with mental illness and PTSD are four or seven times more likely to experience domestic violence respectively. Women presenting with depression are also twice at risk of being abused than women who do not report a mental illness (Dockerty et al. 9). Existing scholarship has also shown that the patterns of abuse mirror those in the non-disabled population, with the majority of domestic and sexual violence perpetrators being men and those abused being usually women, and abuse also occurring in same sex relationships (see Pearson, Harwin and Hester; Cattalini; Nosek et al., “Abuse” and “Disability”; Hague et al.). Likewise in the US, where research into the abuse of disabled women is more widely available than in the UK, 83% of women disabled since childhood have declared being the victims of sexual assault, with half experiencing ten or more incidents. In one study, 40% of physically disabled women were estimated as having been sexually assaulted. Patients with a psychiatric illness are also twice as likely to be victims of sexual assault as the general population, with 45% of female psychiatric outpatients reporting having been sexually abused during childhood (Wisconsin Coalition against Sexual Assault). In addition, qualitative studies available on the subject have, in the main, been carried out by health practitioners, and therefore continue to situate disability-related abuse within the medical model of disability. This approach contributes to hiding the gendered nature of the abuse, as well as systemic inequalities (see Mays 148; Plummer and Findley 25–26).

The impact of domestic and sexual abuse on health, including serious physical injuries, trauma, depression, but also death, is well documented (Campbell; Humphreys and Joseph; Mezey et al.). It must be noted that it can be especially devastating for disabled women, preventing them from managing their primary physical disabilities, and also causing incapacitating secondary illnesses (Dockerty et al. 14). Therefore, while gender violence is

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<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that in the UK today over 11 million people (19% of the overall population) have “a long-standing illness, disability or impairment which causes substantial difficulty with day-to-day activities” (Burke et al. 61).

frequently “disabling” for victims, it tends to be doubly so for disabled people. Dockerty et al. report that “the severity of an impairment increases the risk of abuse,” with people with a limiting disability being 2.3 times more likely to be abused than non-disabled people (10–11). Importantly, risks increase because of societal constructions of disability: threat factors increasing the likelihood of domestic abuse for disabled people include lower educational levels and unemployment. In addition, disabled women experience forms of multiple exclusion and discrimination, as they tend to participate less in the employment market than men (Nosek et al., “Abuse” and “Disability”), and have lower incomes than women free from abuse (Barrett et al.).

276 These patterns contribute to reinforcing social barriers and prejudices. When disabled people are unvalued, and perceived as dependent, passive, or unreliable, it makes it harder for them to seek help, escape, or be believed. They are also presumed to be asexual, which can prevent them from reporting the abuse, and contributes to the violence continuing. This is particularly the case for women living with mental illness or learning disabilities, whose perceived vulnerability may make them a particular target for perpetrators, especially when the abuser is a carer (The Nia Project). Such understandings also cause disabled people to receive less education about their sexuality and rights, and to be overprotected by family and social services, making them less able to identify abuse when it takes place. There is, therefore, a point to be made about the double discrimination experienced by disabled people on the grounds of gender violence. Social isolation and dependence are additional risk factors for domestic and sexual abuse. Evidence shows that perpetrators especially target victims who are socially isolated because they believe the abuse will not be reported. Abuse also takes the form of coercion, control, and power, ranging from humiliation and withdrawal of food, care or medication, to the destruction of medical equipment.

Violence against disabled women is therefore both a gendered and a political issue whereby the intersection of multiple forms of social oppression reinforce each other, causing disabled women to be “at greater risk of not having their needs addressed” (Mays 155). Disabled women have been increasingly contesting the perspectives which ignore the ways in which they have been represented, including by some of the feminist discourses which have defined disabled women and their sexuality according to the binaries of sameness and difference (see Fawcett; Rossiter, Prilleltensky and Walsh-Bowers; Fook). Crucially, these debates predominantly draw on notions of (self)representation and agency which, ultimately, need to be based on appraisals of the social reality. This includes discussing the impact of violence on bodies and minds. Recent British materialist/realist scholarship has attempted to bring the body back into the social model

of disability (French; Crow; Shakespeare). Thomas and Shakespeare have argued that separating the body from culture (i.e. impairment from disability) ignores the living reality of the disabled person, who may experience debilitating constraints caused by a biological or psychological impairment (Thomas; Shakespeare and Watson; Shakespeare).<sup>2</sup> Although problems remain with the realist model, which risks being absorbed within normative and medicalized theories of the disabled body, yet it permits the recognition of the lived experience of disabled people. Therefore, just as feminism has long called for approaches able to take account of women's lived experiences, as well as systemic social realities (Stanley and Wise), there is also an urgent need to take into account the material reality of disabled women's experiences of violence and their diversity.

Taking a close look at the performance of *cicatrix macula (restitutio)* staged within the context of the project *Speaking Out: Women Healing from the Trauma of Violence* (Leicester, UK, 2014), this essay will explore the potential "healing" role performance art can have when representing disabling trauma, and engaging, as part of the creative process, participants who have experienced in their lives significant trauma and physical, as well as mental health concerns arising from gender violence. I argue that the performance provided powerful forms of dis-identification, suggesting new ways of understanding disabling trauma. I also suggest that *cicatrix macula (restitutio)* might also have offered ways of gaining some control to the individuals within the audience that had experienced trauma. I conclude by asking whether the project was conducive to the projection of collective agency around this theme and beyond the performance space.

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## SPEAKING OUT AND HEALING FROM TRAUMA

Over the last couple of decades, research on disability, trauma, and the creative arts has sought to establish a link between art and healing, identifying a therapeutic effect in engagement with the creative arts (Silverman; Stuckey

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<sup>2</sup> In this essay I shall understand the term impairment to mean: "lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body" (UPIAS 1976 qtd. in Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* 33–34). Disability will be understood as: "the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have . . . impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities" (UPIAS 1976 qtd. in Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* 33–34) Many disabled people tend to use the term disability when they actually mean impairment. A number of scholars, such as Carol Thomas, prefer to use the term "disablement," as well as "disablism" or "disablist" to refer to discrimination against disabled people.

and Nobel). The museum or theatre as loci of memorialization have also been identified as particular sites for contemporary remembering and memorialization, in particular in relation to commemorations of histories of conflict and genocides (Coombes; Williams; Stone). Similar mechanisms are claimed to be at work in creative activities akin to autobiographical testimony addressing areas of women's experience (Fayard, "Faire parler" and "Rape, Trauma and Shame"). Importantly, such representations of the role of exposure to creative activities are framed within memory metanarratives, especially mobilizing global memory frameworks in situating the role and value of public testimony and recognition to deal with traumatic events. These tropes have therefore encountered considerable criticism, especially in cases when remembering is related to notions of recovery and reconciliation. Scholarship has also pointed to the erasure of disadvantaged and non-Western groups from these constructions (Silverman; Bracken and Petty; Summerfield; Fayard, "Faire parler").

For an event to be experienced as traumatic, it has to involve more than a threat of violence. It also has to entail a betrayal of trust, either from an individual, or from a larger entity such as a family, a community, or the State. This breakdown of trust shatters the victim's worldview, causing her or him to experience a sense of fragmentation of the self, as well as a breakdown in communication with others. In order for the social order to be restored, the channels of communication between the self and the wider community need to be rebuilt. Thus, psychiatrist Judith Herman states that "remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order, and for the healing of individual victims" (1). In order to be heard, the survivor-witness has to take an active role in the narration of her or his story. The act of bearing witness depends on the ability to find a listener—a witness—when no one existed before. Being able to engage with another has crucial consequences: it grounds the survivor's discourse within reality. It also restores the survivor's agency by endowing her or his words with the quality of a "truth"—the truth of the witness at the moment of articulation. Therefore via the power of public recognition, testifying can act as an instrument of recognition and agency for survivors. At the same time, bearing witness to traumatic acts of violence, can also serve as an instrument of political awareness, as they expose the role performed by relations of power in maintaining the social order.

Bearing witness thus leads to the creation of collective knowledge about trauma, a crucial stage of reconnection of the traumatized self with others, according to Herman. Importantly, in the cases of historical or social trauma, such as the Holocaust or violence against women and children, it also leads to the obligation of memorializing past and current events. This then enables both individual and collective understanding

about traumatic practices. Such a collective obligation similarly resides with witnesses who have not necessarily had any first-hand experience in the trauma processes under discussion. The public and political nature of art, museums, and performance spaces, therefore, comes into its own by providing opportunities for people to move through these stages of healing from trauma, as described by Herman, and provide instruments of recognition. Such an opportunity was provided by the project *Speaking Out: Women Healing from the Trauma of Violence*, which I created and co-curated with Stella Couloutbanis at the Leicester Attenborough Arts centre, in the UK in 2014.

My aim in designing *Speaking Out: Women Healing from the Trauma of Violence* (thereafter *Speaking Out*) was to bring together a number of feminist perspectives on the intersection of disability and the traumas arising from gender violence.<sup>3</sup> The project involved seventeen modern day visual and creative artists creating a diverse body of work, including painting, visual and multimedia art, sculpture, creative writing, music, ceramics, textile installations, as well as performance art. Overall, with the project *Speaking Out*, I put together an exhibition, a symposium, the performance of *cicatrix macula (restituo)*, and an online exhibition.<sup>4</sup> The show was exhibited at the University of Leicester's Attenborough Arts Centre, a pioneering UK arts centre designed to be fully accessible. The arts centre is especially renowned internationally for supporting emerging talent, disability-led artists, and inclusive work, with a strong commitment to collaborating with local artists and the local community. But with this project I was taking the gallery into new territory by also collaborating with the University of Leicester School of Medicine, University of Leicester Hospitals, the Leicestershire police, and victim support groups. The project also involved the participation—as artists, speakers, staff and members of the public—of disabled survivors from the trauma arising from domestic violence and abuse, and/or sexual violence and abuse.<sup>5</sup> This also especially entailed the presence throughout the performance of the Leicester charity *FreeVA (Free from Violence and Abuse)*, who were on hand to provide support to participants who might have felt affected by the show.

The inclusion of the term “healing” in the title of project was directly linked to the aim to introduce a political dimension to the project. There was no intention on my part to conceptualize the exhibition from

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<sup>3</sup> Information about the arts centre can be found here: [www2.le.ac.uk/hosted/attenborougharts/about](http://www2.le.ac.uk/hosted/attenborougharts/about).

<sup>4</sup> Details of the show, as well as the online exhibition can be accessed at [www.speaking-out.co.uk](http://www.speaking-out.co.uk).

<sup>5</sup> No further details can be provided for reasons of confidentiality.

perspectives of reparation or reconciliation between victims and aggressors. Such perspectives would have returned the viewers to individualized interpretations of disabling trauma which erase the point of view of disabled people—especially women. Instead, my overall aim was to build positive cultural identities (see Dodd et al. 16) in response to the cultural erasure of disabling trauma from gender violence in the public sphere. I also wanted disabled and traumatized people to build their own (self-) representations that would place their own voices in public contexts. The idea was that this public manifestation might help challenge reductionist understandings of gender violence and of the disabling traumas arising from it, including social exclusion and political forgetting. It was particularly important to do this in a city such as Leicester, which is one of the cities in the UK where the police and other professionals work with the charity Karma Nirvana to gain a better understanding of forced marriage and other so-called “honour crimes.”

The aim of the project was therefore to locate some of the specific ways in which artistic activities enable particular forms of agency in relation to traumas resulting from gender violence. The point was to address lived experience, as well as to challenge perceptions of lived experience. The use of the keyword “speaking out” in the title of the exhibition was thus instrumental in attempting to fulfil this objective, on the understanding that its interpretation was determined by each artist’s individual reading of the term. One of the aims of the project was to shift the focus of representations of disabling trauma from the problematic binaries that codify wounded and disabled women into either passive victims or heroic survivors. Instead, the main focus of *Speaking Out* was on creators of traumatic memories shifting from serving as the objects of voyeuristic and pitying discourses to gaining agency and voicing their new autonomous selves in ways that confront the normative gaze. *Speaking Out*, therefore, was as much about self-recognition as it was about recognition by others that disabled and traumatized women have a self in a constant state of flux. It was about thinking about forms of empowerment.

### *CICATRIX MACULA (RESTITUO)*

One strategy for creating such a space of connection and reconnection within the gallery was offered via the show *cicatrix macula (restitu)*, which was performed on the official opening night of the exhibition with a view to engaging the audience as participants in the process of performance making. *cicatrix macula (restitu)* was created and performed by two UK female performance artists working together as the collective SSoCiaL.



The show was born out of a desire to urge viewers to reflect on the nature of control over a body. This performance was the second part in a series of participatory events, and must therefore be viewed in a continuum in time and space (i.e. Bristol in 2013, and Leicester in 2014). SSoCiaL described the diptych as follows:

In April 2013 in Bristol, three bodies attached to mobile trolleys were alternately slashed and repaired at the whim and fancy of the audience. Two women worked silently, directed by the audience, sometimes cutting, sometimes repairing with differently coloured materials; the path of conflict and resolution in *cicatrix macula (paratus)* was shown directly upon the bodies as scars. In January 2014, for *cicatrix macula (restituo)* the two women will work together in an attempt to restore the damaged bodies to some semblance of normality under the direction of the audience. (Fayard, *Speaking Out* 56)

The first performance in Bristol in 2013 involved the audience inflicting wounds on the puppets' intact bodies. The shock factor of the show relied on the participants being encouraged by social/cultural enablers to mutilate human body shapes. In Leicester in 2014, we focused on attempting to repair the physically and—presumably—psychologically impaired bodies. While we were very careful to establish safeguards to protect the spectators, audiences in both Bristol and Leicester included disabled and non-disabled victims and survivors of domestic and/ or violence, confidants and witnesses, and, undoubtedly, perpetrators.

The Leicester performance was based on the presence of three life-size puppets whose bodies wore signs of significant cuts and lacerations. At the beginning of the performance, the two artists, dressed in mock surgical scrubs, wheeled the three puppets on hospital trolleys into the middle of the performance space and arranged them in a prone position on a blanket on the floor. The audience looked on these preparations, sitting or standing in a circle around the space. The artists worked in silence, providing no explanations as to what was going on. The puppets were made of identical plastic covering and all three were devoid of facial features and other identifiers of gender, age, ethnicity, social class, or sexual orientation. Their individuality and identity was, however, clearly marked as each was stuffed with a distinct material: feathers, sand, and sawdust. For the performance in Leicester, the gaping wounds on the puppets' plastic skin were held together with emergency tape. They were constructed as motionless, mute, and helpless—in a nutshell, constricted by their circumstances and excluded in ways that rendered them disabled.

During the rest of the performance, the artists invited the audience to assist them in repairing the severely maimed bodies. The audience was

invited to join the artists at a table to record their private hopes and wishes on pieces of paper. Colourful blankets were cut up into strips into which the piece of paper was inserted and made into a neat parcel. The spectator then used the parcel to refill the bodies by inserting it inside a scar of her or his choosing. Following this, and under the direction of the audience, the artists used surgical needles and thread to close the scar. The process was individually photographed, and carbon copies of the wishes were kept in a book, unless the spectators requested them to remain private. At the end of the performance, again with the participation of the audience, the recovered bodies were then installed in the *Speaking Out* exhibition as a reminder of how violence can be overcome with collaborative care (see discussion below). It must however be noted that, at the end of the performance and throughout the rest of the exhibition, the wounds were still visible, with those left unsutured continuing to ooze their contents out.

The interaction between the cuts scoring the bodies of the puppets, and their live suturing was essential to the performance. Carol Thomas has drawn attention to the need to redefine the social model of disability, which she claims, views disability exclusively in the abstract. Instead, the “social relational model of disability” (*Female Forms* and *Sociologies*) characterizes disability as “a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being” (*Female Forms* 3). Thomas makes the point that some of the restrictions experienced by people with an impairment do not exclusively originate from social structures. She refers to these limitations as “impairment effects,” defined as the consequences of physical, emotional, or psychological conditions on people’s day to day routine. For Thomas, their effect cannot be ignored, especially as they combine with “disablism” (the oppression of disabled people caused by attitudes and social barriers). The psycho-emotional dimension of impairment effects is no less oppressive, as it becomes internalized, thus reinforcing the feelings of worthlessness created by disablism (Thomas, “How is Disability Understood?”).

For Thomas, therefore, there is a need to develop an understanding of the social oppression experienced by people with an impairment, and especially the lived reality of its impact in everyday life (“Theorising Disability”). The representation of gender violence explicitly and graphically as violence in *cicatrix macula (restituo)* was part of this understanding. It was instrumental in confronting the audience with the reality of gender violence and its physical, emotional and psychological consequences on disabled and non-disabled bodies, which, as explained earlier, include trauma, shame, loss of self-esteem, depression and anxiety, physical pain, chronic illness, other severe impairments, and death. Death and pain are not systematically

accounted for in traditional representations of trauma and victimhood based on “care and control” frameworks (Oliver, *Social Work, The Politics, Understanding*; Barnes, *Cabbage Syndrome*, “A Legacy of Oppression”; Swain et al.; Barton), which prefer to focus on the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. By contrast, *cicatrix macula (restitutio)* confronted us with the materiality of the body in pain with oozing, gaping wounds. It showed that although wounds can be sewn back, permanently visible scars remain. I was surprised to see many audience members flinch when inserting their messages into the bodies’ gaping wounds and watching the artists sew the puppets back together, as if the spectacle of pain was “real” and painful to witness. In this respect, it is possible to argue that *cicatrix macula (restitutio)* successfully accounted for the social reality and discomfort of the impaired and traumatized body and mind.

The anonymous physical representation of the puppets played a further role in renegotiating stabilized identities. The audience was reminded of two crucial positions: firstly, images construct rather than merely represent; secondly, the space of the body is also a discursive space. This is also where the representation of the body in its factual, natural, and performative dimensions played a crucial part in challenging representational norms. The featurelessness of the puppets acted as a useful reminder that violence and impairment can affect everyone, irrespective of age and background. Also, as theatre props, the puppets were necessarily objectified—in the same way as violence, rape, or an impairment are used to objectify and discriminate against people. Similarly, their lack of personal agency also implied that they could not take personal responsibility for the wounds lacerating their bodies. But each had been individually filled either with sawdust, feathers, or sand which spilled out of their wounds. The representation of the impaired or wounded body as a leaky vessel aptly symbolized the puppets’ inherent difference. This deliberate process of othering challenged any attempt at self-identification, with the puppets destabilizing dominant norms of organicity, femininity, and ablism. The decisions made by the audience during the performance, such as choosing to become involved or not, asked further questions about who has agency in constructing understandings of disability and gender violence. The spectators were both viewers and social agents, imbued with the power either to hurt or repair, to speak out or remain silent. As mentioned above, some of them were disabled, and lived with gender violence themselves. All of them, including those who chose to remain passive viewers, had to acknowledge their voyeuristic position and, more broadly, assess their social responsibility. Thus, the performance provided opportunities to reflect on the ways in which institutions, power, and language construct social relations and frame identity and (self)-definitions.

Thus, *cicatrix macula (restituo)* offered an approach whereby the impaired, traumatized body can be performed in its lived reality rather than as deviant. It also provided a focus on the effect of the physical manifestations of impairment on witnesses and confidants, thus laying foundations for interactions. This motivation explains SSoCiaL's desire to adopt a decentred, multi-vocal approach, and making the creative process dependent on audience participation. This is important as it means that the theatre and gallery, as well as the artists and curators, were no longer solely responsible for affixing constraining labels onto people (see Dodd et al.), especially within the context of *Speaking Out* which dealt with both physical and mental impairments arising from trauma. Debates around the act of professional "labelling" focus on the negative impact on disabled people of reductionist categorizations and differentiations (Edgerton; Walmsley). By contrast, in *cicatrix macula (restituo)* the decision-making process became a personal act of providing disabled and non-disabled members of the audience with opportunities for personal responsibility and self-representations. This included having to make deliberate choices, such as: whether to participate in the performance or not; whether to write into the book of wishes; whether to reveal their thoughts to others; whether to help repair the bodies. Ultimately, the decision of whether the performance would take place rested entirely in the hands of the participants. Thus, the creative process in *cicatrix macula (restituo)* was a collaborative endeavour, with agency located in the viewer. While, by the end of the show, some of the audience might continue to think in terms of fixed categories, it is also likely that a number of spectators returned home that night with a more positive understanding of the power mechanisms at work in understanding of gender violence, impairment effects, and disability.

So far, two highly significant features in the performance of *cicatrix macula (restituo)* have been highlighted which succeeded in making the wounded disabled body present in performance, both physically and symbolically. On the one hand, the role played by the materiality of the puppets' bodies in debunking ablist gender norms; and on the other hand, audience participation highlighting the importance of social and cultural enablers. Both features are important for mobilizing positive identity politics and encouraging social change.

### (RE)CONNECTING BODIES

Postconventionalist perspectives on the body (Braidotti; Shildrick) propose that bodies are always in a state of becoming through their interactions with others. Similarly to the above, this suggestion allows us

to move away from normative and dominant subject position, offering positive subjective and organic possibilities for the Other. Braidotti argues that the postconventional body is “a multilayered subject that is embodied, but dynamic, corporeal and in-process. It has to be built up over and over again and its expression is therefore concomitant with the constitution of the social field.” She adds that dislodging dominant subject positions and fixed labels can enable the self to learn to reinvent itself. In this process of transformation, it desires interconnections with others, all similarly in a constant state of flux (Braidotti).

This interpretation, which goes against the normative, unified, same body with fixed boundaries (Shildrick 25), removes the stigma against the leaky, different body: we are all, always, different to ourselves and each other. Equally importantly, it also removes repressive anxieties about the dangerous significations of intercorporeality—sexual or otherwise—as well as collective action, and has therefore profound political potential. By requiring participants physically to interact with and touch bodies constructed as impaired victims of violent acts, *cicatric macula (restituo)* confronted the audience with constructions of trauma, violence, and disability in three-dimensional terms. This embodiment and intercorporeality played an important role. Firstly, I would argue that it came across as radically different from traditional narratives of gender violence which are constructed in binary terms, opposing the powerless victim to the heroic survivor (see Fayard, *Speaking Out*). By contrast, the puppets’ lifeless bodies incarnated the stark reality of violence. Importantly, in *cicatrix macula (restituo)*, trauma could also be materially experienced by the viewer through physical contact with the mutilated bodies.

Secondly, this experience took place within public contexts, with traumatized bodies being exposed to public view within that space. Direct and public interaction between the audience and traumatized bodies means that, like disability, violence and trauma can no longer be considered as abstractions, or as belonging to the private domain. Therefore, as shown above, three types of collective bodies were introduced into the performance: the body impaired through violence; the disabled body; and the collective body as witness and constructing agent. All three bodies had the opportunity to tell their own story and communicate with each other. Crucially, all three discourses were grounded in reality.

In the first part of this essay, I referred to the need for bodies to take an active part in the narration of their story in the here and now in order to be heard. According to Flax, justice and citizenship should be seen as a process that is negotiated between interconnected groups, implying that all are involved, irrespective of gender and disability (445–63). This inclusive, if somewhat utopian, vision of justice and citizenship therefore

posits the subject as agent. *cicatrix macula (restituo)* highlights that, like remembering and memorialization, social justice is a collective process. There was no performance without public participation and negotiation between the audience, the artists, and the puppets in a constant process of to-ing and fro-ing. And, similarly to the process of memorialization, (self-)inclusions, (self-)exclusions, and forgetting were also part of these negotiations.

These are fundamental realizations as they draw attention to the importance of individual action in the mechanisms of both social awareness and social protest. In *cicatrix macula (restituo)* the audience was faced with three clear choices. It could choose to watch the action only and remain passive; it could choose to speak out by taking an active part in the performance; or it could ignore the evidence and leave the auditorium. These gradations between passive acceptance, on the one hand, and active engagement, on the other, represented a microcosm of the broader social arena regarding social and political attitudes toward both violence towards disabled and non-disabled women. Individual members of the audience were forced at some point to position themselves in at least one category, as either: a witness; a disabled or non-disabled person; a gendered member of society; a victim or survivor of violence and trauma; or a confidante. These self-definitions were difficult for all viewers, including those amongst us who might have been victims—or perpetrators. Therefore, *cicatrix macula (restituo)* raised the issue of both individual and collective responsibility in the processes that normalize responses to gender violence and disability.

The space of the art gallery is well-suited to the projection of collective agency around this theme. The physical shape of the gallery and its function as a public space dedicated to the gathering of visitors around specific themes also makes it comparable to an organic body where corporal functions, including walking, thinking, listening, and talking take place. One of the specific functions of bodies where public debates take place, such as galleries, museums, and theatres, is to memorialize discussion. This includes exhibits and performances about the dead and the sacrificial haunting the living with a view to spurring them to collective action. But the process of memorialization is all the stronger when the visitors are invited to participate directly in the process of meaning-making. In *cicatrix macula (restituo)*, the contributions of artists and viewers likewise meant that a multiplicity of connected bodies from the past and in the future can keep the memory and the act of witnessing alive. This might offer possibilities of forming a community of fellow-protestors, making real change possible. In addition, it also suggests that through its legacy, the artwork looks to the future and therefore has political potential.

I shall conclude with two final observations on the artistic memory of *cicatrix macula (restituo)*. To me, one of the main achievements of the production was its ability to resist constructions of trauma and disability as personal tragedies, and instead demonstrating their social and political nature. As long as this message is successfully transmitted, then the performance can fulfil its potential as a vehicle for social change. Secondly, the design of the show as a collective endeavour literally involving the two artists and the audience working together also worked as a strong instrument for potential change, maybe suggesting that it is through collective action that participants can gain control, however momentarily.

The aim of *cicatrix macula (restituo)* was therefore to open up a dialogue with the audience as witness and make that presence felt in order to challenge difficult understandings of disabling violence. I would also argue that one secondary aim that the performance achieved was to confront participants (museums, artists, and audiences) with new ways of looking at the themes by moving away from clichéd representations of disability, and trauma victims. By presenting the voices and memories of survivors, the artwork provided physical bodies (witnesses) with which to counter society's abstraction of gender violence and disability. Violence is objectified in the artists' representations, permitting the survivor to be reborn as a subject. The artistic memory evoked by the show therefore restores survivor agency.

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On Unruly Text, or Text-Trickster:  
Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*  
as Healing

# ABSTRACT

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The article discusses Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* with a focus on textual manifestations of the figure of the trickster. The theme of shape-shifting and transformation that one usually associates with tricksters is linked here with the theme of (non)dualist timespace, the notion of interbeing, which in turn introduces the theme of trauma healing. The author combines two perspectives—Paula Gunn Allen's view on timespace in her *The Sacred Hoop*, and Gerald Vizenor's writings concerning trickster aesthetics—in order to show that the narrative structure of the novel can also be seen as an embodiment of the trickster: trickster-timespace, trickster-relation, and trickster-processuality; these three manifestations of the trickster are analyzed from the perspective of one more actualization of the trickster, that of a psychopomp, the "Guide of Souls" (which is manifested both at the level of plot and narration).

**Keywords:** trickster, healing, Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*.

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*Every generation occupies itself with interpreting Trickster anew. . . .*

(Radin 168)

*The fish exists because of the fish;  
once you've gotten the fish,  
you can forget the trap. . . .  
Words exist because of meaning;  
once you've gotten the meaning,  
you can forget the words.*

(Chuang Tzu qtd. in Hyde 313)

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to explore various incarnations of the Native American trickster in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. In *Ceremony* we can identify a number of (mythical) trickster characters endowed with fluid identity whose aim is to de- and re-construct the cause-and-effect scheme of narrative events. It is interesting to note that the theme of shape-shifting and transformation that we usually associate with tricksters is inextricably linked with the theme of (non)dualist timespace, the notion of interbeing as opposed to hierarchy and authority, which in turn introduce the theme of trauma healing (individual and/or communal). Hence it is not surprising that Silko succeeds in posing multilevel metaphysical questions on the nature of self, being, and (making sense of) the real. In my analysis, I will attempt to link two perspectives—Paula Gunn Allen's view on timespace in her seminal *The Sacred Hoop*, and Gerald Vizenor's writings concerning trickster aesthetics—in order to show that the narrative structure of the novel can also be seen as an embodiment of the trickster; I will focus here on the trickster-timespace, trickster-relation, and will try to link these two manifestations of the trickster with one of his/her most important role, that of a psychopomp, the "Guide of Souls" (Hyde 91), which is manifested through yet one more (elusive) actualization of the trickster—a continuous process or processuality, both at the level of plot and narration.

## THE TRICKSTER AND TRICKSTER AESTHETICS

Before we touch upon the concept of trickster discourse, or trickster aesthetics, we need to take a closer look at the figure of the trickster itself.

Here is how Paul Radin writes about the oldest figure in American Indian religions:

Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being. (Radin xxiii)

I am interested in that last sentence. Even though trickster him/herself is beyond good or evil, s/he is the agent thanks to whom all values “come into being.” Let us keep that argument in mind as the story of the trickster develops. In Victor Turner’s opinion, the figure of the trickster is the embodiment of liminality in myths (Turner 71). S/he dwells in a liminal situation, between two events, on the border of two worlds, or at a moment where one has to make a conscious decision. In his book *Trickster Makes This World. Mischief, Myth, and Art*, Lewis Hyde goes even further by stating that the trickster is the great shape-shifter, which in his view means “not so much that he shifts the shape of his own body but that, given the materials of this world, he demonstrates the degree to which the way we have shaped them may be altered” (91), and he adds that the trickster “makes this world and then plays with its materials” (91). In a truly poetic fashion Hyde describes the role of the trickster as “the Guide of Souls,” a psychopomp who comes along to help someone cross the line into “a shiftier consciousness where old stories fall apart so that new ones may form from the fragments” (91). And this is precisely what happens in the novel in question.

Radin concludes his 1956 study by stating:

The overwhelming majority of all so-called trickster myths in North America give an account of the creation of the earth, or at least the transforming of the world, and have a hero who is always wandering, who is always hungry, who is not guided by normal conceptions of good or evil, who is either playing tricks on people or having them played on him and who is highly sexed. Almost everywhere he has some divine traits. These vary from tribe to tribe. In some instances he is regarded as an actual deity, in others as intimately connected with deities, in still others he is at best a generalized animal or human being subject to death. (Radin 155)

To some extent, Radin’s statement might be seen as an overgeneralization, and, quite surprisingly, it is shared by Carl Gustav Jung who archetypes the



trickster.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars try to avoid concrete definitions of the trickster, and stress its flexibility. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, for instance, argue that trickster stories are “so culture-specific that no two of them articulate similar messages” (2). In “Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide,” Hynes discusses six characteristic features common among the tricksters. He stresses the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster, and enumerates the following features shared by tricksters from many traditions: a) deceiver/trick-player, b) shape-shifter, c) situation inventor, d) messenger/imitator of the gods, e) sacred/lewd bricoleur (Hynes 34).

Lewis Hyde points out that the trickster, “the Guide of Souls,” as he calls him, the one “who allows a plot to be deeply rearranged[,] is rarely an obvious actor in the story at hand” (91). Why? Because, as he argues, “durable stories are self-containing, self-defended against change and fragmentation” (Hyde 91). Hyde stresses the idea of a double skillfulness on the part of the trickster who has to fool its opponents:

The high gods set guard dogs around their sacred meadows. If there is to be a change, its agent will have to hypnotize those dogs and slip in from the shadows, like an embarrassing impulse, a cunning pathogen, a love affair, a shameless thief taking a chance. (Hyde 91)

It is interesting to note that in *Earthdivers: Tribal Narratives on Mixed Descent*, Gerald Vizenor, who coined terms such as *survivance* and “post-Indian warriors of simulation,” identifies contemporary mixedbloods as the new earthdivers, that is to say tricksters who “dive into unknown urban places now . . . to create a new consciousness of coexistence” (ix). He also notices that the function of tricksters is closely linked with the role of writers: “Earthdivers, tricksters, shamans, poets dream back the earth” (*Earthdivers* xvi). For Vizenor, the contemporary trickster writers “speak a new language, ” and he adds that “in some urban places the earthdivers speak backwards to be better understood on the earth” (*Earthdivers* xvi).<sup>2</sup> We will see that very clearly in the analyzed novel. For Vizenor, the trickster

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<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that Radin’s generalization may be associated with Western thinking that can still be traced among scholars, which is why I have decided to follow two Native American authors (Gerald Vizenor and Paula Gunn Allen) and even if their modes of writing seem different, in my view they are both interested in the philosophy and the practice of writing trickster stories.

<sup>2</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of writers as tricksters, see Kocot “Games with Kitsch in the Works of Sherman Alexie and Thomas King,” “Post-Indian Warriors of Simulation: Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* as a ‘Story of Survivance,’” and “Rewizje historyczne we współczesnej powieści indiańskiej.”

is a shapeshifter, a wit, a disturber of the status quo, a dissembler of meaning, the one who “uncovers distinctions and ironies between narrative voices” (Vizenor, *Narrative Chance* 192). In Vizenor’s view, the trickster’s actions create a trickster discourse of “narrative chance—a comic utterance and adventure to be heard or read” (*Narrative Chance* x):

The trickster narrative situates the participant audience, the listeners and readers, in agonistic imagination: there, in comic discourse, the trickster is being, nothingness and liberation; a loose seam in consciousness; that wild space over and between sounds, words, sentences end narratives. (Vizenor, *Narrative Chance* 196)

296 As I argue elsewhere, the quotation emphasizes the highly subversive character of the trickster’s actions, be it a character in the novel, or the narrative’s timespace, but first and foremost it introduces “the trickster’s relationship with the concept of *survivance* as a way of active struggle for self-definition and against the simulacra of the real” (Kocot, “Post-Indian Warriors of Simulation” 141; “Games with Kitsch” 102). For Vizenor, the relation between storytelling and *survivance* is of utmost importance. He defines *survivance* as “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name” (*Manifest Manners* vii).<sup>3</sup> To him, Native *survivance* stories are “renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (*Manifest Manners* vii).<sup>4</sup> The focus of this article is on “that wild space over and between sounds, words, sentences and narratives,” the textual manifestations of the trickster,<sup>5</sup> but I will also emphasize the link between “in-between-ness” and *survivance* in their healing aspect.

<sup>3</sup> For more analysis on the relationship between *survivance* and trickster aesthetics, see Kocot “Games with Kitsch in the Works of Sherman Alexie and Thomas King,” “Płynna tożsamość—oblicza trickstera w powieściach Indian Ameryki Północnej,” “Post-Indian Warriors of Simulation: Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* as a ‘Story of Survivance,’” “Rewizje historyczne we współczesnej powieści indiańskiej.”

<sup>4</sup> I develop an analysis of *survivance* in the context of Hayden White’s tropology and the motif of alternative histories and uchronias in my article “Rewizje historyczne we współczesnej powieści indiańskiej” (169–72).

<sup>5</sup> Naturally, the textual manifestations of the trickster do not have to be associated with Native American (or Aboriginal) traditions. In Scottish literature, for example, we may speak of a figure of whittrick which, as I argue, can be seen as trickster manifestation in the structure of literary texts. I discuss various instances of trickster discourse in *Playing Games of Sense in Edwin Morgan’s Writing* (125–39), “Trickster Discourse: The Figure of Whittrick in Edwin Morgan’s Writing” (49–58), and in the article “The Whittrick Play of *No Nothing*: Alan Spence, Edwin Morgan, and Indra’s Net.” In my texts on Morgan I connect trickster

Vine Deloria Jr. famously wrote that “[t]o be an Indian in modern society is in a very real sense to be unreal and ahistorical” (10). One of the ways to challenge the problem of entrapment and to promote active struggle for self-definition, if not self-realization, is to affirm what Kimberly Blaeser calls “trickster consciousness” in its healing aspect:

We can be prisoners, and we are, in our bodies. But we can liberate our minds. Tribal people were brilliant in understanding that a figure, a familiar figure in an imaginative story, could keep their minds free. . . . I'm going for trickster consciousness because it's an ideal healing, because it disrupts the opposites and that creates the possibility for discourse that's communal and comic. (Blaeser 238)

Tricksters' aim is to disrupt narratives and projections; they are to mock the norm, and they usually do this on the sly, by ridiculing the status quo. Whether the discourse is always comic is debatable, and many Native Americans would agree that the figure of the trickster may be perceived as comic, but his/her actions are not necessarily comic as such. Therefore discussing trickster dynamics may pose a challenge, especially for the non-Native audience. A Laguna Pueblo Indian portrayal of the trickster differs from those of other parts of the US. As Winifred Morgan notes, this is because “Southwestern tricksters associated with witchery are not playful and usually overtly malicious than those from other Indian cultures” (57). As we will see in the course of analysis, the evil tricksters in *Ceremony* will be closely associated with the “death dealing events that bedevil” (Morgan 57) the protagonist—Tayo.

Before we move on to the issue of cyclical timespace, let me quote a story which interestingly enough functions as a coda in Lewis Hyde's study of the trickster. The story is preceded by a quote from Chuang Tzu (one of our epigraphs) which introduces the idea of the elusive nature of words, their meaning, and the message of silence which, as I will argue here, exert a huge impact on how the meaning in trickster narratives is conveyed. Here is the story itself:

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a certain Father J. Jetté, Jesuit missionary to the Athabaskan Indians, lived among the Ten'a in the lower Yukon. In those days the Ten'a told the old stories in the dead of winter,

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discourse with Bakhtinian dialogical imagination, and in my article on Spence's play (with the figure of Edwin Morgan in it) the link with Bakhtinian dialogicality is strengthened by the application of the metaphor of Indra's net which serves as a useful tool in exploring spatial dimensions of the play and the issue of interconnectedness.

from early December to the middle of January. The group with whom Father Jetté lived would go to bed in the early evening, dozen or more rolling themselves in blankets on the floor around the cabin, their heads to the wall. The last one blew out the light, throwing the room into complete darkness (every chink and crack was caulked against the cold, and gunnysacks hung outside the windows to keep the window panes from frosting over). Before long, someone would start a story—"In old times, it is said . . ."—the listeners responding *anni! anni!* to keep the voice going. "A strange thing had occurred: the sun had disappeared, and all was in the dark. What was to be done? the old women asked. Who will get back the sun for us?" Peals of laughter as Raven is lured from seclusion by the promise of dog meat.

Father Jetté wanted very much to make a collection of tales, but there were difficulties. The 'Ten'a were reluctant to let the Raven stories be put in writing, for one thing (though another group of tales—"the inane stories," Jetté calls them—could be had for the asking). Jetté tried to transcribe tales as they were being told, but the utter darkness frustrated him. Nobody would repeat the stories in daylight, and at night whenever he struck a match to light a candle, the storyteller fell instantly silent. (Hyde 313–14)

The story sheds light, as it were, on a few characteristic features common among trickster stories. First of all, the stories in question are told in (and for) the community of listeners, those who are familiar with the Tradition (except Father Jetté, of course, who figures here as the Other, if not the potential intruder). Additionally, the stories are told in complete darkness, where the conscious mind's power over ourselves is significantly diminished, and where the power of the subconscious, or the unconscious mind, is awakened and brought to the fore. Darkness is essential in creating an atmosphere which opens the listeners to the experience of receiving mind-bending, subliminal messages that can break the cognitive patterns of thinking. And it is precisely this darkness that Father Jetté finds so frustrating. Why? Because it prevents him from entering the world of Indians on his own terms; without a candle he is unable to transcribe the stories for the white people—and symbolically essentialize the 'Ten'a—to capture the intangible. He can take part in the meetings but he finds it difficult to adjust to the rules established by the 'Ten'a. The darkness might function as a form of protection in literal terms; the sphere of the sacred needs to be protected against potential intruders and colonizers, those who do not respect the Tradition. But the very same darkness might also function metaphorically. When we think of trickster stories in general, they usually contain messages that are clear for the members of a given community, they are not for the white man's ears. Therefore when approaching trickster stories we need to accept the

fact that the essence of a given story will be clear only to those familiar with a given tribal tradition; by “tradition” I do not mean theoretical acquaintance with mythology or (religious) rites, but deep knowledge of the tribe’s history and experiential wisdom drawn from ritual practices.<sup>6</sup> We may notice nonetheless these oblique spaces, obscure parts and links between fragments of the narratives, and we may appreciate them precisely because they are part and parcel of trickster aesthetics.

### CYCLICAL TIMESPACE IN NATIVE AMERICAN TRADITION

When discussing a Native American concept of the world, we cannot forget that the vision of the divine and human individual in it differs to a large extent from that of the Western tradition (see Kocot, “Our Island in the Flood” 231). In one of the chapters of her illuminating *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen notes that a holistic and circular Native vision stands in stark contrast with the Western division of the world into the physical and the spiritual (see Kocot, “Our Island in the Flood” 231):

In English, one can divide the universe in two parts—one which is natural and one which is “supernatural.” Man has no real part in either, being neither animal nor spirit. That is, the supernatural is discussed as though it were apart from people, and the natural as though people were apart from it. This necessarily forces English-speaking people in a position of alienation from the world they live in. This isolation is entirely foreign to Native American thought. At base, every story, every song, every ceremony tells the Indian that each creature is part of a living whole and that all parts of that whole are related to one another by virtue of their participation in the whole of being.

In American Indian thought, God is known as the All Spirit, and other beings are also spirit—more spirit than body, more spirit than intellect, more spirit than mind. The natural state of existence is whole. (Allen, *Sacred Hoop* 60)

The perception of the universe as holistic and circular seems inextricably linked with the American Indian notion of time and space as motion; in her chapter on the sacred hoop, Allen points to the American Indian tendency to “view space as spherical and time as cyclical” and she contrasts that with

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<sup>6</sup> Hartmut Lutz’s offers a stimulating analysis of the poem titled “His Horse Danced” by Greg Daniels, and shows how the dynamics during the process of deciphering the meaning operate with and without that knowledge. Lutz argues that the poem “will only matter for those who know” (95–98).

the non-Indian's vision who in her opinion "tends to view space as linear and time as sequential" (Allen, *Sacred Hoop* 59). This vision of timespace is naturally reflected in traditional storytelling, but also in contemporary prose, poetry, and drama (see Kocot, "'Our Island in the Flood'" 232). In the chapter on ceremonial time, Allen discusses the intricate relationship between time, space, and myth in Native American thought. She observes that the traditional concept of time "is of timelessness, as the concept of space is of multidimensionality," and she adds that "[i]n the ceremonial time the tribes inhabit, time and space are mythic" (*Sacred Hoop* 147). Allen quotes Fred Young, the Navajo mathematician and physicist, who explains how the movement of time and space operates:

if you held time constant, space went to infinity, and when space was held constant, time moved to infinity. That was why it was not possible to determine the exact location of a particle on a grid. The tribal sense of self as a moving event within a moving universe is very similar to the physicists' understanding of the particle within time and space. There is plenty of time in the Indian universe because everything moves in a dynamic equilibrium and the fact of universal movement is taken into account in the ritual life that is tribal existence. (*Sacred Hoop* 147)

According to Allen, the belief that "time operates external to the internal workings of human and other beings, contrasts sharply with a ceremonial time sense that assumes the individual as a moving event shaped by and shaping human and nonhuman surroundings" (Allen, *Sacred Hoop* 149). This relationship is also foregrounded in Silko's *Ceremony*.

### LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *CEREMONY* AS THE TRICKSTER

Trickster novels can be read on several intermediating levels: physical, social, psychological, and spiritual (Lutz 100). The importance of the level of spirituality is crucial, but as Bo Schöler points out, it is often overlooked, or confused with the psychological. In his interpretation of Leslie Marmon Silko's "Tony's Story," Schöler says: "[t]he fourth dimension gives perspective, as the saying goes: ethnic perspective. The confusion is understandable because it is difficult to separate psychological wholeness and spiritual attachment, but this is where the ethnohistorical and contextual knowledge becomes useful, if not indispensable" (qtd. in Lutz 100). One could only add that the mythic perspective, or as Elaine Jahner puts it, the "mythic way of knowing" (49), so important in Silko writing, cannot be grasped without such contextual knowledge.

Discussing Silko's *Storyteller*, Arnold Krupat notes that "[f]or all the polyvocal openness of Silko's work, there is always the unabashed sense of the value of Pueblo tradition as a reference point" (*The Voice in the Margin* 199). In the introduction to *Leslie Marmon Silko's "Ceremony."* *A Casebook*, Allan Chavkin notices a similar thing: "for non-Indian readers both the source of greatest difficulty and the source of greatest originality is Silko's heavy reliance on Pueblo cultures, traditions and mythologies" (8). Let us see, then, how the knowledge of Pueblo cultures may help in deciphering some of the nuances of Silko's narrative.

In Keres Indian mythology, the concept of time as cycle is inextricably linked with the creation of five worlds, the fifth of which is the one we live in, and the four below where the (mythical) ancestors dwell and have their being. In his seminal book on Silko's *Ceremony*, Robert M. Nelson adds more complexity to the picture. He states that in Laguna Pueblo cosmology, "there are four worlds before/within the one we all live in, always in four dimensions, four 'places,' or phased sources of life moving in some kind of relationship to one another" (*Leslie Marmon Silko's "Ceremony"* 168), and he adds that the function of ceremony is "to align or re-align those relationships" (Nelson 168). Interestingly, according to traditional beliefs, and this is often the case in the narratives, the time cycles—that is, the contemporary here-and-now and the mythical times—may overlap. Silko's *Ceremony* is certainly a case in point. In creating her "trickster narrative," Silko, an accomplished Laguna Pueblo storyteller, reaches for traditional tribal oral Laguna stories and rewrites them in her characteristic style, interweaving the ideas of the contemporary here-and-now and the mythical "humma-hah" ("long ago"). She speaks about the importance of the "humma-hah" motif in her *Storyteller*:

The Laguna people  
always begin their stories  
with "humma-hah":  
that means "long ago."  
And the ones who are listening  
say "aaaa-eh." (Silko, *Storyteller* 38)

Arnold Krupat argues that Silko invokes the feel of "long ago" both in her prose and in the embedded poetic pieces in her novels, but he admits that for him only "the sections of the book set in verse attempt to evoke something of the actual feel of an oral telling" (*The Voice in the Margin* 168). Robert M. Nelson goes one step further, and in his book on *Ceremony* he studies the palimpsestuous design of these poetic pieces.

Nelson wants to see Silko's novel as a peculiar example of "post-modern intertextuality," that is, a text in which two kinds of text—prose narrative and poetic/mythical/ceremonial pieces (that attempt to evoke the atmosphere



of an oral telling)—“derive (or better yet, recover) a semblance of authority from a third, absent yet acknowledged, text, that is, the ethnographic pretext” (*Silko’s “Ceremony”* 3). He discusses the intricate patterns of relationship between the traditional Keresan narratives and Franz Boas’s *Keresan Texts*—for instance, the symbolic significance of the sunrise motif, or the Hoop series—in his book on *Ceremony*. Nelson shows how the Laguna myths, which come in the form of poems, always centre justified on the page, create a sort of palimpsest narrative “backbone” of the novel (Nelson, *Silko’s “Ceremony”* 13). Once readers decipher the symbolic meaning of the poems, and notice how they are interrelated with the Laguna mythology and cosmology, they are ready to re-discover (it is a continuous process, if not a never-ending processuality) the (mythic) story of Tayo’s illness, the causes of his affliction, the multilevel nature of healing he undergoes, the type of ceremony he takes part in, and the consequences of his healing not only for himself but for the whole community as well.

Thus, in *Ceremony*, the trickster manifests itself as an incessant movement or processuality, both at the level of plot and narration. But for us the most important sphere of the trickster’s manifestation is that of the narrative structure, as here we can talk of trickster-relation, and trickster-timespace in their healing aspect. The narrative structure mirrors, as it were, the spatial/temporal paradigm of the world that Spider Woman fabricated for the Laguna, which again is linked with the Laguna symbolic geography. One should mention here the two articles by Edith Swan (“Laguna Symbolic Geography and *Silko’s Ceremony*” and “Healing via the Sunwise Cycle in *Silko’s Ceremony*”) that provide invaluable (also ethno-astronomical) details concerning vertical and horizontal aspects of space and time, and succeed in showing that *Silko’s* imagination reflects a highly sophisticated mythopoetic sense of place. In his article “The Function of the Landscape of *Ceremony*,” Nelson discusses the symbolic significance of places visited by Tayo, the sick, battle-weary World War II veteran, the novel’s protagonist. It is this reference to the Laguna cosmic system that serves as a guide in understanding Tayo’s spiritual journey towards the centre of himself, towards health and harmony. Readers familiar with the Laguna Pueblo mythology see Tayo as a character in a liminal state, and they can clearly see that thanks to (fighting with) the (mythical) trickster he manages to fight off the witchery and thus he is healed. The trickster works here as a psychopomp who, by means of his/her witchery, takes Tayo from the stage we may refer to as “before” to the stage “after.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> I develop this argument in “Płynna tożsamość—oblicza trickstera w powieściach Indian Ameryki Północnej” (85–93) and particularly in “‘Tricksterowa hermeneutyka’ a procesualność lektury—próba (od)czytania *Ceremony* Leslie Marmon Silko” (167–77).

As Swan notes, “Tayo must function in and come to terms with the cosmos spun by the thought process of Spider Woman” (“Laguna Symbolic Geography” 229), and she adds that Silko is “indelibly dyeing the warp and weft of the novel with the sacred, immortal voice of genesis, the universe maker” (Swan, “Laguna Symbolic Geography” 229). The design of the novel acknowledges and reflects the relationships between the five worlds: the one we live in, and the four “below.”<sup>8</sup> The metanarrative character of *Ceremony* is signalled on the first page of the novel:

Thought-Woman, the spider  
named things and  
as she named them  
they appeared.

She is sitting in her room  
thinking of a story now

I'm telling you the story  
she is thinking. (Silko, *Ceremony* 1)

Silko foregrounds here the act of storytelling, and its link with Spider Woman's thought process, but also the process of naming things so that they (may) appear. It must be noted, however, that as Owens observes, Silko, like a traditional storyteller, is remaking the story rather than inventing it (170). “The story, and all the stories within it, are part of the primal matrix that cycles and recycles infinitely, as Old Grandma indicates when at the novel's end she says, ‘It seems like I already heard these stories before . . . only the thing is, the names sound different’” (Owens 170). The second page introduces the second speaker who emphasizes the healing power of stories:

Ceremony

I will tell you something about stories,  
[he said]

They aren't just entertainment.  
Don't be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,  
all we have to fight off  
illness and death.

You don't have anything  
if you don't have stories. (Silko, *Ceremony* 2)

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<sup>8</sup> See Gunn (25–30); Boas (76–82); Benedict, “Eight Stories from Acoma” (59–87); Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (57–130).

Then the speaker—possibly an anonymous clan elder (Owens 170)—touches his belly<sup>9</sup> where he keeps the stories. He says: “Here, put your hand on it / See, it is moving” (Silko, *Ceremony* 2), and he adds “And in the belly of this story / the rituals and the ceremony / are still growing” (Silko, *Ceremony* 2). Owens argues that “within her story about Tayo’s journey toward wholeness and health, Silko . . . conducts a healing ceremony for all of us, for the world at large” (170). He points to the self-reflective nature of storytelling: the healing, life-giving story is in the belly of the storyteller “while the rituals and ceremony from which the ‘he’ voice arises are found within the belly of the story” (Owens 170). Thus, the speaking “he” is telling the story but at the same time he is born from the story, while “both are contained within Thought-Woman” (Owens 170). The third poem, situated at the bottom of page three, introduces a feminine voice. The speaker, “possibly a clan mother or Thought-Woman reentering the text” (Owens 170) says: “The only cure / I know / is a good ceremony, / that’s what she said” (Silko, *Ceremony* 3). Thus the three processes: storytelling, ceremony and healing become inextricably interrelated (Owens 170); they inter-are, if you will. Once this “interwoven” unity is established, we move to page four which features only one word, “Sunrise,” centre justified at the top of the page. It should be noted here that this single word not only functions as one more “humma-hah” but, interestingly enough, may also be seen as a one-word translation of the Keresan phrase (Nelson, *Silko’s “Ceremony”* 59). Nelson observes that for a Keresan-speaking audience the phrase “not only cues the beginning of a storytelling performance, but it also locates the *event* of the coming story in the spatial and temporal vicinity of originality,” and he adds that “hama-ha” “directs the Keresan audience’s attention towards both a *time* (early) and a *place* (easterly) of beginnings, a vicinity of story time-space naturally associated with the daily event of sunrise” (*Silko’s “Ceremony”* 59). But if we follow Nelson’s suggestion concerning the typographical and symbolic meaning of pages one to four—with their reference to the four worlds “below”—then the Sunrise on page four will function as “a sort of verbal *sipapu* or Emergence Place in the geography and topography of the novel” (Nelson, *Silko’s “Ceremony”* 49), preparing readers for the events that will take place in the fifth world,<sup>10</sup> on page five, where we learn that

Tayo didn’t sleep well that night. He tossed in the old iron bed, and the coiled springs kept squeaking even after he lay still again, calling up

<sup>9</sup> For the discussion of the motif of the belly, see Chapman.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on the homology of the motifs, see Nelson’s chapter “Analogy vs. Homology: The Kaupata Motif” in his *Silko’s “Ceremony.”*

humid dreams of black night and loud voices rolling him over and over again like debris caught in a flood. (Silko, *Ceremony* 5)

The typography plays a crucial role here, as the beginning of the story of Tayo—placed six lines from the bottom of the page—mirrors Thought-Woman's message on storytelling as healing on page three. But the most meaningful texts which actually link the stories of the five worlds can be found between the poems, especially on page three (where we find only six lines of text at the bottom), four (with only one word on top of the page), and five (again, only six lines of text at the bottom). We might call it an invisible text, or white text, and the fact that we cannot see any signs does not mean that it is a blank space. Given that we are moving, as it were, between the worlds, or better still moving through five worlds, the invisible text, or the gaps, may be seen as a manifestation of the trickster, the one who transgresses narratives, subverts normative rules, and promotes multiperspectivity. By crossing each of these gaps, by noticing the intriguing nature of relationship between the events happening on different levels of being, readers (together with Tayo) experience the healing power of storytelling. Hence, when discussing Silko's narrative structure we must bear in mind that the intricate design characterized by hyper-intertextuality and hyper-intratextuality, which promotes the Native idea of narrative multivocality/dialogicality, and multiperspectivity, can be seen as the embodiment of the trickster. And the fact that the text refuses to be read in a linear way may further prove my point.

When analyzing the circular design of the novel, Robert C. Bell notices that *Ceremony* is a New World variation on the hero-quest pattern—with its elements of separation, initiation, and return—and just as in most American ceremonial myths, Silko creates a hero who suffers injuries (afflicting his mind and body) that require supernatural aid (Bell 47). Bell stresses the link between the hero's gaining the ceremonial knowledge and power essential for establishing a chantway (47). He observes that “[t]he Coyote Transformation story and its attendant hoop ritual, in particular, are . . . a major motif in numerous exorcistic chant legends, including those of Waterway, Excessway, Beadway, and Red Antway” (48). Such curing ceremonials consist of a number of procedures “designed to symbolically recapitulate the events told in myth and legend, including rituals ‘intended to appease or to exorcise the etiological factors that are thought to have caused the patient’s trouble,’” (Bell 48) and, if they are to be functional, if they are “to work their magic, the procedures must be recited exactly and in detail: ‘Repetition is compulsive and authoritative’” (Bell 48). Bell notes that this is precisely what Silko does in her novel: “the hoop

transformation ceremony in *Ceremony* recapitulates, in astonishing detail, the procedures set forth in the Coyote Transformation rite in *The Myth of Red Antway, Male Evilway*, recorded and translated by Father Berard Haile in the 1930s” (Bell 48).

The emphasis on precision in using words is related to practicing responsibility and the continual progress in the process of healing. Early in *Ceremony*, when the old singer Ku’oosh attempts a cure for Tayo, he remarks: “But you know, grandson, this world is fragile” (Silko, *Ceremony* 35). The narrator then comments as follows:

The word he chose to express “fragile” was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and *with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web*. It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. That was the responsibility that went with being human, old Ku’oosh said, the story behind each word must be told *so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; and this demanded great patience and love*. (Silko, *Ceremony* 35–36, emphasis mine)

This passage shows Silko’s poetic mastery in the power of suggestion.<sup>11</sup> While she dwells on the fragile nature of the world, and the elusive nature of words that can describe it, she composes a painterly scene which foregrounds the notion of interbeing, or the interconnectedness of the phenomena (human beings included): in order to convey the “intricacies of a continuing process” hidden or latent in the word “fragile,” she uses the metaphor of strong *spider webs* that are woven across *paths* through *sand hills*, and stresses the importance of the morning sun being “entangled in each filament of web.” Obviously, if we try to imagine this sunrise scene, we will notice the shining nature of the intricate, strong and yet fragile design. On a symbolic level, the metaphor with all its elements is associated with the Laguna mythology and healing ceremonies for warriors who killed or touched dead enemies. It is not a coincidence that one of the embedded texts evoking the feel of the oral storytelling appears on the subsequent page. Before we will have a look at it, let me refer to one more important issue connected with the healing ceremony. When Ku’oosh asks Tayo about people he had killed in the war, he stresses that his recovery will affect not only him but also

<sup>11</sup> For a slightly different, and surely post-structuralist, reading of the story, see Krupat’s “Post-Structuralism and Oral Literature” (116–18).

the community, and the whole world. He says: “You understand, don’t you? It is important to all of us. Not only for your sake, but for this fragile world” (Silko, *Ceremony* 36).<sup>12</sup> And here is how Silko connects the message of Ku’oosh with the “humma-hah” poetic mode:

The way  
I heard it  
was  
in the old days  
long time ago  
they had this  
Scalp Society  
for warriors  
who killed  
or touched  
dead enemies.

They had things  
they must do  
otherwise  
K’oo’ko would haunt their dreams  
with her great fangs and  
everything would be endangered.  
Maybe the rain wouldn’t come  
or the deer would go away.  
That’s why  
they had things  
they must do  
The flute and dancing  
blue cornmeal and  
hair-washing.

All these things  
they had to do. (Silko, *Ceremony* 37–38)

The “humma-hah” story is followed by a passage which takes us back—or perhaps forward, if you will—to the narrative here-and-now. It proceeds from the middle of the line, just where the previous “here-and-now” passage stopped.

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<sup>12</sup> For an illuminating analysis of Silko’s “technology” of healing the world through Tayo’s actions, and how it may lead us to see *Ceremony* as a trickster epic rather than a novel, see Giorgio Mariani’s *Post-Tribal Epics: The Native American Novel Between Tradition and Modernity* (82–102).

The room was almost dark. Tayo wondered where Auntie and old Grandma had been all this time. The old man put his sack on his lap and began to feel around inside it with both hands. He brought out a bundle of dry green stalks and a small paper bag full of blue cornmeal. He laid the bundle of Indian tea in Tayo's lap. He stood up then and set the bag of cornmeal on the chair. (Silko, *Ceremony* 38)

It is evident that Silko's associative thinking design is in full operation here. The blue cornmeal used in healing ceremonies is being prepared by Ku'oosh, but we learn that Tayo is not ready for the ceremony. As soon as Ku'oosh leaves Tayo rolls over on his *belly* [emphasis mine] and knocks the stalks of Indian tea on the floor. "He cried, trying to release the great pressure that was swelling inside his chest, but he got no relief from crying anymore. The pain was solid and constant as the beating of his own heart" (Silko, *Ceremony* 38). And this is where Silko associates his suffering with the message of old stories and with the fragility of the world which we have already discussed:

The old man only made him certain of something he had feared all along, something in the old stories. It took only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, spilling the rays of sun into sand, and the fragile world would be injured. Once there had been a man who cursed the rain clouds, a man of monstrous dreams. Tayo screamed, and curled his body against the pain. (Silko, *Ceremony* 38–39)

Kenneth Lincoln observes that in the narrative version of the Laguna myth, Tayo struggles with his own self, with the "whirling darkness" of hatred and fear, and he "must complete the old rituals in order to 'create new ceremonies'. . . It is not just the way things *were*, but how they *are*, evolving from the past; the past informs a living present, just as Spider-Old-Woman's web spins reality out of her aged abdomen" (53). As John Purdy notes, when Tayo "moves through his narrative, his awareness of the relationship between his experiences and those told of in the stories of his people grows, and he in turn moves from an isolated, ill individual to a powerful, competent representative of his people" (63). This *movement* can be seen not only in Silko's narrative, characterized by associative thinking and imagery building, but also—and, I would argue, more importantly—in the empty spaces (empty six lines of text) which precede and follow each of the "humma-hah" poems. This process, or better still processuality, is what I would like to see as the trickster's manifestation. These empty "passages" literally open the space where the transformation, shift or transition may take place. In my opinion, this process of hiding the actual workings of the



trickster can be related to the already quoted Lewis Hyde's anecdote on the importance of complete darkness in telling the Raven stories. Silko reverses the usual metaphor for non-differentiation, darkness, and shows that what is hidden (white spaces) and what is apparent (printed text) is also reversed. This technique has quite a long history in the Taoist and Buddhist traditions; in my opinion, the fact that Hyde's anecdote is preceded by a quote from Chuang Tzu is not a coincidence. In a playful and yet serious way, Chuang Tzu introduces the idea of the elusive nature of words, their meaning, but also the message of silence which, as I will argue here, can be related to the way the meaning in trickster narratives, including Silko's *Ceremony*, is conveyed. By foregrounding (telling) silence, these empty (are they really empty?) passages speak volumes about Tayo's lesson of nondifferentiation allowing infinite variation, but also of non-discrimination and interconnectedness. The typography here speaks in the language of the trickster.

In her seminal article "An Act of Attention: Event Structure in *Ceremony*," Elaine Jahner points out that Betonie teaches Tayo "that an important part of the experience of event is the experience of transitions" (48): "There are balances and harmonies always shifting, always necessary to maintain. . . . It is a matter of transitions, you see; the changing, the becoming must be cared for closely. You would do as much for seedlings as they become plants in the fields" (Silko, *Ceremony* 130). "Once he comes to this intersection of time, place, and story"—Jahner comments—"Betonie's teachings become 'a story he could feel happening—from the stars and the woman, the mountain and the cattle would come' (Silko, *Ceremony* 186). Once Tayo has come to this realization, he is a conscious participant in the development of the story. He can shape the story because he understands something about the real boundaries that relate and separate actions and persons" (Jahner 48).

In *Grandmothers of the Light*, Paula Gunn Allen writes that, for Native Americans, myths are "accounts of actual interchanges" involving transcendent beings (6). Such figures do not function as metaphors or representations of psychological realities, but share with humans the landscape of ordinary life:

Though [myths] function on a number of levels of significance, as is the nature of all literature, they are factual accounts. They inform consciousness and direct awareness within as well as without, and they connect with deep levels of being, not because the figures they tell about are immaterial denizens of the shadowy world of the unconscious, but because the supernaturals live within the same environs that humans occupy, and interchanges with them are necessarily part of the fabric of human experience. (Allen, *Grandmothers of the Light* 7)

Once the readers of Silko's story apprehend the nature of her transitions and boundary blurring, they notice the tricksteresque artifice of her novel's design. Trickster timespace, trickster-relation, and trickster-processuality are here mutually conditioned, creating "trickster aesthetics" or "trickster discourse" which manifests itself by the (healing) fluidity of meaning. The effect of this is to recreate a Pueblo sense of time, with a focus on the cyclical nature of events happening simultaneously in all five worlds; the immediacy of the events is not related to where and how long ago they happened but to how crucial they feel in the here-and-now.

Through the narrative events of the novel, protagonist and reader gradually learn to relate myth to immediate action, cause to effect; and both reader and protagonist learn more about the power of story itself. The reader seeks to learn not only what happens to Tayo but also how and why it happens. The whole pattern of cause and effect is different from most novels written from a perspective outside the mythic mode of knowledge. To employ myth as a conscious literary device is a quite different thing from employing the mythic way of knowing as the basic structural element in a novel as Silko does. (Jahner 49)

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## CONCLUSION

In one of the chapters of her *Sacred Hoop*, Allen observes that the tribes seek through songs, ceremonies, sacred stories and tales "to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated, private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity" (55). She discusses two contrasting notions of time: Western mechanical time—which she calls "the psychic fragmentation of factory time" (*Sacred Hoop* 150)—and Native American time, "the psychic integration of ceremonial time" (*Sacred Hoop* 150).<sup>13</sup> In order to convey the complexity of the movement, together with the focus on the theme of trauma healing and empowerment, she uses the poem "Hoop Dancer" which interestingly enough came in part out of Allen's conversations with Fred Young:

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<sup>13</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of "the psychic integration of ceremonial time" with the focus on healing a trauma through re-telling the myth of the Flood, see Kocot "'Our Island in the Flood'" (234–46).

It's hard to enter  
circling clockwise and counter  
clockwise moving no  
regard for time, metrics  
irrelevant to this place  
where pain is the prime number  
and soft stepping feet  
praise water from the skies:

I have seen the face of triumph  
the winding line stare down all moves  
to desecration: guts not cut from arms,  
fingers joined to minds,  
together Sky and Water  
one dancing one  
circle of a thousand turning lines  
beyond the march of gears—  
out of time out of  
time, out  
of time. (Allen, *Sacred Hoop* 149–50)

It is worth pointing out here that achronicity (“beyond the march of gears— / out of time out of / time, out / of time”)—where the individual and the universe are “tight” (Allen, *Sacred Hoop* 150), “fingers joined to minds, / together Sky and Water / one dancing one / circle of a thousand turning lines”—is associated with integration and empowerment (see Kocot, “Our Island in the Flood” 234). In my view, Silko succeeds in showing that promoting trickster aesthetics, characterized by narrative achronicity, is closely related to the process of deconstructing projections of the real, to trauma healing, which in turn brings a sense of self-empowerment at the individual/collective level.

Perhaps when Lewis Hyde wrote that “with some polytropic characters it is possible that there is no real self behind the shifting masks, or that the real self lies exactly there, in the moving surfaces and not beneath” (54) he was actually addressing the postmodern (textual) trickster. If so, the white (healing) empty spaces in Silko’s narrative, could be seen as one more manifestation of the power of the trickster, be it trickster-timespace, trickster-relation, or trickster-processuality. Perhaps Radin was right when he wrote that “every generation occupies itself with interpreting Trickster anew” (168). Paula Gunn Allen’s “Bringing Home the Fact” may offer a clue as to why trickster stories, *Ceremony* included, are so open to numerous interpretations:

The narrative concerning the journey to the centre of his being is analogous to the narratives connected to the Chantways, and the

ceremonial narratives of the Pueblo, in which the significance of events is embodied and transmitted. It is this process of working events into meaning which makes them true—more true, perhaps, than they would have been otherwise.

Literature is that act of the mind which allows significances created by events to become apparent. If the work of literature is imbued with the power which is in the mind of the writer, that meaning will take a form and shape that is real and vital, and that will continue to bear meaning for generations to come. (Allen, “Bringing Home the Fact” 578)

Silko’s novel, written in 1977, has been subject to hundreds of analyses, each of them focusing on different aspects such as textual, mythological, cosmological, or psychological design. I am certain this process will continue, as the novel’s landscapes-mindscapes are still open for exploration. When analyzing Silko’s trickster narrative, we may notice that it could be seen as a peculiar application of Vizenor’s *survivance*. As opposed to Vizenor’s highly subversive and comic stories of survival and resistance, *Ceremony* foregrounds the theme of survival, presence and acceptance. Silko’s trickster design is a renunciation of dominance, tragedy, and victimhood, but the emphasis is placed on ceremonial healing, thanks to which “the whirling darkness” of trickster’s witchery—the dualist black-and-white pattern of thinking—“keeps all its witchery to itself” (Silko, *Ceremony* 261).

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## What Ever Happened to My Peace of Mind? Hag Horror as Narrative of Trauma

# ABSTRACT

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In his pioneering study of Grande Dame Guignol (also referred to as hag horror or psycho-biddy), a female-centric 1960s subgenre of horror film, Peter Shelley explains that the grande dame, a stock character in this form of cinematic expression, “may pine for a lost youth and glory, or she may be trapped by idealized memories of childhood, with a trauma that haunts her past” (8). Indeed, a typical Grande Dame Guignol female protagonist/antagonist (as these two roles often merge) usually deals with various kinds of traumatic experiences: loss of a child, domestic violence, childhood abuse, family conflicts or sudden end of career in the fickle artistic industry, etc. Unable to cope with her problems, but also incapable of facing the inevitable process of aging and dying, she gradually yields to mental and physical illnesses that further strengthen the trauma and lead to her social exclusion, making her life even more unbearable. Unsurprisingly, scholars such as Charles Derry choose to name psycho-biddies horrors of personality, drawing attention to the insightful psychological portrayal of their characters. Thus, it would be relevant and illuminating to discuss films such as *Die! Die! My Darling!* (1965) and *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (1971) as narratives of trauma. This will be the main concern of my article.

**Keywords:** Grande Dame Guignol, hag horror, trauma theory, Gothic.

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Grande Dame Guignol, also known as hag horror or psycho-biddy, frequently explored the theme of trauma turning the lives of its characters into nightmare. Hag horror, a fairly short-lived cinematic fad, emerged in the early 1960s.<sup>1</sup> It drew inspiration from the Gothic tradition dating back to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century theatrical phenomenon, i.e. Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, specializing in naturalistic and exploitative gory performances. Peter Shelley, the author of a seminal work on this genre, defines Grande Dame Guignol as “a horror movie which uses grand guignol effects and stars an actress in a leading role playing a character with the airs and graces of a grande dame” (3). The Grande Dame, a stock character in this form of cinematic expression, “may pine for a lost youth and glory, or she may be trapped by idealized memories of childhood, with a trauma that haunts her past” (Shelley 8). Typically, a female protagonist/antagonist deals with various kinds of traumas—from the sudden end of her career (as in Robert Aldrich’s 1962 *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and Donald Wolfe’s 1970 *Savage Intruder*) and marital infidelity (*Strait-Jacket*, 1964, dir. William Castle) to false accusations of murder and subsequent ostracism (as exemplified by *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, 1964, dir. Robert Aldrich). Unable to deal with her problems, but also struggling to face the inevitable process of aging and dying, she gradually succumbs to mental and physical illnesses that strengthen the trauma and lead to her social exclusion, making her life even less tolerable. Hence, it is logical to view hag horrors through the lens of trauma theory. Stef Craps defines this approach as “a product of the so-called ethical turn affecting the humanities” which “infuses[s] the study of literary and cultural texts with new relevance” (45). Although trauma theory is usually applied to discuss the aftermath of events such as wars, mass killings or terrorist attacks (e.g., to analyze the testimonies of Holocaust or 9/11 survivors), it can be employed on a more personal level as well, embracing what E. Ann Kaplan labels “suffering terror,” “family trauma” and “quiet trauma” (1) to identify different aspects

<sup>1</sup> Scholars sometimes use one more term to refer to this trend, i.e. hagsploitation movement, thus suggesting its close ties with other exploitation genres popular between 1950s and 1970s—nunsploration, blackploitation, sexploitation, giallo, etc., all of them being cinematic equivalents of yellow press and pulp fiction which used to be frequently associated with Gothicism. David Roche defines exploitation cinema as “an industry with a specific mode of production” rather than a genre, “made cheap for easy profit,” “relying on time-tried formulas” and offering their audience “sex, violence and taboo topics” (1). I argue that Grande Dame Guignol, despite its eventual descent into the run-of-the-mill stylistics, offers more than lurid material such as “sex, drugs, vice, nudity, and anything to be considered in ‘bad taste’” (Mathijs and Sexton 147).

of trauma in general, in real life, but also in literature and, more and more frequently, cinema. Films, horror ones among them, “previously excluded from consideration as representations of . . . trauma, actually provide the means to recast key theoretical impasses in film studies, as well as trauma studies” (Lowenstein 1–2). According to Linnie Blake, horror films constitute “a disturbing, yet highly political and therapeutic genre that capacitates its audience to deal with the traumatic legacies and horrific incidents of reality in a productive way, on both an individual and collective level” (qtd. in Elm, Kabalek and Köhne 13). *Grande Dame Guignol* serves here as an appropriate example.

Although numerous features of the genre had already been displayed by such films as *Sunset Boulevard* (1950, dir. Billy Wilder) or *Les Diaboliques* (1955, dir. Henri-Georges Clouzot), it was the aforementioned *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* by Robert Aldrich (1962) that not only marked the beginning of hag horror as such, but also illustrated its specificity, being a conflation of high camp aesthetics, Gothic excess, superfluous theatricality, boundless nostalgia for the Golden Era of Hollywood, and strong interest in the theme of trauma and its consequences.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the plot of *Baby Jane* revolves around the Hudson sisters, two former actresses, and their love-hate relationship, strained even further by the fact that one of them is paraplegic and the other has to unwillingly perform the role of carer (even if she herself is the one in need of professional psychiatric help). However, I decided not to analyze this film, finding it too obvious a choice. Instead, my focus shifted to two British responses to hag horror, both of them dealing with a particular subtype of trauma—one resulting from the loss of a child (even though the theme of trauma related to aging is also prominent in both cases). They are Silvio Narizzano’s *Die! Die! My Darling!*, a 1965 product of the legendary Hammer Studios, as well as *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (also known as *Who Slew Auntie Roo?* or *The Gingerbread House*), a mild horror flick from 1971, directed by Curtis Harrington.

<sup>2</sup> According to Charles Derry, hag horror is a subtype of horror of personality and “a psychological study of two women whose relationship was based on some past crime, yet a study that dealt very overtly with the ambiguity of insanity” (33). As such, it marks a clear departure from horror films that dominated the 1940s and 1950s—monster movies or mad scientist thrillers. “What seems to have been adopted in the early sixties in these horror films (however sometimes skeptically) was the psychological explanation. Violence and horror were not explained in terms of science or religion, but in terms of psychology. This is made obvious by the very Freudian Oedipal complex in *Psycho*, the recurring Electra complexes in the Aldrich films, and the obsession with sex in all the films from *Psycho* to *Maniac* to *Strait-Jacket* to *Berserk* to *Orgasmo*” (Derry 24).

The former was originally shown in theatres in 1965 under the not-so-catchy title *Fanatic*. Yet, upon its release onto the American market, it was changed to *Die! Die! My Darling!*, so as to gain more recognition and to better fit the hagsploitation trend of question and exclamation marks in titles.<sup>3</sup> Viewers were additionally attracted by the final silver screen appearance of Tallulah Bankhead, a Hollywood icon of the 1930s and 1940s, who agreed to perform in the film after a 20-year hiatus from cinema. Bankhead returned as the deranged Mrs Trefoile, accompanied by a young Stefanie Powers in the role of the abducted and tortured Patricia Carroll. The movie met with mixed reviews (as was the case with most Grande Dame Guignol productions). In *The Aurum Film Encyclopedia of Horror* Phil Hardy suggests that Silvio Narizzano, the film's director, "tends to lapse into gratuitous baroqueries" (72). Yet, he agrees that "[t]he mad Mrs. Trefoile is extravagantly played by Bankhead determined to best Bette Davis's Baby Jane. Powers's change from mild amusement to sheer terror and Bankhead's development from eccentricity to homicidal mania are handled with consummate skill by the two actresses" (Hardy 72). On the other hand, Gary A. Smith applauds Richard Matheson's "wry script," regarding the film "a highly entertaining offering" (98). Its weaknesses notwithstanding, *Die! Die! My Darling!* merits attention as a unique mixture of camp, horror and religion, but, most of all, as a film in which traumatic experiences play a significant part in propelling the action. Furthermore, it offers a new take on the issue of dramatic familial conflict between two women, since hag horrors hardly (if ever) focused on mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations before, preferring to exploit the decay of more conventional bonds of kinship such as mother-daughter (e.g., *Strait-Jacket*), sisters (*What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*) or cousins (*Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte*) instead.

The film tells the story of Patricia Carroll, a snobbish city girl who decides to pay a visit to her late lover's mother. She finds it a prerequisite to calm her feeling of guilt as she is going to marry another man, named Alan. She has never met Mrs Trefoile before, therefore she does not realize that Stephen's (i.e. the late husband-to-be) suicide may have resulted from his mother's overbearing behaviour. From the outset, the visit is strange, but Patricia agrees to stay overnight and participate in a mass in memory of Stephen. However, her confession that she intends to marry Alan results in Mrs Trefoile's outburst of exasperation. Enraged, the elderly woman decides to abduct Patricia and keep her in confinement until she repents for

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<sup>3</sup> According to Howard Maxford, the film was retitled "much to Bankhead's chagrin . . . so as to better tie in with her well-known but by now despised affectation for calling everybody darling (drawled as *dab*-ling)" (266).

her sin of neglecting Stephen. Although Mrs Trefoile initially calls Patricia “my poor Stephen’s love,” she quickly changes her mind and blames her for Stephen’s untimely death. Mrs Trefoile tries to find solace in religion, but excessive piety verging on fanaticism in fact reinforces her trauma. She is also traumatized by a strong feeling of shame for her own sinful past when she was an actress. As a result, the elderly woman suffers a nervous breakdown and obsessively seeks an opportunity to avenge her son’s death. Thus, she immediately assumes a specific role for her daughter-in-law-to-be: that of a fallen woman in need of a thorough moral cleansing. In addition, Mrs Trefoile and Patricia can be viewed as modern renditions of the tyrant and damsel in distress, a stock binary opposition to be found in numerous Gothic stories.<sup>4</sup>

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Similarly to other hag horrors, the audience is confronted with a spectacular struggle between two strong-willed, independent women, even if one of them is clearly at a disadvantage. Their duel is enhanced by the Gothic setting (a threatening dark house with barred windows) and the presence of three ominous-looking servants: Harry, a butler and the only living relative of Mrs Trefoile; Anna, his obedient wife; and Joseph, their mentally disabled son. Although the complex Patricia-Mrs Trefoile relationship forms the core of the plot, one cannot fail to notice the ambiguous role of the background characters, especially Anna and Harry. Throughout the film, these two passively obey Mrs Trefoile’s orders and become her accomplices in abducting and forcefully keeping Patricia in the house. Undoubtedly, the Gothic manor and its inhabitants immediately make one think of the stereotypical image of a den where “the weirdos live . . . , the cultish families with the disgusting habits [and] the serious lack of regard for the ways of . . . normal upstanding citizens” (Penner, Schneider and Duncan 37). All of the above contribute to the film’s nightmarish campiness.

Mrs Trefoile’s exuberant religious zeal also adds to the movie’s camp aesthetics. The woman confesses that she reads the Book of Scriptures “each night and each morning,” as it gives her a profound sense of freedom—especially from the traumatic memories of her career as an actress and immorality she associates with it. Mrs Trefoile’s equivocal attitude to

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<sup>4</sup> Since its inception, Gothic fiction was replete with traumatic events, from family loss (e.g., Horace Walpole’s 1764 *The Castle of Otranto*, Ann Radcliffe’s 1794 *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Mary Shelley’s 1818 *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus*) to rape and murder (as in *The Monk* by Matthew Gregory Lewis, 1796). The aforementioned tyrant-damsel conflict would be either a direct consequence of such a dramatic event or a further source of trauma (most of all, for the damsel), or, in the majority of cases, both. See Hogle.

her former profession is evident throughout the film. In one of the early scenes, Patricia enters Mrs Trefoile's private chamber where she notices an album filled with photo stills, all of which portray the latter in her youth (Narizzano here uses real-life photographs of Tallulah Bankhead in her Hollywood prime). Mrs Trefoile, unable to conceal her wrath, explains that they remind her of what she had been before she entered the road to salvation and transformed into a deeply spiritual person:

God was good. He led me from that evil. Yes. A pit of evil! A place for the lost and the damned! The devil's entertainment! God's anathema! It is a painful memory to me, but by the grace of our Lord and the inspiration of my late husband, no more than a memory. I keep it as a harsh reminder of what I was, of what I escaped!

Her speech at least partially clarifies why she expects a similar sacrifice from Patricia, in whom she sees the former sinful version of herself. Therefore, Mrs Trefoile buries herself in her own perverted vision of piety, which helps her to live in denial after the tragic loss of her son and to come to terms with the inevitability of death.

Her fanaticism manifests itself in many ways. She insists on continual praying and reading the Bible aloud. As a result of a conflict with the local vicar, she performs lengthy masses at home herself. Many objects must not be used in her house—there is no radio, TV set, telephone, not to mention mirrors (“A mirror? Is it to adorn yourself, to observe yourself? Mirrors are naught but tools of vanity, Patricia. I know! Vanity—sensuality, Patricia! The Bible speaks of our vile bodies.”). Restrictions apply even to food (“We use no condiments of any kind in this house, Patricia! God's food should be eaten unadorned.”).

Moreover, Mrs Trefoile is unhealthily preoccupied with the colour red which she constantly refers to as “scarlet” to underline its evil connotations (and which is a direct allusion to Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*). Even though Patricia is no Hester Prynne forced to wear a scarlet A to imply adultery, she is nevertheless perceived as an unfaithful woman by her would-be mother-in-law, who is convinced that Patricia betrayed Stephen, at least spiritually. To prove it, she goes so far as to ask Patricia whether she is still “pure and virgin,” this scene accompanied by the suggestive usage of a red filter. The conclusion is clear—scarlet brings to mind everything classifiable as sinful or abject, both bodily and morally. Hence, Patricia is forbidden to use “filthy” lipstick or wear her favourite red garments. At the same time, Mrs Trefoile, a woman ostensibly avoiding scarlet things, not infrequently yields to her innermost desire to bask in red, hanging red curtains in her secret room or keeping a portrait of her

late son where his shirt is distinctly red, as well. Peter Shelley adds that “[t]he red interior of Patricia’s suitcase can also be considered as a vaginal wall, since sexuality is [what] Mrs Trefoile denies herself, with her love of God as an alternative to any love interest” (68). Red is also a significant element of the most powerful scene in this production.

The sequence depicts Mrs Trefoile immediately after she has murdered Harry, the disobedient servant. She slowly ascends the stairs, exposing her blood-covered hands. Besides direct references to Shakespeare’s *Lady Macbeth*, the scene emphasizes the inner split in Mrs Trefoile, her mind being a battlefield where self-imposed religious rigour and desire for the forbidden clash. Later on she is seen wailing on the floor, surrounded by the paraphernalia of pleasure, namely a red lipstick, a mirror and a bottle of alcohol.<sup>5</sup> Mrs Trefoile turns into a heart-rending travesty of a Grande Dame when she smears the lipstick all over her face and tries to fasten her dishevelled hair. This scene very much resembles the dramatic breakdown of Baby Jane Hudson in front of a mirror in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* Mrs Trefoile, just like Jane, seems unable to accept her deterioration. The past keeps haunting her, yet in her case there is more than just longing for regaining her youthful looks. She also yearns for her beloved son and therefore immerses herself in religious fanaticism in order to survive.<sup>6</sup>

The lipstick scene cruelly portrays the woman’s descent into madness. Obsessed with her son’s death, she thinks she hears his voice. The voice instructs her to subject Patricia to various abuses in order to purify her soul and, simultaneously, take revenge for Stephen’s death. As *The Terror Trap* website specializing in horror films produced between 1925 and 1987 notes:

[Patricia is] deprived of food, shot at, and in one scene, accidentally gets stabbed with a pair of scissors during a struggle. Finally, as Pat’s future husband is closing in on them, Mrs Trefoile takes Pat down to her basement where she plans to sacrifice her in a makeshift altar to her dead son. (“Ladies of the Grand Guignol”)

<sup>5</sup> Once again, the onscreen and real life trauma of aging and decline intertwine. “A noted beauty of her day famous for her bright red lipstick, Bankhead played the role without full make-up, giving her appearance a harsh, scrubbed look, which must have been hard for her to bear while playing opposite the apple-cheeked Powers” (Maxford 265–66).

<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to a comprehensive study on trauma entitled *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, its editor, Cathy Caruth writes that “[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4–5). Mrs Trefoile’s and Auntie Roo’s cases confirm it.



The former deeply believes in the success of her fight for purity, claiming that “[it] is necessary to make a sacrifice. Sometimes this is the only way.” Paradoxically, to achieve this, she has to commit several crimes. Peter Shelley observes that Mrs Trefoile’s “fascination with Patricia’s blood presents her as a vampire, and the sight of the scissors in Patricia’s shoulder is [thus] first grand guignol moment” (70).

Overall, despite its uninhibited campness and horror ambiance, *Die! Die! My Darling!* successfully tackles the themes of trauma, affliction and sexual repression. A similar statement could be applied to another hag horror, i.e. *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?*, even though the film approaches grief and suffering in a more subdued way. Curtis Harrington’s 1971 production, starring two-time Academy Award winner Shelley Winters, marks the moment of the genre’s decline in popularity.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, it offers an interesting portrait of a middle-aged woman who, in a desperate attempt to come to terms with her young daughter’s death, resorts to kidnapping. As a result, a specific bond between the eponymous character and her substitute daughter is established. The film is ripe with cross-references to classic fairytales and other literary texts, incorporating elements of the horror and camp typical of Grande Dame Guignol style. However, some of the formal solutions adopted by the filmmakers may appear unnecessary and grotesque.

One of them is the opening scene, in which an elegant woman in her early 50s sings a lullaby to a child rocking in the cradle. Soon the audience learns that the child is in fact a gruesome skeleton dressed in an elaborate Victorian outfit.<sup>8</sup> Later, the action moves swiftly to an annual Christmas party organized by Mrs Forrest, i.e. the titular Auntie Roo. Mrs Forrest, an unsuccessful ex-vaudeville actress and a widow to a magician, holds regular Christmas celebrations for orphaned children. This is her method to cope with the tragic death of her own daughter Katharine. One of the young guests names Mrs Forrest’s mansion “the gingerbread house,” which foreshadows future events and points directly to one of the movie’s main intertexts, namely the story of Hansel and Gretel, and their encounter

<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* garnered ambivalent reviews. Craig Butler notes that “the screenplay doesn’t really take advantage of the premise to come up with more than a handful of imaginative twists. It’s also poorly structured in places, with characters who are introduced and seem as if they will play an important role, but then just fade away.” Gary A. Smith calls Winters’s performance “shrill and overwrought” (237). At the same time, scholars such as James Morrison praise the film’s “comedy and horror collaps[ing] into one another, exchanging places in syncopation with sudden, inexplicable shifts among expressions of love, hostility, and aggression between generations” (134).

<sup>8</sup> James Morrison considers it “a reversal of the *Psycho* template” (134).

with the witch. Indeed, the Forrest mansion, with its lavishly decorated spacious rooms, secret passages, traps, hidden doors and a dumb waiter joining the key parts of the building, overtly displays fairytale-like Gothic quality.<sup>9</sup> Such a specific construction of the house enables Mrs Forrest to keep the mummified remains of her child in a concealed nursery near the loft (the room is situated behind both a mirror and a spacious wardrobe—Curtis Harrington seems to have derived inspiration from *The Narnia Chronicles* by C. S. Lewis). Auntie Roo's daughter died in very unusual circumstances, falling off the bannister which her mother allowed her to slide down. Not unexpectedly, her shocking instant death evokes an acute sense of guilt and causes irreversible mental damage in Mrs Forrest. Similarly to Mrs Trefoile, Auntie Roo, traumatized and shattered, lives in almost complete seclusion, accompanied only by two servants who trick her out of money. Additionally, from time to time she is visited by a fake medium who organizes special séances just for her. Moments of joy are few and far between, and they are usually associated with the aforementioned yuletide parties.

During one of them Mrs Forrest notices little Katy who bears a striking resemblance to the deceased daughter, not only visually, but even in her very name. Mrs Forrest wants to convince Katy to stay by her side. That is why she pays special attention to her whims and showers the girl with gifts. As Katy fails to resist the attention Auntie Roo pays to her, the latter, in a fit of passion, decides to keep Katy by force in her mansion and locks her in the room that once belonged to Katharine (comparisons to *Die! Die! My Darling!* seem perfectly justified here). At first, Katy sees nothing wrong in being trapped and believes she is merely a partner in a game of hide and seek. Apparently, she accepts Auntie Roo as her new mother and revels in the current situation—not only having a room of her own, but also an abundance of toys. However, the intervention of Christopher, Katy's elder brother, ruins this harmonious union. Christopher, having successfully sneaked into the house, manages to convince his sister that she is in fact being kept imprisoned by a wicked witch who is going to devour both of them. From this moment on, Katy starts to turn against her new mother. In a similar way to Hansel and Gretel, Katy and Chris escape the mansion and set fire to it. In a sequence of events reminiscent of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Derry points out that a fear-inducing location, such as the dark imposing house, is central to hag horrors, its dilapidation reflecting the mental state of its inhabitants. “Usually the house is a dead thing, containing memories, corpses, or reminders of an old way of life; the horror usually arises because, while the times change, the house and its occupants do not—such as in *Baby Jane*, *Sweet Charlotte*, *Auntie Roo*, and *Psycho*” (Derry 47).

Salem trials, the woman falsely accused of witchcraft burns, killed by those in whom she invested so much affection. Katy, though, does not appear to show much concern for her foster mother and smiles derisively as she leaves the house with a teddy bear stuffed with Auntie Roo's jewellery. "She would eat us later," Christopher says, ensuring the rightness of their mutual decision.

Although it is debatable whether Auntie Roo deserved such a severe punishment for the abduction of Katy, there is no denying that, from the opening of the film, it is not so subtly implied that sooner or later her unstable behaviour resulting from her traumatic experiences will lead to a tragic conclusion. Mrs Forrest's over-the-top demeanor, hysterical mood swings, reliance on mediums, extravagant theatrical dresses, and grotesque "transitions from faux crying to laughter" (Shelley 185) reinforce her image as a mad woman, thereby placing her in the role of a threatening Other whose trauma directly affects another person.<sup>10</sup> One of the most memorable scenes portrays Auntie Roo devouring an apple, thus "bring[ing] to mind images of a witch, specifically the witch from *Snow White* who traded in apples" (Shelley 185). John Kenneth Muir indicates the Dickensian touch in the construction of the story's protagonists—Katy and Christopher resemble the characters in *Oliver Twist*, whereas Auntie Roo draws heavily from *Great Expectations*' Miss Havisham (153).

The reference to Miss Havisham seems pertinent, for Auntie Roo is as tragic and lonely a character as her literary predecessor. One of the film's final scenes confirms the connection. Mrs Forrest visits her late daughter's room and tries to hug the corpse. The dried skull literally crumbles, poignantly signalling that Auntie Roo's world has fallen apart, too. The desperate woman cries "I have nothing!" and the audience realizes how truthful this statement is. Hopeless, helpless, abandoned by the servants and by Katy, but also racked by feelings of guilt, as she considers herself responsible for Katharine's tragic accident, she dies, similarly to Miss Havisham, in flames.

As demonstrated above, devastating denouements characterize most Grande Dame Guignol stories. However dramatic it may sound, hag horror heroines' lives are generally fraught with traumatic events and they end in an equally traumatic way. The eponymous character of *What*

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<sup>10</sup> E. Ann Kaplan emphasizes the necessity "to distinguish the different positions and contexts of encounters with trauma," differentiating between direct trauma victims and, for instance, "those who encounter trauma through accounts they hear" (2). Both Katy in *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* and Patricia in *Die! Die! My Darling!* are indirect victims of those who suffered a particular kind of trauma at first-hand.

*Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* faces arrest for life-threatening misconduct towards her sister, Blanche. A similar fate (i.e. life imprisonment in a mental institution) awaits Charlotte Hollis in *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte*. Mrs Trefoile is killed, most probably by her servant, Anna, while Mrs Forrest burns to death. What is more, in all cases certain disturbing past experiences unfailingly affect the present. In the case of the Hudson sisters, their childhood conflict, fuelled by envy, continues until their last minute reconciliation. The protagonists (antagonists?) of *Die! Die! My Darling!* and *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* suffer from the loss of their children, which finally leads them towards criminal activity—abduction, physical and mental abuse, even murder. Therefore, it is unfair to dismiss Grande Dame Guignol as merely camp fun, because camp is just a façade—under the surface of excessive theatricality and grotesque lies a number of tragedies and traumas.

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# LIMINAL SPACES

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“But what a place / to put a piano”:  
Nostalgic Objects in Robert Minhinnick’s  
*Diary of the Last Man*

## ABSTRACT

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In 2003, Martin Rees referred to the present as “mankind’s final century.” A few years later, Slavoj Žižek wrote that humankind is heading towards “apocalyptic zero-point,” when the ecological crisis will most probably lead to our complete destruction. In his 2017 collection, *Diary of the Last Man*, Welsh poet Robert Minhinnick offers readers a meditation upon Earth at a liminal moment—on the brink of becoming completely unpopulated.

Imagining a solitary human being, living in the midst of environmental collapse, Minhinnick yet entwines different voices—human and non-human—operating across vast spans of time. The speaker of the poems moves freely through different geographies and cultural contexts, but the voice that starts and ends the journey, seems to be the voice of the poet himself: he is the last man on earth, a survivor of ecological disaster.

The paper discusses Minhinnick’s collection as a projection of the world we now inhabit into a future where it will exist only in the form of nostalgic memories. The analysis focuses on the role of objects in the construction of the world-within-the poem, where the fragments of human civilization are being claimed by forces of the environment—engulfing sand, progressive erosion—forming a retrospective vision of our “now” which will inevitably become our “past.”

**Keywords:** Robert Minhinnick, Welsh poetry, memory studies, ecology.

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Robert Minhinnick's collection of poems, *Diary of the Last Man*<sup>1</sup> (2017), offers a vision of a post-apocalyptic world, in which a lonely wanderer, perhaps the last representative of the human race, passes his nights experiencing nightmares and his days eating scurvygrass, burying his excrement, living a "castaway life" which he despises.

The world we encounter in the poems exhibits features of a dystopia which, as Gregory Claeys states, not only describes "negative pasts and places we reject as deeply inhuman and oppressive," but also "projects negative futures we do not want but may get anyway" (498); and so it "increasingly defines the spirit of our times" permeated by "long-term anxieties" (498) about climate change and the destruction of the natural environment. By imagining the plight of a solitary individual who survives an environmental collapse, Minhinnick offers such a dystopian projection. He takes us into a time when the world we now inhabit will exist only in the form of nostalgic memories; a time that could be described, in the words of Martin Rees, as mankind's "final hour," or in the words of Slavoj Žižek, as the "apocalyptic zero-point" when the ecological crisis leads to our complete destruction (x); the time when "apparently omnipotent humanity" ends its course (Claeys 498)<sup>2</sup>.

In these conditions, all possible cultural points of reference slowly lose their integrity, becoming precarious and ephemeral, and offering no guidance. On his journey through a post-apocalyptic world, the speaker of Minhinnick's poems—the "Last Man"—encounters multiple objects which constitute the detritus of the human world, and which evoke memories. The aim of this article is to analyze the role of such objects in Minhinnick's poems, using selected examples; and to examine, in particular, how they are used to construct a vision of a world deprived of human existence, and so of human meaning. Objects function in the poems as "touchstones" for the speaker, who has to find his place in a landscape which is becoming more and more "Other," removed from human values and hierarchies.

In "Nostalgia," the speaker finds a computer that once belonged to the Prime Minister, now abandoned in the empty quarters of Number 10, Downing Street. It brings back "all the meaningless secrets," "cover-ups" and "scandals" (6), the less-than-admirable legacy of the human era; and it reduces the lonely traveller to tears as he breaks the password, and goes through the files: "Those were the days" he cries, "great days," "the last

<sup>1</sup> Subsequently referred to as *Diary*.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "final hour" is taken from the title of the book by Martin Rees published in 2003. The full title of the book is *Our Final Hour: A Scientist's Warning: How Terror, Error, and Environmental Disaster Threaten Humankind's Future In This Century—On Earth and Beyond*.

of our lives" ("Nostalgia" 11). The speaker of the poems (the chronicler-wanderer) does not collect objects, but merely encounters them on his way; nevertheless, they function as "linking phenomena" (or "linking objects"), to use Vamik D. Volkan's term: they represent a lost thing for someone in mourning (49). In one poem, for example, an abandoned piano offers a "a symbolic bridge . . . to the representation of that which is lost" (Volkan 49)—in this case, human music. Such objects may be termed "nostalgic" in the sense defined by Laura Impert and Margaret Rubin, who analyze what they call an "embodied nostalgia, a sensory and somatosensory experience of the past in the present that evokes cherished and/or painful memories" (692). Drawing on Marcel Proust's treatment of involuntary memory in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and their own experience as psychoanalysts, the authors confirm that nostalgia

is often linked to the various objects we keep as time passes. Evocative objects and memorials weave . . . [human] affects around loss and mourning on a sensory, physical level, functioning as touchstones that hold life's painful losses. Just like any given memory tells a story, so do the objects we choose to keep. . . . [They] summon the time that had vanished. . . . Evocative objects are . . . registered in our bodies as we touch them, or pick them up and look at them or smell them once again. (700)

Such objects provide a locus for externalized contact between aspects of the representation of that which has been lost. The one who mourns sees them as containing elements of himself/herself and of the lost object which, in the case of the speaker in Minhinnick's poems is, in a sense, the whole human civilization. The objects encountered anchor the speaker in the realm of the human, connecting him to the past as a source of his identity, while, all around him, traces of human civilization undergo progressive erosion.

Together, the objects in the poems may be said to trigger a nostalgic response, in the traditional sense of an unappeased yearning to return. As Barbara Cassin explains, the word is "made up of *nostos*, 'return,' and *algos*, 'pain,' 'suffering'"; and it refers to both "the suffering that has a hold on you when you are far away and the pains you must endure in order to return" (5). In the seventeenth century, when nostalgia was first classified as an illness (Cassin 5), this "return" was understood as a return home, to the place of origin, or simply the place one identifies with, which is associated with safety, with all that is local, comprehensible, and recognizable. In Minhinnick's collection, "home" has to be understood not as a geographical location, but rather a particular moment, the anthropocentric era in the history of the world, developed around human needs and desires; a period which, long as it might have been, is now (apparently) coming to an end.

Throughout the collection, Minhinnick entwines different voices—human and non-human—operating across vast spans of time. The speaker of the poems moves freely through different geographies and cultural contexts, but the voice that concludes the journey, like the voice that initiates it, seems to be the voice of the poet himself: *he* is the last man on earth, the last survivor of the species on the brink of extinction, who finds himself in a liminal space, between the end of the old era and the beginning of the new—the threshold between the populated and unpopulated world. As Barbara Cassin suggests, “not yet” (15) is what nostalgia is most interested in: the liminal space between pleasure and pain, here and there, past and present. The speaker in *Diary* is himself, in a sense, the “threshold,” the last man standing; the objects he encounters are similarly “liminal” as they are inscribed with the old stories, recognizable only by him, the last traveller and the last chronicler, who asks, it seems rhetorically, “who is left to read what I must write?” (“The London Eye” 19).

The objects open up the past, and bring it back in the form of film-like images. In the poem “The London Eye,” the speaker enters an abandoned “Traveller’s Club” and notes objects such as old maps and diaries. Although the address is not mentioned we may assume that he is in the famous Traveller’s Club situated at 106 Pall Mall Street, established in 1819, which originally excluded from membership anyone “who has not travelled out of the British islands to a distance of at least five hundred miles from London in a direct line” (Cunningham). This is an institution, then, which epitomizes an era of great explorations and imperial ambitions, and is above all “unmistakably English” (Wilson), saturated with British history and tradition. The speaker inscribes himself into the line of explorers who came before him: “I sit in the travellers’ armchair / and I sip the travellers’ gin” (“The London Eye” 20–21). The objects he touches, admires and tastes, summon stories of great deserts, “Saharan, Sonoran and thirsty Thar” (“The London Eye” 13), and isolated vignettes from the past, such as one of “caribou-skinned aristocrats / knocking there pipes out on Greenland’s lava” (“The London Eye” 14–15). In the present context, however, the club’s lavish interiors seem absurd, and its exclusive character meaningless. The speaker is also an explorer, yet his account of his journey through the wasteland of civilization may be written in vain, as no readers await it. The poem, like others in the collection, depicts a future of recognizable landmarks which have their place in a complicated net of cultural associations. Depopulated and deprived of their practical and representative functions, they now seem to question the values that prompted their existence and ensured their status. Although they have not yet fallen into decay, they occupy a liminal position, as they are on the verge of turning into ruin, a condition which

has been defined by Brian Dillon as “essentially an accommodation between nature and culture, the artificial object sliding imperceptibly towards an organic state, until in the end nature has its way and we can no longer legitimately speak of a ‘ruin’ at all” (13). The implied future (i.e. slow ruination) of the Traveller’s Club, an abandoned architectural masterpiece, evokes a sense of nostalgia and endows the objects found in the club with additional meaning. To use Georg Simmel’s words: as “countless things, once immersed in life” and now “cast on its bank,” they embody “the present form of the past life” (23). As the speaker comes into contact with the objects—books, maps, grains of sand from Sahara, a pipe, a bottle of gin—they “command in spirit the entire span of time . . . the past with its destinies and transformations . . . gathered into this instant of an aesthetically perceptible present” (23). However, the speaker is the only “traveller” left to perceive it. He confirms his solitude:

No,

no-one here.

Nobody.

The only soul my own. (“The London Eye” 2–5)

The very title of the poem (“The London Eye”) evokes several meanings. Firstly, of course, it is a familiar city landmark, and a point of reference on the landscape which the collection is mapping; but it also connects the “future” time of the action, with the past (i.e. our own “present” time as readers). It is an object which both the reader and the speaker of the poem recognize in the worlds they inhabit. Additionally, its name refers to the act of looking: the phrase “London Eye” can be understood as an “eye” cast over the city. There is, indeed, only one pair of human eyes left in this future-world; and there is a suggestion, perhaps, that in time, only the artificial, non-human “eye” will remain, still “gazing.” Given the homophonous character of the words “eye” and “I,” the “London Eye” may also denote the speaker as the London “I”: a lonely presence in the city, the last storyteller, who gazes and reports on his journey, with no hope of any future audience.

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*Diary* begins with an extended subsection, composed of twenty-three poems, which gives the collection its name. At the start of the first poem, “Prophecy,” the speaker is in a church made of driftwood:

Perhaps  
 I am the last man.  
 Perhaps I deserve to be.  
 So in this driftwood church  
 I hum my hymn of sand. (1–5)

The “hymn of sand” is an evident attempt at prayer. As Suzannah V. Evans points out, the poem is “a good example of Minhinnick’s gift with sound: ‘hum’ and ‘hymn’ reverberate across each other, the combined sounds extending to suggest the gulf of empty time that the speaker suddenly finds himself in” (Evans). Despite the fact that he is in a structure associated with human spiritual endeavour, the speaker is adrift, and the church itself is merely an empty shell, a remnant of human culture, with no power to transcend or to console; where, as we learn, “any god / would be welcome here. / Any god at all” (“Prophecy” 6–8). In this poem, characterized by brevity and formal austerity, there are no references to particular objects which could characterize the world inhabited by the speaker (as occurs in “The London Eye”); nevertheless, it may itself be said to bear resemblance to a “found object.” As Evans suggests, “like other fragments in *Diary of the Last Man*, the piece is perfectly formed, its shape suggestive of a medallion, washed up on the shore, something that could be picked up and held in the hand” (Evans). At the same time, the poem’s terse and short lines suggest a state of suspension and waiting—the loneliness of this solitary “worshipper” who, like Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon, is waiting endlessly for God(ot) to arrive. The terseness also suggests, perhaps, the hollow sound of the speaker’s words, as they reverberate in the surrounding silence. The speaker’s solitude is further confirmed by the images of objects which start to appear in subsequent poems of the subsection: some are man-made, such as razor-wire or a child’s shoe, scattered randomly across the post-apocalyptic landscape, and contributing to the general feeling of desolation. Some belong to the world of nature, like the “gold leaf” of a dispersing cloud (“Nocturne” 1), suggesting the beauty of a natural environment which can also, however, be a source of dread. The horror of human extinction is often communicated through the objects which appear in the “frame” of the traveller’s gaze, such as the oyster shells, which in his mind turn into the countenances of old men eating their gruel. The image is disturbing, violent even, as we learn that the traveller treads on their faces with his boots, revealing their “blue craniums” (“Oyster Shells” 5). The opening poem of the series (i.e. “Prophecy”) introduces two elements which recur in many poems of the collection: sand (which is mentioned by the speaker) and water (suggested indirectly through the reference to the “driftwood” from which



the church is made). These elements powerfully assert their presence, in particular, in the final poem, "The Sand Orchestra," in which the speaker comes to a dry plateau, and encounters a grand piano; and not an ordinary one, but a Bechstein, the most exquisite specimen of its kind, evidence of an advanced level of human craft. In this way, the abandoned instrument represents human culture, which is now irreversibly lost. In the context of a sand-covered landscape, with no sign of human presence, it can be seen as a synecdoche of human civilization; magnificent and absurd, deserted now, and at the mercy of the elements.

The speaker remembers his youth, the times when he thought, as an activist in the peace movement, that the end of the world would come with a blast of nuclear weapons, as a horrific but spectacular event, a powerful explosion. Now he knows that extinction in fact came quietly and slowly, with the continuous destruction of the natural environment. The main tool of the destruction, its final phase, was not fire, burning like the "hair of Blake's Christ" ("The Sand Orchestra" 20), as the activists had believed, but rather sand, which invades all interiors, amalgamates all shapes, smooths all edges, disfigures the landscape, erases the horizon, and makes all the elements of the world indistinguishable. The piano can be seen as an evocative object, as defined by Impert and Rubin, which carries in itself a reminder of loss, and "summons the time that had vanished" (700). In this case, the piano refers back to the world of human music, even though it can no longer fulfil its original function; it is only "played" now by the wind and the sand. The Bechstein piano is not only a synecdoche of lost civilization; in the poem, it also bears the "shadow" of a different object entirely. To the speaker, the piano lid suggests the sail of a ship on the horizon—an object which the traveller has no chance to see in a landscape which is covered in sand. The image of the ship underpins the image of the piano, and constitutes its spectral double.

Ian Gregson notes that there is, in Minhinnick's poetics, an "increasing tendency for places to overlap" (49). This is often achieved through the introduction of images of animate or inanimate objects which then undergo transformation. In his 2002 poem "The Cormorant," for example, a seabird figuratively becomes a piece of war machinery, a "stealth-bomber out of the empty / quarter, trailing . . . death / across the sky" (45–47). As Neil Alexander observes, the introduction of the image serves to "conflate the Porthcawl shoreline with the bomb-damaged cityscape of contemporary Baghdad. Such usage of juxtaposition and double focus in Minhinnick's texts imply that the meanings of any given place are often dependent upon the relation it has with other places" (80). The piano/ship doubling conflates different time planes, rather than geographical locations: the anthropocentric past and the depopulated future. If we take into account

the reference to Ulysses, however, the poem also brings into play a sense of “mythic time,” which stands outside linear time-sequence—the idea of a clear and chronological beginning, middle and end—and is concerned rather with cyclicity. By inscribing the story of the lonely wanderer and the abandoned piano into a larger context of canonical literature (Homer and Greek Mythology on one hand; James Joyce’s *Ulysses* on the other), the poet not only “conjoins the local and the global” (Alexander 81), individual and communal; but also envisages literature as a site of exchange, and positions his own voice in the long history of voices; and his own “diary” in the long procession of stories which have been told by those who read the landscapes they inhabit as “neither integral nor native” to them (Minhinnick, “Mouth to Mouth” 34).

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The speaker in “The Sand Orchestra” links piano and ship through the power of association, knowing, of course, that the landscape is deprived of water. We may assume it has disappeared as the result of human action and ecological disaster. Surrounded by a desert, the speaker imagines a sea-shore; the piano, resembling a ship, evokes nostalgia for the sea, for water which could offer “a greener arena” (“The Sand Orchestra” 55) but which is nowhere to be seen, although the constant movement of sand in the poem itself resembles the movement of the ocean. It is a “sea” of sand, which engulfs everything. In this way, we may say that the image of the piano is a focal point of nostalgia for the lost human civilization, but also for the natural world destroyed by that civilization. Perhaps the poet is pointing to the fact that the former cannot survive without the latter; human music cannot survive in a world where the ocean has become a mere memory.

The object as “ship” suggests yet another context. The poem actually begins with the announcement that “Ulysses has not returned” (“The Sand Orchestra” 2). Ulysses, a Latinized version of the name of Odysseus, refers the reader to Joyce’s famous novel, and indirectly to Homer’s narrative poem, a canonical text in Western culture, whose main character is the epitome of the “traveller”—a nostalgic traveller, perhaps, as Barbara Cassin has suggested, calling *The Odyssey* the very “poem of Nostalgia” (5). Neil Alexander has analyzed the importance of the “beach” as an image in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In Chapter 3, Stephen Dedalus is walking alone on Sandymount Strand. He responds to or “reads the littoral landscape . . . as a text composed of shifting and unstable layers. . . The shoreline is, for Stephen, a place of ‘ineluctable modality’ (Joyce 31) . . . a protean landscape” (73). In the course of the chapter, Stephen remembers the past, his dead mother, and different moments in the history of Ireland. In all cases, his “location on the beach is symbolically crucial, for in this liminal zone, land and sea meet in an

ongoing process of accumulation and erosion" (Alexander 74). It is "a landscape of continual change [representing] a condition of flux that Stephen discovers at the heart of the apparently solid material world" (Alexander 74). Similarly, the speaker of Minhinnick's poem is depicted in the midst of an environment whose main feature is its instability. In this case, the main destabilizing elements are sand, which claims the entire surroundings which moves in tides ("The Sand Orchestra" 39); and the wind, which as we learn, "dines on dunes" ("The Sand Orchestra" 29).

As Alexander notes, the "littoral landscape" constitutes a pivotal space in Minhinnick's *oeuvre*. His "expansive . . . narratives often explore the seacoast and beaches of South Wales and around Porthcawl," articulating the "relationship between place and identity" (Alexander 75). The beach is present in many of his poems as an "eventful place of flux," "a shifting ground upon which" the poet explores his "ideas of home" (Alexander 74), the relationship between self and place, the human and non-human, people and nature, and the unavoidable conditions of "environmental entanglement" (Alexander 75). Minhinnick's ecological concerns, which he so often raises in the context of the "littoral zone" (Alexander 74) and its decline, are closely related in his texts to issues of attachment and alienation, rootedness and uprootedness, permanence and transience. This should not be surprising, perhaps, if we consider that "the prefix eco- is derived from Greek *oikos* 'the home or a place of dwelling'" (Bate 75; emphasis in original). The beach in Minhinnick's poetry is the "place of dwelling" abused by its inhabitants, "a landscape of exhaustion" ("Salvage" 19), a "coast poisoned / By people, crossboned with shipwreck" ("Salvage" 23–24). The setting of "The Sand Orchestra" is not the sea-shore, but the idea of the sea underpins the tissue of the poem: the desert has a "littoral landscape" as its silent counterpart or spectral double. In other words, it is the *absence* of the sea which is being represented in the text. The poem refers to sand (the word is used 11 times in the poem), but it is, in a way, a poem *about* the sea which is no more. The sea is not referred to directly, but suggested by the piano/ship and its "sail" ("The Sand Orchestra" 57), by the movement of the sand, the line of the horizon; and perhaps most powerfully, by the character of Ulysses.

From the beginning, we learn that the speaker has been looking for Ulysses, who is nowhere to be found. In Homer's version of the story, of course, Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca (even if only for one night). The line, "Ulysses has not returned" ("The Sand Orchestra" 57) may suggest an alternative ending to the hero's mythical journey; or it may simply refer to an earlier point in the narrative, when the hero has yet to return, unlike the other Greek Warriors who made their way home after bringing Troy to its knees.

The ship we subsequently encounter and recognize in the piano, might be interpreted as Odysseus's. Minhinnick describes the sound the sand makes on the piano as a "hissing" aria, and compares it to the song of a mermaid. This ragged music of extinction may evoke associations with the Sirens of *The Odyssey*. The Sirens try to lure the hero into the abyss, but fail, as he asks to be tied to the mast while he sails past their island, so as not to give in to their calamitous song and, as Cassin writes, so "lose his homecoming" (15). The object's double status as a piano/ship seems to resonate in the context of another scene in *The Odyssey*, which also revolves around the idea of doubling. After his return to Ithaca, Odysseus has to set off again, this time inland; and (like the speaker of Minhinnick's poem) he reaches a land without a sea. His oar (which he carries in his arms) is mistaken by a passer-by for a winnowing fan. The passer-by is "assimilating" what he "does not know to and through [his] culture" (Cassin 22). Cassin suggests that he is "'integrating,' we might say today, foreignness and alterity" (Cassin 22). As the passer-by does not know the sea, he does not recognize the oar for what it is. The text offers two perspectives, that of the reader (and Odysseus) who *knows* what the object is; and that of the wayfarer, who does *not* know.

The misunderstanding and misrecognition produce the double image of the "oar/winnowing fan," as "the mark, the sure sign of the elsewhere" (Cassin 22) of a land far away from the Mediterranean (and so the sea). In Minhinnick's poem, the situation is different: the doubling is produced as a result of the fact that the speaker *remembers* the sea, and *knows* the difference between sea and sand, the "greener arena" ("The Sand Orchestra" 55) and the "gold" plateau ("The Sand Orchestra" 53). His recognition of the resemblance between the piano lid and the sail does not imply an assimilation but, rather, the cultivation of strangeness. The gap between the two objects is even accentuated by the comparison—in the similarity found between dissimilar things. At the same time, the comparison plays on the shifting meaning of the object, in the absence of a human context to endow meaning. Cultural points of reference only exist in the speaker's mind; and the object obtains its double status through the power of memory. The speaker sees a sail in the piano lid, because he remembers the sea. Memory is the driving force that produces this image, and we share the speaker's gaze: we see the piano-as-ship through his eyes. In this way, Minhinnick invites us as readers, to consider a time and circumstance, in which the last man on earth might recall the last memory of the sea. In order to see a resemblance between piano lid and sail, one must know the sea; if we destroy the sea (the poem implies), this recognition will, finally, be impossible. We will all be like the wayfarer in *The Odyssey*; or we will not even be there, to "misunderstand" it at all.

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Minhinnick argues that “writers are witnesses . . . it’s the searching that counts . . . writing is part of that search. It’s one of the things that make us human” (Minhinnick, “Interview”). Through the persona of the speaker of the *Diary*, the “Last Man” who writes his lines in the face of the extinction of his own species, Minhinnick directs the reader’s attention to the act of “witnessing” and “searching”—but also to language as an imperfect tool of expression and communication. For Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the shoreline is a “space of multiple, overlapping inscription” (Alexander 72) which he can decipher by naming the objects and phenomena he encounters, exploring the mosaic of fragments: “signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawreck, the nearing tide, the rusty boot. Shotgreen, bluesilver, rust, coloured signs” (Joyce 31). Discussing Minhinnick’s work, Alexander has argued that, at times, the poet seems to follow “the lead of Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus by reading the . . . landscape as if it were a text” (81). This textualization of the environment, however, implies that the landscape is a “home,” the place of our dwelling, which we can relate to and where we can find meaning. As Minhinnick observes, the problem is that, even as we live in the landscape, we also “live in language” (“Questions of the Woman who Fell” 63) and so our relation to the environment is always “culturally mediated” (Alexander 81). In his concern with ecological issues, the poet himself, as much as the poetic persona of the *Diary*, occupies a liminal position, as the very medium of expression estranges him from what he is trying to witness and explore. In “The Sand Orchestra,” the speaker attempts to communicate with nature, but this only confirms his alienation:

Attention sand! I say  
But after all these years the  
sand ignores the sandman.

This is urgent I cry.  
But may as well be talking to myself. (31–35)

We learn that “sand . . . eats words / just as the wind / dines on dunes” (“The Sand Orchestra” 27–29). The implication is that human language may be coming to an end, together with all the sounds and forms it once produced.

In “The London Eye,” the speaker states that “today might be the day / when all the great astonishments must cease” (22–23). Nevertheless, the collection ends with a moment of great astonishment. The final image—the last leaf of the “diary,” one might say—is a single cinematic

“frame,” occupied by an object, the grand piano, as it again catches the speaker’s attention:

Okay, after exhaustion sand summons extinction.  
But what a place  
to put a piano. (“The Sand Orchestra” 65–67)

The words foreground the aesthetic value of the image, its sublime beauty, which evokes a sense of awe and dread. The shadow of “extinction” (“The Sand Orchestra” 65) is almost literally cast over the last two lines, through the graphic layout of the text. The speaker’s outburst is prompted by the clash between culture and nature, the wild landscape of the dunes and the man-made object. As Alexander observes, the contemporary ecological poet “occupies an interstitial space in which the tension between a desire to engage with nature directly and an abiding commitment to the artifice of language and poetic form has always to be negotiated” (81). Minhinnick’s poetry is created out of this liminal space, which proves to be an “eventful place of flux” (Alexander 72), productive and continually challenging, where the poet seeks to bear “witness,” to name the objects he encounters, even as meaning itself proves to be unstable under the fleeting human “gaze.”

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Liminal Space in J. G. Ballard's  
*Concrete Island*

# ABSTRACT

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This article explores the way in which surrealist techniques and assumptions underpin spatial representations in Ballard's *Concrete Island*. With much of Ballard's fiction using spatiality as an ideologically charged instrument to articulate a critique that underpins postcapitalist culture, it seems important to focus on exactly the kind of spaces that he creates. This paper will investigate the means by which spatiality is conceptualized in Ballard's fiction, with special emphasis on places situated on the borders between realism and fantasy. Ballard's spaces, often positioned on the edgelands of cities or centers of civilization, can be aligned with the surrealist project as presented not only by the Situationalist International, but of psychogeographical discourse in general. What the various Ballardian spaces—motorways, airports, high-rises, deserts, shopping malls, suburbs—have in common is a sense of existing outside stable definitions or what, following Marc Augé, we would call non-places, which by their definition are disconnected from a globalized image society, thus generating a revolutionary idea of freedom. As these places exist outside the cognitive map we impose on our environment, they present a potentially liberating force that resonates in Ballard's fiction.

**Keywords:** Ballard, surrealism, psychogeography, spatiality.

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Though James Graham Ballard is perhaps best known as a representative of New Wave sf, his literary debt to surrealism and modernist techniques of estrangement has only recently become the subject of critical attention.<sup>1</sup> Championed by *New Worlds* editor, Michael Moorcock, and praised by Judith Merrill for elevating science fiction to a more sophisticated literary genre, Ballard successfully infused ambiguity and allusiveness to a literary genre which had defiantly resisted such literary pursuits. Influences of surrealism can be seen in most of his works, especially in the imagery, ekphrastic allusions to surrealist paintings, and general rejection of scientific rationality in favor of speculative imagination, psychoanalytical references, and a rebellious 1960s affirmation of the transgressive. But it is the concept of liminality that constitutes an integral point of intersection between surrealism and Ballard's fiction. The way liminal spaces function as a destabilizing agent, challenging power relations and subverting established social constructs link them to Andre Breton's surrealist project and later to Guy Debord's Situationist International movement. These operations, as well as their relevant contexts will be exemplified with reference to J. G. Ballard's *Concrete Island*, a work in which the agency of spatial liminality showcases the effects of surrealist estrangement.

Space, whether it be monstrous, consuming or uncanny, figures as the primary agent in many of Ballard's novels and short stories. One needs only to take a short glance at the titles to see how central spaces and places are to his imagination: *High-Rise*, *The Drowned World*, *The Crystal World*, *Concrete Island*, *Rushing to Paradise*, "Enormous Space," etc. In these texts the characters are often relegated to a secondary role, their reactions to their environments observed in much the same way as an animal behaviorist would examine animals in a laboratory—their behavior triggered and later unleashed by the subtly repressive conveniences provided by modern technology and urban planning, or by sudden alterations to habitual everyday routine. This primary role afforded to the environment is enabled by the corollary passivity of the characters, a characteristic of many of Ballard's novels and shorts stories, rendering the subject especially responsive to the effects of their environment. With this in mind, we can see that liminal spaces are a particularly productive environment. Due to their already ambiguous status as spaces, liminal spaces defy clear categorization, as they are always in flux. As such,

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<sup>1</sup> Both Roger Luckhurst in *The Angle Between Two Walls: The Fiction of J. G. Ballard* and Andrzej Gasiorek in *J. G. Ballard* draw attention to the presence of surrealism in Ballard's work, but Jeanette Baxter's *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination* is the only book-length study of the various references and inspirations Ballard's work maintains with the surrealist tradition.

borderlands do not belong to any definable space, they are in-between and thus somehow released from the structural authority of a polis, nation-state or any governing authority. This spatial indeterminacy affords the subjects freedom to redefine themselves outside the dictates and symbolic determinations governing their social spaces; however, what Ballard's novels attempt to explore are the psychological effects of inhabiting a borderland for an extended period of time.

The spaces that occupy many of Ballard's novels and short stories—at least the ones that live up to the adjective “Ballardian”—bring to mind a postcapitalist dystopia characterized by bleak, manmade landscapes, oftentimes occupying a borderland of sorts, a liminal zone where identity and meaning are brought into question. Ballard's topographies are always suspended in an interstitial zone, either geographically between definable zones (rural, urban) or temporally between the defunct utopian modernist projects and the unreal, unsustainable present. For example, the titular high-rise from his 1975 novel is situated with London in receding view but nonetheless separated from the monotonous malaise it represents; his titular concrete island from his 1974 novel is always in clear view of the surrounding motorways, all the while remaining anonymous and, in a certain topographical sense, absent. There is an almost revolutionary impulse in these spaces which remain outside the cultural and social purview; at least this is the psychogeographical perspective that Ballard seems to draw on in his representations of subjects and subjectivities disintegrating under the pressure of this spatial indeterminacy.<sup>2</sup>

These blank spaces, unresolvable in their definition as place and situated beyond the symbolic representations of topographical mapping, provide Ballard with a liminal environment where the subject of inquiry shifts from exterior spaces to “inner spaces.”<sup>3</sup> It is now subjectivity and the psychological landscape that become the focus as a result of the liminal nature of the physical environment, and it is at this juncture that

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<sup>2</sup> Such blank spaces within the urban landscape were seen as the prized destinations of psychogeographers, writers who take their cue from the Situationist of the 1960s, a movement influenced by Guy Debord's celebrated *Society of Spectacle*. This tradition is upheld by Iain Sinclair and Will Self, both of whom have paid homage to Ballard, naming him as an inspiration and one of the most important British authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> In 1962 Ballard as a guest editor of *New Worlds* published “Which Way to Inner Space,” expressing his frustrations with the staid conventions of sf, a genre which he considered aptly suited, but underutilized, to represent the changing conditions of modern life. He thus redefined the goals of New Wave sf in contrast to the Golden Age of sf represented by Hugo Gernsback, suggesting a shift in focus from outer space to inner space.

Surrealism can be seen as providing Ballard with a vibrant depository of techniques and images to transcend the conventions typically associated with mainstream sf.

A fine example of such a liminal space can be found in Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974), which is part of the urban disaster trilogy consisting also of *Crash* (1973) and *High-Rise* (1975). Whereas *Crash* and *High-Rise* deal with a more claustrophobic setting, addressing the effects of modern technology and architectural environments, *Concrete Island* opens itself up to a more agoraphobic space.<sup>4</sup> The protagonist of *Concrete Island* is a 35-year-old architect, Robert Maitland, who one day while homebound on the exit lane of the Westway interchange in west London veers off, crashing his Jaguar through the ramps onto a deserted wasteland beneath and between the motorways. This island is described as "a small traffic island, some two hundred yards long and triangular in shape, that lay in the waste ground between three converging motorway routes" (Ballard 11). This space is a forgotten by-product of urban development, a negative space that has resisted incorporation into the homogenized space of the urban environment. After a series of predictable but ultimately futile escape attempts, he begins to explore this land in hopes of mapping it, finding help, food and shelter, but the landscape is so overgrown that Maitland is unable to find his bearings. Ultimately, the island, as a liminal zone, is unknowable, resistant to cognitive mapping of any kind. Eventually, he comes across two socially outcast inhabitants, Jane Sheppard and Proctor, a street-smart young woman and a mentally disabled ex-circus performer, who take him in, but whether as a patient, hostage, or guest is never certain. Incapacitated by his injuries and by days of having to fend for himself without food and shelter, he is at first at the mercy of his hosts. Eventually, however, the time spent on the island gradually removes the vestiges of his habitual bourgeois behavior and Maitland, instead of struggling to rescue himself, decides to exert his dominion on the island.

Ballard presents Maitland as a typical example of an urban dweller, not only by means of his profession and demeanor, but also because of the deep-seated alienation that distances him from other people. George Simmel in "Metropolis and Mental Life," in discussing the various psychological conditions resulting from urban life, identifies alienation as the natural consequence of this new spatial arrangement characterized by multiplicity, heterogeneity and intensified tempo, which ultimately lead to the blasé attitude characterizing urban dwellers. This distance is seen as

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<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, both of these psychopathologies were diagnosed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and applied exclusively to urban environments. Cf. Anthony Vidler's *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture*.

a necessary defense mechanism against the barrage of impulses constantly assaulting the senses. Thus, appropriately, Ballard provides the readers with a backstory in which Maitland's private life is defined by the safe distances he was able to establish between himself and the surrounding social environment. In fact, he succeeded at separating himself from his wife and coworkers to the extent that his absence was not even noticed and, as a result, no search party was ever launched. This is a character whose emotional isolationism likens him to the kind of detached heroes epitomized in Herman Melville's *Bartleby* or Robert Musil's *Man without Qualities*. In both cases the capitalist urban backdrop is evoked as an important factor in the alienation of the characters.

The question that runs through the story hinges on the psychogeographical relation of this space to Maitland: how the one affects the other. Especially provocative is the depiction of his gradually shifting behavior—at a certain point he is no longer concerned about his life beyond the embankments and is no longer desperate to leave; instead, he passively resigns himself to his new situation and embraces this new environment as his own. Ballard here creates a mild version of a cozy apocalypse, where repressed desires and fantasies of isolation and solitude are fulfilled. There is a haunting effect that this space exerts on Maitland, as it drains his will and deprives him of his previous identity—that of a well-mannered, upper-class architect, who now proclaims that his goal is to exert dominion over his new territory, a theme that coincides with the story's two most important intertexts—*Robinson Crusoe* and *The Tempest*.

Ballard's inclusion into psychogeographical literature also rests on these moments of psychological responses to spatial environments, responses which merge the mind with the environment to the extent that they become almost inseparable. For example, *Concrete Island*, according to Andrzej Gasiorek, is “an extension of Maitland's psyche, the external manifestation of the unresolved inner conflicts he projects onto it, and on the other hand, it represents the physical challenge of survival” (114). Descriptions of the landscape become interchangeable with descriptions of Maitland as the following quote makes clear:

Comparing it with the motorway system, he saw that it was far older than the surviving terrain, as if this triangular patch of waste ground had survived by the exercise of unique guile and persistence, and would continue to survive, unknown and disregarded, long after the motorways had collapsed into dust. (Ballard 69)

It is a Ballardian trademark to anthropomorphize inanimate objects such as buildings, as was the case in *High-Rise*, or the natural environment,

as is the case in *Concrete Island*, which is why it is crucial to understand the specific nature of the kind of environment Ballard is presenting, as these spaces are the prime actors in these narratives, at times exerting more agency than the characters themselves.

In many of the commentaries about *Concrete Island*, Marc Augé's notion of non-spaces has been utilized as a theoretical framework to present the heterotopic space represented in the novel in its ideological relevance as a postmodern, postcapitalist, posthistorical space, where the excess of events and signifiers disintegrate organically social spaces. With the pace of globalization and the effects of what David Harvey terms the "space-time compression"<sup>5</sup> individuals become consigned to the role of inactive witnesses, their identity no longer resulting from organic social conditions, but from what Augé calls the "solitary contractuality" of non-places. The most common examples of these non-places which Augé sees proliferating the postmodern, postcapitalist landscapes are airport terminals, supermarkets, motoways, and hotel chains or just about any place where upon entering a person "is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver" (Augé 103). In all these cases we are dealing with either places of transition from, or with focalized places of, consumerism (or both as with the duty-free area in airports). Augé has been criticized for not only misreading de Certeau whose conception of space and place provides a starting point for his own analysis but also because of a pervading sense of nostalgia for "some mystical, pastoral type of collective existence" (Buchanan 62). I think it is important not to fall into this line of argument in analyzing Ballard, i.e. not seeing this descent as a primitivist revival of experience, which incidentally would mean reading against Ballard's own intentions, as evidenced in the preface to *Concrete Island*, where he refers to "the challenge of returning to our more primitive natures, stripped of the self-respect and the mental support systems with which civilization has equipped us" (qtd. in Gasiorek 114).

Indeed, on one level, *Concrete Island* may be construed, following Ballard's lead, as a reactionary fantasy about finding your authentic self in an acultural, pastoral type setting, but what I believe is more interesting is how this narrative is inscribed into a greater narrative of Surrealism, which is based in part on dismantling and reconfiguring our conception of reality. Ballard utilizes surrealistic motifs and techniques for the purpose of presenting a spatial construct which works in tandem with the psychological restructuring of the protagonists himself. This psychogeographical

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<sup>5</sup> See Harvey (260–307).



element of the narrative serves a dual purpose: 1) in unifying spatiality with psychology, Ballard is externalizing latent and repressed trauma (which would be in accord with his statements about "inner space" in *New Worlds*) and 2) because the concrete island is an interstitial borderland, Ballard is, at the same time, presenting a liminal experience. The two interlacing points mentioned above (externalization of trauma and presentation of liminal experience) reveal the hidden political project of Surrealism, which was to subvert and destabilize the established societal norms and protocols; such a project, I believe, informs Ballard's texts and goes beyond the clear-cut classification of this zone as a non-place.

To better develop the mechanism of this project, it is helpful to elaborate on Freud's concept of the uncanny. If the uncanny is understood in its spatial dimension, then we see how architecture is coopted into the surrealist project of invoking the feeling of estrangement that is a necessary step towards this liminal experience. Surrealist painters such as Giorgio de Chirico and Rene Magritte aestheticized the experience of the uncanny by frustrating spatial mapping, eliminating codified cues and conventions that make space understandable. This *other spatiality*, or heterotopia, with which surrealists are concerned is what M. Stone-Richards refers to as the *dessaisissement de l'espace*, "a spatiality marked by passage and transition—and where architectural metaphoricity encounters, comes with, the possibilities of defamiliarization and dislocation of space, . . ." (255). This is what is translated as the undoing of space (255). The effect produced by this other spatiality is a feeling of disorientation and cognitive confusion, not unlike the disorientation Freud discusses in "The Uncanny," where

caught in a mist perhaps, one has lost one's way in a mountain forest, every attempt to find the marked or familiar path may bring one back again and again to one and the same spot, which one can identify by some particular landmark. (237)

Martin Heidegger's account of place in *Sein und Zeit* calls this experience Ent-fernung, or deseverence, a condition which opens the possibility for an encounter with alterity by diminishing the distance between an entity and Dasein. This experience of self-awareness and disalienation is precisely what the situationists hoped to evoke by means of their intoxicated drifts through the streets of Paris, not unlike those described by Breton in *Nadja* (1928). Such an experience of disorientation was meant to jolt the subject from his routine-oriented consumerist existence experienced in urban settings, where rationalized space contributes to the sense of isolation. This is so, because "[t]he voided

spaces of modernity are frequently reductivist, abstracted, hygienic, homogenized, and continuous—designed to suppress the individuated, coarse, theatrical, perverse, or the traumatic” (Mical 6).

What then accounts for the uncanny nature of this patch of land on which Maitland is marooned? Certainly, there is the intellectual and physical sense of uncertainty, which for Ernst Jentsch was a defining factor of the uncanny,<sup>6</sup> pervading Maitland’s attempts to come to terms with his new environment; this uncertainty is further heightened by a haunting sense of familiarity which effectively undercuts his attempts to seek escape. The mixture of strangeness and familiarity defines this uncanny psychogeography and places Maitland in a position of utter confusion. His explorations of the island uncover a vast historical topography that has been literally concealed by concrete; there are ruins of an old Edwardian house, a bomb shelter, and he goes on to identify “[a]round the ruin of a former pay-box . . . the ground-plan of a post-war cinema, a narrow single-storey flea-pit built from cement blocks and galvanized iron. Ten feet away, partly screened by a bank of nettles, steps ran down the basement” (Ballard 69). These revelations force us to reevaluate our initial impressions of this space as a modern wasteland without a history of its own must. What initially appeared as a non-place is in fact laden with ghostly traces of an earlier urban topography that has not been fully erased by rampant modernization. It is, therefore, telling that the spatial production of capitalist modernity should take place on the ruins of a past that is abandoned and suppressed. This aspect of the past encroaching on the concrete island is yet another reason why Marc Augé’s non-place may not be the appropriate term to describe this particular space, as non-places are manifestly ahistorical and acultural, whereas here we are dealing with a spectral historicity that further aligns this space with the uncanny.

What is perhaps the most important turn in this story is that eventually Maitland begins to feel at home in this once hostile environment; he effectively domesticates this space, divesting it of the uncanniness that had initially defined it, which leads us to the following related question: what then does it mean to make a home in the borderlands, in a place that eludes all definitions? Heidegger in “The Origin of the Work of Art” sees the home as the locus of the uncanny:

We believe we are at home in the immediate circle of beings. That which is familiar, reliable, ordinary. Nevertheless, the clearing is pervaded by a constant concealment in the double form of refusal and

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jentsch (7–16).

dissembling. At bottom the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extraordinary, uncanny. (54)

This quote describes the obverse situation of how the uncanny is usually concealed from our view by the force of habit, a habitual familiarity with which we endow our environment with the illusion of homeliness. Commenting on the effect of habit on memory, Beckett remarked in his essay on Proust that

[t]he laws of memory are subject to the more general laws of habit. Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence. Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. (19)

This evocative image presents Beckett's rejection of habit, seeing in it a threat to creativity (his "organic eccentricities"), at the same time holding us hostage to the mundane and unremarkable aspects of our existence and also grounding us in existence much like a lightning-conductor grounds the uncontrollable force of lightning. Whereas the Modernist text would locate habit-breaking moments of authenticity in such transcendent moments as Proust's involuntary memory or Joyce's epiphanies, Ballard makes use of *deseverence* as a step towards the reappropriation of spatiality through a radical experience of place.

In conclusion, it is clear that, though Ballard is not typically considered a Surrealist writer, he employed many of the techniques and aesthetic principles of Surrealism; most importantly, the landscapes he painted in his works recall the foreboding spaces we find in de Chirico or Max Ernst. It is not just in these spaces but by means of these spaces that the principle themes of Ballard's work are played out. And because these spaces are situated outside the rational, thus offering a contradistinction to the modernity project, they continue the surrealist project of aesthetically and ideologically rupturing established boundaries, subverting socially constructed notions, all in the name of yielding a more direct interaction with the spatial environment. Ballardian borderlands present us with a fertile means of delving into the ambiguities of liminal spaces. What makes liminality a potent theoretical notion is its ability to recontextualize the ideological flux, unstable meanings, fluctuating certainties, which characterize postmodern thought, especially in relation to identity politics. In the case of *Concrete Island* this borderland as a liminal space affects a ritualistic passage into an apocalyptic state of liberation, the kind that Ballard repeatedly presents as an antithesis to the modern utopian fantasy.


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**Don DeLillo's *White Noise*:  
A Virilian Perspective**

# ABSTRACT

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Don DeLillo's *White Noise* depicts a world of rapid techno-scientific and economical changes. Paul Virilio's concepts of dromology and speed, as well as his notions of accident and technology, seem to be the most relevant in order to examine a novel centrally concerned with change, speed and technology. This article first offers an analysis of *White Noise* in the light of Virilio's concept of integral accident in relation to the negative consequences brought about by industrial and technological progress. This is followed by a discussion of the relevance to the novel of Virilio's theories about architecture and space. Finally, Virilio's theories about the replacement of conventional war with pure and info wars are discussed in the context of the central event of the novel. Reading the American writer through the lens of the French theorist can shed light on the enduring relevance of both.

**Keywords:** Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Paul Virilio, accident, info war, virtualization, architecture.

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## INTRODUCTION

*White Noise* has been subject to many critical analyses. Literary critics have taken up DeLillo's metaphysics (Maltby), Hitler studies and critical whiteness (Engles), consumerism (Osteen), nature and environment (Phillips), and, finally, post-9/11 violence and representation (Devetak). The novel's contribution to our understanding of the contemporary scene from different theoretical perspectives including postmodernism, cultural studies, deconstructionism, and even romanticism has been examined by different literary critics. However, what seems to be missing is a reading of DeLillo's novel through Paul Virilio's views on technology, virtualization and architecture. As this novel depicts a world of rapid techno-scientific and economical changes, Virilio's concepts of dromology and speed, as well as his notions of accident and technology, seem to be the most relevant in order to examine a novel centrally concerned with change, speed and technology. As such, this article offers a detailed analysis of Virilio's concept of "integral accident" in relation to the negative consequences of industrial and technological progress as presented in DeLillo's novel. To this end, we focus on three main spaces in *White Noise*—the supermarket as a modern urban space, the Boy Scout camp as a military one, and the tourist barn as a natural one—through the lens of Virilio's theories about architecture and space. Also discussed are Virilio's theories about the replacement of conventional war with pure and info wars epitomized by the menace of the toxic spill in the novel and its coverage in the media.

To say more about the relevance of a Virilian reading of *White Noise*, we should highlight the common ground between the American writer and the French theorist. DeLillo explores contemporary issues such as technology, terrorism, media, the ubiquity of images, virtuality and environmental catastrophes. The contention of this article is that considering the work of DeLillo in the light of Paul Virilio's views on some seminal aspects of modern times—particularly those on images, virtual vs. actual reality, speed and technology—can enhance our understanding of it. Paul Virilio's work is particularly significant here because it voices all these concerns, and more. Moreover, in Virilio all these issues/aspects of the contemporary scene are addressed in relation to each other in the light of a unified body of theorization of the history of human civilization. Thus, Virilio's comprehensive approach can more sharply focus an analysis of a novel which is, like DeLillo's *oeuvre* generally, profoundly concerned with the making of contemporary American society. Reading *White Noise*, we can find almost exact fictional analogies for some of Virilio's views about aspects of the contemporary scene, especially in relation to its speed and image-saturation.



The narrator of the novel is Jack Gladney, a professor in College-on-the-Hill, living in a small town. Obsessed with death, both Jack and Babette, his current wife, often wonder which of them is going to die first. The novel's plotline revolves around two major events: a toxic spill prompting the evacuation of all houses in the town, and Jack's discovery of Babette's betrayal for getting a drug she thinks would relieve her fear of death.

### ACCIDENT AND PURE WAR

As a theorist focusing on the history of civilization (considering it through its main ingredients: war, architecture, technology, speed), Virilio has frequently emphasized the importance of the notion of speed and accident as its corollary. To him, the mind-boggling progress of technology, the fast way in which images and news are reported and received in the highly competitive world of news make dromology the systematic study of speed as the motor of history the defining science of our era. Dromology, a term derived from the Greek *dromos* meaning "race" or "racecourse," is thus the science of speed. Virilio explains:

Speed enables us to see. It does not simply allow you to arrive at your destination more quickly, rather it enables you to see and foresee. To see, yesterday, with photography and cinema, and to foresee, today, with electronics, the calculator and computer. Speed changes the world vision. (*Politics* 21)

In Virilio's conception there are important epistemological and ontological consequences to the pervasiveness of speed in the modern world. Speed has changed the very perception of man and thereby his mode of being in the world.

*White Noise* is also centrally concerned with speed. Jack's and Babette's fear of death, for instance, can be fruitfully explained through Virilio's views on speed and time. At issue here is velocity and its correspondence to Virilio's notion of acceleration in relation to time. The overall argument is that Jack's life and almost all the events in the novel are very much affected by speed and technology as a consequence of speed. Fearing death, Jack and Babette aspire to escape from speed—both in the sense of the frenzied pace of modern life and the speed with which death approaches them—in different ways (shopping; seizing the day; drugs magically offered by science; getting lost in virtuality, in the forgetfulness-inducing dream world of images, in the "white noise" of media). Here is one instance.

"Let's enjoy these aimless days while we can, I told myself, fearing some kind of deft acceleration," says Jack (DeLillo, *White Noise* 18). However, Jack is clever enough to know that the "carpe diem" remedy is no more than a cold comfort. "All plots," including those of our lives, "tend to move deathward," he reflects (26). For, this "mov[ing] deathward"—for Jack and Babette, for mankind, for the planet—is ever accelerating; things are "heating up" critically (one more sense of "white noise").

A corollary of speed-centered technology is accident. By "integral accident" Virilio means that the potentiality of accident is hidden in any technological means. As he elaborates in an interview: "accidents are a revelation of science and technology's original sin. Science and technology are flawed—in the same way that we are" (Virilio, "The Art of the Motor" 154). The central event of the novel is an ecological disaster caused by the failure of the technology of transportation (the derailling of a tank car carrying toxic chemicals). After the accident, people have to evacuate their houses which are marvels of convenience. It is as if technology was negating itself. Accidents, for Virilio, evidence human vulnerability in the face of the very technology which is supposed to empower.

The misuse of Dylar as a highly advanced psychopharmaceutical drug by Willie Mink, the Dylar project manager, is another example of the debunking of the idealistic view of technology. Technology which was meant to civilize humans ironically has the potential to revive savage instincts. Thus the pill's side effects on both Babette and Willie Mink exemplify Virilian accident. "I forget names, faces, phone numbers, addresses, appointments, instructions, directions," Babette complains (DeLillo, *White Noise* 52). Later on, in the scene of his confrontation with Willie Mink, to test the side effects of Dylar on Mink, Jack utters the words "falling Plane" only to find that the man "kicked off his sandals, folded himself over into the recommended crash position . . . performed the maneuver automatically, with a double-jointed collapsible dexterity, throwing himself into it, like a child or a mime" (309–10). The drug not only causes forgetfulness, it makes the user confuse words with what they refer to. Moreover, Jack's resorting to violence, his attempt to kill his wife's seducer, provides more evidence of the Virilian idea that barbarism is the integral accident of technology. This is what Virilio has always warned about.

Virilio's insightful views about the actual uses made of science—the destructive technologies—sound dismayingly pessimistic. Historically, technology and science are sources of progress. Ironically, however, they are also, historically, the means of destruction. Virilio reflects on the issue thus:

The civilization or militarization of science? If truth is what is verifiable, the truth of contemporary science is not so much the extent of progress achieved as the scale of technical catastrophes occasioned. Science, after having been carried along for almost half a century in the arms race of the East-West deterrence era, has developed solely with a view to the pursuit of limit-performances, to the detriment of any effort to discover a coherent truth useful to humanity. (*Information 1*)

The nature of modern science/technology and its uncanny relation to actual life is a seminal concern in DeLillo's fiction too. One of the characters in *White Noise*, Heinrich, seems to be Virilio's voice in this regard: "What good is knowledge if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody actually knows anything" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 148–49).

The acceleration of events in contemporary life and the consequent accidents is a major concern in Virilio's work. However, what is far more interesting for Virilio is another aspect of accident. Thanks to the fast technologies of communication, accidents are no longer confined to a specific place or time: the local has become global due to virtualization and media. "With the technologies of general interactivity," Virilio urges, "we are entering the age of the *accident of the present*. . ." (*Open 14*, emphasis in the original). Consider how in *White Noise* a local accident is mediated and turned into a global one through its media coverage: "The radio calls it a feathery plume" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 111); "The movie wasn't sure what it does to humans" (111). Though the event proves to be an accident, a technology-generated one, it is blown into one with global impact through the media coverage it receives. Also interesting here are the myriad reports of the names and the subsequent effects attributed to the event in the media. "They're not calling it a feathery plum anymore," Babette tells Jack, adding that it is now called a "black billowing cloud" (113). This naming by media continues until "airborne toxic event" is decided on as the appropriate name (117). This multiplicity of data can also be seen in the media reports of the effects of exposure to the toxic matter, ranging from "nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath" to "the sense of *déjà vu*" (116). The reality-shaping quality of media is facilely welcomed by the characters in the novel. For instance, Denise, who suffers from nausea instead of experiencing the sense of *déjà vu*, is said to be "showing outdated symptoms" by Heinrich (117). Virilio observes that "the reality of information is entirely contained in the speed of its dissemination" ("The Art of the Motor" 156). The faster a piece of information spreads, the greater its chance to be accepted as real. Hence, reality is defined to the degree it exists within the media. Although many

catastrophes occur in India, for instance, as there is no “film footage” and no recording except for “three lines in the newspaper,” they are treated as if they have not actually happened (DeLillo, *White Noise* 66). This colonization of the mind by media can be seen as an inevitable consequence of the high pace of communication technologies. As Guy Debord asserts, it is technology, by the way of the mass media, which seems to “cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be seen” (qtd. in Olster 80). That is, media makes us apprehend the world through a set of images and representations separated from their referents and subject to the political whims of their manufacturers. Along the same lines, media in *White Noise* is presented as a kind of inhuman organism intimating Virilio's idea of a controlling technological tool operating freely in governing minds. In the contemporary era, virtual images of the real have usurped the authority of the real.

The toxic accident provides a good illustration not only of Virilio's idea of accident but also of his reflections on pure war. Virilio explains to Armitage that in the time of the Cold War and the rationale of atomic discouragement, the very idea of refinement sounds grotesque because there is always the possibility of war:

[Pure war] is a war of a single utterance: Fear! Fear! Fear!. . . During Second World War you had resistance against the Germans who invaded France. During the 1960s and 1970s there were resistance . . . not against an invader, but against the military-industrial complex, that is against the invention of ever crazier sorts of weapons, like the neutron bomb. . . . It is resistance against science. (Armitage, “From Modernism” 28)

Virilio's point is that the real menace now is militarized science. DeLillo presents contemporary society facing this unprecedented menace. Expressing her anxieties about a “cloud-eating microbe” which has been “conjured” to eradicate the pollution caused by the toxic accident, Babette tells Jack: “Every advance is worse than the one before because it makes me more scared” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 161). “The greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear” (161), Jack responds in agreement. Virilio's critique—his notion of “total war”—applies here, as the distinction between war time and peace time is blurred and the whole society seems to have changed into a battlefield under the influence of permanent technological deterrence. “The drift towards total war in the twentieth century has multiple consequences for twentieth-century civilization. It deepens the colonization of the social by the military so that distinctions between the ‘civilian’ and the ‘military’ become blurred,” Luke and Tuathail observe (367). The lack of distinction between states of war and peace will

challenge not only the question of territory but also that of identity. This is what Virilio means by talking of society as in a perpetual state of war: “all of us are already civilian soldiers, we don’t recognize the militarized part of [our] identity” (qtd. in Cooper 119). Indeed, the ubiquitous menace results in the rise of a state of total war or pure war that affects the very mode of life and being in the world. In the novel, evacuation of all places of residence, the sirens screaming out, and Babette’s hysterical rush echo Virilio who stresses that “there is no state of peace” (qtd. in Redhead 17) and no end to the World Wars.

Ian James maintains that in order

to understand the manner in which war is present in peacetime, or, more precisely, the manner in which the boundary which separates war and peace is in reality permeable, Virilio highlights the key role played by the concrete bunkers, both in the military and the political imagination of Nazi Germany and in the more general history of warfare and fortification. (73)

In this respect, the Boy Scout camp in the novel, as the secure place for the townspeople, exemplifies Virilio’s theories about the role of the bunkers. In line with his general theorization of the essential link between war and architecture in different eras of human history the militarization of space Virilio postulates that architecture is an open book which helps us realize the significance of war in human societies throughout history. There are, in his account, war narratives interwoven into the fabric of every building. “Defensive architecture is therefore instrumental, existing less in itself than with a view of ‘doing’ something: waiting, watching, then acting or rather, reacting,” Virilio asserts in *Bunker Archeology* (43). Thus, in this sense, the evacuation center, though “abandoned” according to the voice in the radio (DeLillo, *White Noise* 119), as a bunker-like structure is “instrumental” since it provides a haven for the Blacksmith’s citizens against the ever-prevailing threats of modern times. Here is the description of the place:

We were in a large barracks, one of three such buildings at the camp, and with the generator now working we were fairly comfortable. The Red Cross had provided cots, portable heaters, sandwiches and coffee. . . . The place was crowded, still quite cold, but the sight of nurses and volunteer workers made us feel the children were safe. (129)

Blacksmith is a suburban area. Jack describes the place thus: “Blacksmith is nowhere near a long city. *We don’t feel threatened* and aggrieved in quite the same way other towns do. We’re not smack in the path of history and

its contaminations” (85, emphasis added). At issue here is the nativity of the idea of the town’s security against any threat. What we have here is clearly an instance of the idea of pure war, the imminence of war even at peace time. Pure war, thus, is an integral part of life in a technological capitalist society. As for Virilio, “the fortification answers to the accidental, the dual between arms and armor leaves its mark on the organization of the territory by progress in its means and methods, by the potentialities of its invention—war is thus present in peace-time” (*Bunker* 42).

### VIRTUALIZATION

Virilio holds that war in our time does not depend solely on weaponry and fighting but also, and even more importantly, on how it is accounted for and depicted in the media. In this regard the toxic accident in DeLillo’s novel, dubbed “the airborne toxic event,” could be counted as an instance of Virilian pure. The news coverage of this disastrous event in the media reflects the relationship between accident, war, and virtualization in Virilio’s theories.

Speed, for Virilio, is not just about transportation vehicles; at stake here are all fast means of communication: the media. The ubiquitous presence of TV and radio sets throughout the novel and the fact that characters heavily rely on the news for analyzing the phenomena illustrate Virilio’s point about virtualization as the “logistics of perception” and politics. Virilio states that the “logistics of perception can, for example, be linked to the phenomenon of private detectives, to tele-surveillance, and to the phenomenon of ‘watching-at-distance.’” “The logistics of perception,” he concludes in an interview with Armitage, “are thus highly political” (“Kosovo W@r” 187). In fact, the virtual sphere is employed as a means to form a collective understanding of events; it presents its own doctrine of deterrence and security, which turns out to be that of gradually thinking for people. The media in *White Noise* provide the Blacksmith residents with an arsenal of images and possible side effects of the toxic event, shaping the characters’ conception of and feelings about it. First of all, they provide a label for it, calling the catastrophic accident “the airborne toxic event.” The mediatic dubbing turns the drab-sounding local accident into a highly dramatic phenomenon. Paradoxically, the word “event” for accident also robs the happening of its menacing potential. The label is an apt one for the process of virtualization launched by the media. Also relevant here is Virilio’s anxiety about using technology as a means of controlling people. As Virilio points out in an interview with Armitage, this is another version of a “war model.” “The war model is a method of total control over a territory

and of a population. The aim is to have total control of the population, to bring a whole region or a continent into subjection, through radio, telephone” (“From Modernism” 45). According to Virilio, it is the new media and communication technologies which have made it possible for the menace to be seen, heard or read about, to be felt immediately. Hence, there is the threat of instant annihilation and the possibility of instantly being informed about this threat, all made possible through virtual space of new technologies. The following passage of the novel on Jack’s infection with chemicals after the toxic accident in which he sees “computerized dots that registered [his] life and death” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 140) illustrates this Virilian idea. The computer operator of SIMUVAC who is responsible for making data profiles of the people in the camp explains to Jack how his identity is a virtual technology-bound construction:

Gladney, J. A. K. I punch in the name, the substance, the exposure time, and then I tap into your computer history. Your genetics, your personals, your medicals, your psychologicals, your police-and-hospitals. It comes back pulsing stars. This doesn’t mean anything is going to happen to you as such, at least not today or tomorrow. It just means you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that. (141)

The virtualization discussed by Virilio of course suffuses contemporary life, turning people into “the sum total of [their] data.” Also, we realize that the evacuation after the chemical spill is based on this very SIMUVAC, a “state program” which mounts practice evacuations by using real evacuations as models (139).

Another good example in the novel occurs when Babette, Jack’s wife, appears on television while the rest of the family is watching. It seems that the family has not expected to see her on TV. The scene depicts them struggling to come to terms with the fact that virtualization has invaded reality. Jack describes the scene thus:

The face on the screen was Babette’s. Out of our mouths came a silence as wary and deep as an animal growl. Confusion, fear, astonishment spilled from our faces. What did it mean? What was she doing there, in black and white, framed in formal borders? Was she dead, missing, disembodied? Was this her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology, set free to glide through wavebands, through energy levels, pausing to say good-bye to us from the fluorescent screen? (104)

The only one who immediately responds to Babette’s mediated and virtual self is Wilder, the family’s toddler, who approaches the set and



touches "her body, leaving a handprint on the dusty surface of the screen" (105). Babette's odd course in posture further illustrates the dominance of the virtual over the real sphere. It is the virtual space (here the TV) which controls this practice. People learn how to appear, to embody different postures and take on various positions from the virtual territory of the electronic media. "If you go one step further, then you discover what is the real project of today: the 'media building,' where the facades have morphed into screens," Virilio comments on the increasing dominance of virtual sphere over geo-sphere in his interview with Ruby (64).

As Olster states, "the characters in *White Noise* are quite willing to place themselves under the control of others" (86). Babette, for instance, recognizes that "people need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 171–72). Her posture instructions to old people confirm her attitude. However, it seems that the most cogent authority in the world of the novel's characters is not a person living in a physical sphere but a thing dominating the virtual realm electronic media perhaps because unlike written forms of media, TV and radio do not demand literacy as a prerequisite.<sup>1</sup>

The elimination of the difference between virtual reality and actual reality is a notion amply discussed by many contemporary thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard and Virilio. DeLillo has also frequently addressed this notion in his fiction. A classic example in the novel under discussion is the scene in which Jack's son does not trust that it is raining because he has heard on the radio that it would rain later that night. Another good example is the scene of Babette on TV discussed above. Also relevant is the point that the distinction between media objects and media watchers is blurred. A revealing example is the scene where Jack sees the image of himself and other members of his family reflected in the mirrored walls within the supermarket: "I kept seeing myself unexpectedly in some reflecting surface . . . Brightness settled around me . . . Our image appeared on mirrored column, in glassware and coherence, on TV monitors in security rooms" (84). The media addicts are also turned into media subjects.

A corollary of this virtualization, according to Virilio, is that the reality entering the mind is "a degenerate reality in which speed prevails over time and space, just as light already prevails over matter, or energy over the inanimate" (*Vision* 72). At issue here is how virtual time and space can obscure reality and how phenomena are not defined objectively but

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<sup>1</sup> This is of course a recurring motif in DeLillo's fiction. The following quote from *Underworld* is typical: "Whoever controls your eyeballs runs the world" (530).

as one perceives them. In this respect, virtualization becomes a feature of technology, one obscuring and redefining reality. Germain comments:

Transposed into Virilian terminology, this means that reality is ultimately a function of speed. But when reality is perceived as dependent on speed there emerges the possibility of multiple realities based on variances in the relative motion between the perceiver and the perceived. (77)

The “Toyota Celica” scene in the novel illustrates the uncanny impact of virtualization on life in contemporary times. In part two of the novel, the Gladney family takes shelter in a local barracks from the toxic cloud of the chemical spill. As Jack watches his children sleeping, he recounts a visionary moment:

Steffie turned slightly, then muttered something in her sleep. It seemed important that I know what it was . . . I sat there watching her. Moments later she spoke again. Distinct syllables this time, not some dreamy murmur—but a language not quite of this world. I struggled to understand. I was convinced she was saying something, fitting together units of stable meaning. I watched her face, waited. Ten minutes passed. She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, a part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.

*Toyota Celica.* (DeLillo, *White Noise* 154–55, emphasis in the original).

What is expected here is a revelatory utterance. However, it seems that DeLillo is mocking the traditional visionary moments and ironically questioning the possibility of such moments in a postmodern culture. At issue here is what concerns Virilio: the invasion and colonization of the human body and mind by technology. Virtuality has permeated not only the public sphere but also the individual unconscious.

One can also find the precedence of the image over reality in “the most photographed barn” scene, which is also probably the most frequently quoted and commented upon passage in the novel. The scene is a good representation of what Baudrillard has shrewdly termed the hyperreal state or simulation, over which Virilio prefers the term virtualization and substitution. Early in the novel, we are introduced to the most photographed barn in America, a tourist attraction that draws amateur and professional photographers from around the country. As Jack and his colleague, Murray, watch other people taking pictures of the barn, Murray claims that “no one sees the barn,” because “once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (12). In a Virilian reading of the scene, all visitors to the barn contribute to the diminution

and “desertification” of the first-hand and direct experience of the barn and even become “part of the aura” (13) using their own photographic equipment. In this situation, virtual images and representations replace the real; the object of representation declines in importance as the virtual takes over. Virilio explains this situation in the following words in his interview with Joubert and Carlut:

Every real image has a dual identity. We cannot compare a virtual image with a real image. Philosophically it must be compared to the existing image: the real is composed of the existing image and virtual one. . . . The virtual image is . . . the mental image. Thus I think there is a shift in the supremacy, in the primacy of the real image, in favor of the virtual image. In the past, the opposite was true. (125–26)

It is in reference to this triumph of virtuality over reality that Murray comments on the visitors' inability to conceive the true nature of the barn: “What was the barn like before it was photographed?” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 13). A contemporary theorist whose theorization of virtualization is in many respects comparable to that of Virilio is Baudrillard, the figure most frequently associated with the dominance of the simulacra, the copy without an original, to which this loss of the real leads. He mentions nostalgia as one of the consequences of this state of affairs: “when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (6). Murray's nostalgic bemoaning of the erosion of the sense of reality is to be understood in such a context.

Also relevant to “the most photographed barn” scene in the novel is Virilio's reflection on the relationship between architecture/space and perception. To Virilio, human experience is inextricably tied up with bodily movement and positioning. Space affects vision and the body at the same time. Space and environment function as a medium through which perception of reality becomes indirect, secondary, and even incomplete because the world arrives to us in relation to space and surroundings, as Husserlian phenomenology suggests. Thus, space does not just stand in relation to situation, but the information absorbed also comes through that medium. The road to the barn and even the barn itself is replete with the pictures of the barn taken by visitors. This image-covered structure of the barn provides its visitors with a mediated and indirect perception of its own reality: “We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one,” Murray comments ironically (DeLillo, *White Noise* 12).

A distinguishing fact about the Gladneys in *White Noise* is that “the sense of union they instill no longer depends on physical proximity”; as Olster continues,

the Friday night gathering, with Chinese take-outs that join Jack and his wife Babette's children from various marriages into a blended whole also join the resultant Gladney family to families all over the country by the way of the television shows they watch while eating. (83)

This confirms Virilio's observations about 'telepresence' as one of the corollaries of virtualization. Due to technological progress and virtual space expansion, there is no need for physical and face-to-face interaction any more. "One can be here and to act somewhere else at the same time," Virilio says in an interview with Kittler (98). Though this situation is profoundly disturbing to Virilio, Jack feels that his life is blessed by the automated teller machine as a technological device. This epitomizes the telepresent condition; for the ATM transactions that Jack uses to check his personal holdings link him to people all over the world by the way of a "mainstream sitting in a locked room in some distant city" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 46). Linked by technology in this manner, Jack feels that his life is desirable:

I went to the automated teller machine to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate. . . Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. (46)

The illusion that life is blessed by virtue of technology (the white noise of electronic devices) is ironically described in terms of "waves" ("waves of relief and gratitude"); later these are waves of pollution from the spill of the toxic chemicals that make Jack's life hell. Also, generally, Jack's and Babette's lives are affected by "waves" of anxiety (about aging, social status and, above all, death) which are only momentarily fended off by the "waves" of the media, telecommunication and other technological devices. The novel, then, illustrates the uncanny status of technology as the very source of contemporary angst misrecognized as one of blessing.

## ARCHITECTURE

Virilio's interest in architecture has its roots in his preoccupation with studying the German bunkers made during World War II in France. Yet as a Husserlian phenomenologist, he thinks of space as a medium through which human perception in relation to bodily movement is achieved. As James explains, to Virilio, "spatiality is inseparable from our capacity to sense, touch and see within the context of a specific bodily orientation" (12). DeLillo's depiction of architecture and urban spaces in *White Noise* can also be fruitfully read through the lens of Virilio.

Virilio believes that architecture and environmental space reveal the ideology and tell the story of different eras. We have already discussed the turning of the supposedly more natural structure of the barn into an artificial/virtual space, as well as the turning of the Boy Scout Camp into a bunker-like shelter, a militarized space. Generally, the architecture and environs described in DeLillo's novel can be said to exemplify Virilio's theories about the designing of space based on military requirements the bunker ideology as well as the prevailing tendencies toward consumerism and virtualization. If, as Virilio suggests, space tells us about the spirit and culture prevailing in each era, then it is no surprise that the image of the students and their vehicles in the opening scene of the novel as a stream weaving through the landscape implies an assembly-line or machine-oriented culture to which the students belong. Moreover, their numerous consumer products emblemize the ascendancy of consumerism:

The station wagons arrived at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus. In single file they eased around the orange I-beam sculpture and moved toward the dormitories. The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with carefully secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets, boots and shoes, stationary and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; with rolled-up rugs and sleeping bags; with bicycles, skies, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts . . . the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges . . . hairdryer, styling irons; . . . onion and garlic chips, fruit chews and toffee popcorn. (DeLillo, *White Noise* 3)

The landscape of the campus and the surrounding area is supposedly natural (though it is already designed space, suburban space). The nature-like environment, however, is turned into a festive, even carnivalesque, scene of the triumph of consumerism.

Virilio observes that urban spaces and architectural structures in each era reveal the dominant ideology of that era. As such, shopping areas are among the urban spaces that feature most frequently in DeLillo's novel. As a modern structure, the supermarket is a site emblematic of the consumerist culture of modern times. It has a profound impact on different aspects of modern life, even that of reading—the ultimate cultural practice. As Christian Moraru notes: "Reading here hinges on non-spiritual activities, 'Eating and Drinking,' the 'Basic Parameters' (*White Noise* 171). Knowledge, experience, and literacy have lost their original sense and object, and refocus on the superficial world of consumption" (96). "There are," Jack ruminates, "full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 10); "they scrutinize the small print on packages, wary of a second level of betrayal" (326). This is

the place for advertisement-stuffed tabloids, porn literature and all kinds of trashy, thoughtless reading. This is the place of ultimate vulgarization, where everything—all human needs, desires, hopes, fears, aspirations—are catered to, are turned into consumer products to be sold. Jack ironically reflects in the last scene of the novel: “Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead” (326).

An alteration in the shelves of the supermarket causes disturbance for the consumers: “The supermarket shelves have been rearranged. It happened one day without warning. There is agitation and panic in the aisles, dismay in the faces of older shoppers” (325). This is because in the world of the novel the supermarket is an artificial haven where the characters seek order, meaning, pattern and even spirituality: “This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it’s a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It’s full of psychic data” (37), comments Murray. Murray, whom Jack meets as frequently in the supermarket as he meets him on the campus, comparing Tibetans’ beliefs about death and afterlife with the charms of the supermarket, reflects further on the significance of such urban shopping spaces: “Here we don’t die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think” (38). Such spaces are the modern havens, somehow substituting the religious/spiritual spaces like churches.

Moreover, consciousness of place as something that might be geographically and locally identified—as something towards which one could feel a sense of attachment—is eroded by a variety of technological means such as the telephone, television, computer, ATM, etc. Though *White Noise* was written in the early 1980s when telecommunication technologies such as the World Wide Web were still in the future, it partly reflects what Virilio calls telepresence, a concept referring to the decline of lived spatial existence due to the prevalence of technology. Virilio particularly focuses on the manner in which the images of cinema and television are telepresent, that is, present at a distance or in their absence, whereby the virtual comes to dominate over the actual. He suggests that modern “vision machines” have invented a new way of seeing, that is, vision as mediated through the transmission of radio or electronic waves which have the potential to give us a new consciousness of the world (*Lost Dimension* 84)). Consider, as an instance, Jack’s description of how Denise, his step-daughter, updates her address book: “She was transcribing names and phone numbers from an old book to a new one. There were no addresses. Her friends had phone numbers only, a race of people with a seven-bit analog consciousness” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 41). In the novel, chief among these technological advancements which are responsible for our transformed perception of

space is television which according to Jack is the "focal point" of life in *Blacksmith* (85). This is of course epitomized in the very title word of the novel. The "white noise" of media has, among other things, effected an erosion of a sense of place.

## CONCLUSION

DeLillo's novels are, as Tom LeClair shrewdly puts it, "both explanatory and mysterious, singular in expression but multiple in meaning, positive and negative in . . . connotations" (ix). They are unique in their treatment of "the postindustrial culture . . . the age of information and communication" (ix). DeLillo is what LeClair calls a "systems novelist," one concerned with the endangering of "man-planet," the living, intelligent ecosystem, not least by the "reduction of life to entities in motion" (2). Paul Virilio, as a seminal contemporary thinker, is also centrally concerned with such issues.<sup>2</sup> Dromology, as the arch concept in his theorization, is key to understanding the contemporary human—posthuman—condition, one of the reign of "convoluted systems"<sup>3</sup> of technology, science, communication, war, virtualization—of capitalism in its newest modes and guises.

Dromology also encompasses Virilio's study of technology and accident, as technology's negative aspect, his readings of urban space in relation to social changes and virtualization. In a similar way, DeLillo in *White Noise* is obsessed with technology, accident and space. DeLillo's literary world lends itself to being read through Virilio's theories because both the American writer and the French theorist are fundamentally concerned with how technology has changed the very mode of life and the character of human perception. (Note how, for instance, the synaesthesia of the title words—white noise—masterly expresses the concern with perception, with how it is transformed through waves of energy and data.) The sense of urgency with which they reflect on modern times is rarely paralleled.

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that Virilio is rarely, if ever, mentioned in studies on works of literature in reference to the theorizations of the postindustrial culture. (LeClair's important early study of DeLillo is a case in point.) This is while Virilio's contribution in this regard seems to be no less seminal and urgent than those of figures associated with systems theory—who highlight the importance of the recognition of information in living systems and the rise of information and communication technology, as well as thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase is that of Joseph McElroy, one of the important influences on DeLillo, used in his 1974 essay titled "Neural Neighborhoods and Other Concrete Abstracts."



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# Theater Without a Script— Improvisation and the Experimental Stage of the Early Mid-Twentieth Century in the United States

## ABSTRACT

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It was in the mid-twentieth century that the independent theatrical form based entirely on improvisation, known now as improvisational/improvised theatre, impro or improv, came into existence and took shape. Viola Spolin, the intellectual and the logician behind the improvisational movement, first used her improvised games as a WPA worker running theater classes for underprivileged youth in Chicago in 1939. But it was not until 1955 that her son, Paul Sills, together with a college theater group, the Compass Players, used Spolin's games on stage. In the 1970s Sills made the format famous with his other project, the Second City.

Since the emergence of improv in the US coincides with the renaissance of improvisation in theater, in this paper, I will look back at what may have prepared and propelled the emergence of improvised theater in the United States. Hence, this article is an attempt to look at the use of improvisation in theater and performing arts in the United States in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to highlight the various roles and functions of improvisation in the experimental theater of the day by analyzing how some of the most influential experimental theaters used improvisation as a means of play development, a component of actor training and an important element of the rehearsal process.

**Keywords:** theatre, impro(v), experimental theater, improvisation.

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“Improvised performance is as old as performance itself” (Sharma 46), and even Viola Spolin, the High Priestess of Improvised Theatre, points to its different traditions: “Improvisation isn’t new, for god’s sakes. The commedia dell’arte improvised. The socialist political theatres in Europe improvised. They didn’t read it anywhere. They were working on what was happening in the streets” (qtd. in Coleman 26).

Spolin started creating her “theater games” in 1939 when she commenced her work as a drama supervisor for the Works Progress Administration’s Recreational Project in Chicago, teaching “creative dramatics to ghetto children from the West Side streets” (Coleman 23). By then the theater had undergone what is referred to as The Great Reform and was still in the midst of an experimental phase that embraced many robust historical avant-garde theater movements. In such an atmosphere of experimentation and change, sundry movements were coming to life and new ideas were materializing, encouraging writers and artists to take bold steps and to try unconventional, novel approaches towards art.

In the early 1960s, when Spolin was teaching improv games in Chicago to her son’s improv company *The Second City*, Keith Johnstone was building up his improvisational system while training actors at the Royal Court Theatre Studio in London. In the introduction to *Impro for Storytellers*, Johnstone states that he had no knowledge of any other improvisation at the time (xii). Notwithstanding, as early as the 1950s, the young American comedian Dudley Riggs would tour the country with his vaudevillian act, which encompassed “acrobatics, juggling, and improvisational comedy” (Regan). He would refer to this as “word jazz” since the troupe musicians “were adamant that the word improvisation belonged to jazz” (Regan). As noted in Sharma’s *Comedy in New Light*, “some people credit American Dudley Riggs as the first vaudevillian to use audience suggestions to create improvised sketches” (46). Yet, according to Coleman, “this hallmark technique of the modern improvisational theater” (30) was first used by Spolin in 1936.

In this paper, I will examine the use of improvisation in theater and performing arts in the United States in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prior and parallel to the emergence of what is now known as impro, improv, improvisational or improvised theater.<sup>1</sup> By analyzing how

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<sup>1</sup> The terms improvisational theater, improvised theater and impro(v) are used interchangeably throughout the paper. I, however, make a distinction between impro and improv, as explained in the article “Alchemy and Smoke in a Bottle—Contemporary Improvisational Theater in Poland and the United States” published in *Acta Universitatis Lodzianis: Folia Litteraria Polonica* 2.40 (2017).

various American companies and artists from the 1950s to the 1970s used improvisation, I will highlight its many uses, functions and roles in the development of the American stage, both avant-garde and popular, which in turn might have given way to an independent theatrical format—impro(v).

### THE SECOND REFORM OF THE THEATER<sup>2</sup> AND THE AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE. AMERICAN THEATER COMES INTO ITS OWN

The Second Reform of the Theater was a natural continuation of the Great Reform. Having lasted approximately four decades, from the 1950s up to the 1990s, it was far from uniform. Its gradual development, however, was synchronous in Europe and the United States. In this study, I will focus on the first phase of the Reform (1950–75), since during this period improvisation as a technique of acting and means of creation was central to the development of the new theater. The Living Theatre, Grotowski's Laboratory, Kantor's Cricot 2 Theater, Happenings, Actions and Events, the emergence of Off- and Off-Off-Broadway theaters and Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater are some of the key figures and groups of the movement. Yet again, although diverse in styles and methodologies, they had shared ideologies. They were open (towards both fellow company members and audiences), rebellious (towards the ingrained status quo of arts in general, and of theater in particular, as well as opposing the ideals of a consumer society), anti-war, political, socially engaged, transcendental in nature and defiant of structure and tradition. The new theater supported social equality, multiculturalism and the individual right to freedom—of speech, actions and views. They also engaged in spatial experimentation in the spirit of *Grotowski's exit from the theater*, seeking new venues to perform in in order to be *closer to the people*. In the US this primarily meant moving away from Broadway:

They wanted to change the world but had to change the theater first. In the first phase, it was a collective product, a process of artistic interaction between actors, director, musicians, and stage designers through improvisation. . . . The “openness” and audience participation was crucial. (Braun 314, translation mine)

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<sup>2</sup> The Second Reform of the Theater is a term coined by Kazimierz Braun. As the term is widely quoted in the Polish theater studies, I will use it throughout the paper when referring to the experimental and avant-garde theater movements of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The negation of traditional theater, both politically and artistically, together with the theatricalization of other arts (John Cage's and Allan Kaprov's happenings, Jackson Pollocks's action painting), significantly altered and reshaped the definition of theater. The experiments at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century stretched the boundaries of theater, making room for more experimentation and alteration, which in turn paved the way in the second half of the century for new theatrical forms, such as Happenings, Events, Actions, and impro(v).

The American stage provided fertile ground for these changes. Lacking a centuries-long theater tradition while possessing the necessary infrastructure and human resources, as well as the burgeoning ideologies planted a few decades before, the artists in the US had a more than favorable environment for experimentation. James Roose-Evans wrote in 1970 that "the greatest variety of experimentation in the theatre today is to be found in America" (144). By the 1950s, the universities had already trained actors, playwrights, critics and technical staff, as well as informed, knowledgeable and well-educated audience. The ideas of the European emigrants coalesced with American heritage to form a new American drama and theater. Many critics, Franck Jotterand among them, claim that the history of American theater begins in 1916 with the staging of Eugene O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff* (9). Debatable as this statement is, this national playwright certainly had a major influence on the shaping of the American stage. Indigenous characters, familiar events, colloquial language and the use of idiolects in his plays have contributed to the development of a truly American drama, both formally and conceptually. Political events have also greatly marked drama and theater in the United States. The Great Depression of the 1930s that questioned existing values, the HUAC atmosphere of fear and suspicion in the 1940s that intensified the need for freedom and openness in the arts, the Korean War in the 1950s and the Vietnam War in the 1960s, which overturned so many perceptions that America had about itself, engaged the theater politically to an even greater extent. The American stage, although heavily influenced by the European avant-garde, was developing autonomously.

The most noteworthy formal changes were those that took place in the style of acting, the use of written text (or lack thereof), and spatial experimentation. The "new acting," originated by Stanislavsky, was expanding and evolving and differed among the artists who took up the role of teachers, yet it always concentrated on one goal. Acting was understood as being, not pretending to be somebody else on stage. The prime idea was to find the emotions inside and reveal them instead of playing them out. This was often achieved through improvisation. The written text

was either non-literary, or non-existent—the performances used either few words, or the words were improvised (either on the spot or during the rehearsal process). In order to escape the artificiality of theater stages the performance space moved away not only from Broadway to private apartments and specially constructed venues, but also out of any buildings. The actors performed in parks, railway stations and basements. By using a real-life space open to actual passers-by, in contrast to performing in front of a theater audience on artificial grounds, they were *in medias res* of particular, real situations. This improvised performance space manifested the notion of “people’s theater,” in which the actors could interact with an arbitrary, accidental audience.

Improvisation in theater, long before it became a separate theatrical form, was an important factor in the creation of the new theater (re) invented in the wake of an artistic search for new solutions and directions. It was a part of experimentation, of an ongoing artistic exploration. In the formal sense, it was an acting technique, and a teaching method used by Joseph Chaikin and Viola Spolin, in the so-called transformational acting “based on Brechtian alienation to enable actors to take up different roles in a sequence” (Braun 315, translation mine). Improvisation was used in space and stage design, as a part of the process of creation or even as a basic strategy of performance.

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### THE PERFORMATIVE REBELLION: HAPPENING, PERFORMANCE, EVENT

In 1952 at The Black Mountain College, an experimental school in North Carolina, John Cage, together with Charles Olson, M. C. Richardson, David Tudor, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg and a group of dancers, staged *Theater Piece #1* (Black Mountain Piece), a rather odd performance, which subsequently came to be known as the first Happening, a term coined by Allan Kaprov. It has never been determined what exactly happened in The Black Mountain College that day, as according to Ross, “no two accounts agreed” (400). However, in *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* he gives a vague description of the events:

Cage lectured on Zen Buddhism, perhaps standing on a ladder. Robert Rauschenberg exhibited artworks and/or played Edith Piaf records at double speed. Merce Cunningham danced. David Tudor played prepared piano. Movies of some kind were shown, boys or girls served coffee, a dog may or may not have barked. (Ross 400)



Cage, through his experimentation, extended or crossed the boundaries of art forms, which in turn gave way to an entirely new form. The Happening and its cousins: Events, Performances and Acts bloomed in the USA in the 1950s and influenced many avant-garde artists in Europe in the 1960s (Mueller xx). They incorporated music, painting, sculpture, film and theater in an attempt to discredit the traditional forms and challenge expectations. While Environments created by the Dadaists and Surrealists were interrelated with painting and sculpture, Happenings related in the sense of composition to music and theater. For Kaprov, a Happening was an improvised collage of events, with no logical link. The goal was to awaken the senses, to recognize and rediscover the surrounding people and environment, to engage an individual and society; it was as much to expand the boundaries of the form as it was to broaden horizons, alter perspectives and ignite critical thinking. The Fluxus movement under the leadership of George Maciunas developed its “anti-art,” anti-commercial aesthetics (“Fluxus, Performance, Participation”). Some of the so-called Fluxpieces, such as Milan Knížák’s *A Week*, were to engage people in game-like activities to initiate adventures and open people to different kinds of interaction (Jotterand 96–101):

- 1st day—all your clothes should have same color. Also underwear.
  - 2nd day—keep silent all day long.
  - 3rd day—look at your naked body in a mirror for at least an hour. Do it carefully.
  - 4th day—
  - 5th day—sing or whistle the same tune all day long without a pause.
  - 6th day—make a trip by train. Buy no ticket.
  - 7th day—walk all day long aimlessly through the city. The best is alone.
- (Knizak 65)

However, such artistic interventions soon became a channel to vent dissatisfaction with and dissent from social and political norms. Anti-war and civil rights movement happenings and performances became a widespread form of protest in America in the 1960s. They took place in the streets, at universities, and even in courtrooms. The leaders of the leftist Youth International Parties, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, referred to the movement as *guerilla theater*. When called to appear before the HUAC, Hoffman and Rubin showed up for questioning in judicial robes. At other times, Rubin would also wear an Independence War uniform, a Vietcong sweatshirt and carry a toy gun, or dress up as Santa Claus. Jotterand claims that the Yippies aimed at igniting crises, surprise and sudden changes in the fossilized system of

frames of reference (113). Words did not suffice anymore; they would not ignite immediate intervention or reaction, nor would they kindle turmoil around the most important political issues and unacceptable social norms. Happenings did.

The Happenings, the often-nonverbal political commentaries, left the art galleries and became a revolutionary means in the streets of America. In the theater, the spirit of Happening was an inspiration to discover space and new attitude towards audiences (Jotterand 118). It also showed how theater could influence public perception, inspire change, and affect individuals and societies in non-artistic dimensions.

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### THEATER IS A STATE OF MIND: THE OFF-BROADWAY MOVEMENT AND BEYOND

Away from the expensive Broadway venues, and the highly commercial entertainment of the Great White Way, a new theater arose in the late 1940s. The Off- and Off-Off-Broadway movement first started in private apartments and basements among the new generation of artists predominantly influenced by the European avant-garde, yet, with the American tradition already carved into this influence. It was a poor, experimental avant-garde theater, small in size and budget, looking for new means of expression, promoting new drama, too complex for the popular stages of Broadway:

[Off-Broadway] grew in the succeeding decades to rival Broadway in the dynamics of its more challenging plays and productions. And it proved to be a theatre that would mould significant careers of playwrights, actors, designers, and directors in a more accessible and clearly sequential, step-by-step process of progress. (Witcover 260)

The burgeoning theater was expanding, and by 1949 there were enough theaters to establish a formal association—The League of Off-Broadway Theatres. In 1975 the Off-Off-Broadway Alliance was founded (Braun 319–21). This movement strove for an entirely different kind of entertainment from what Broadway had to offer. With intellectuals and artists in mind as a target audience, Off-Broadway did not compete with The Great White Way, but was more of a highbrow alternative to the popular mass entertainment. Widely diverse in form and content, the “off companies” (see Table 1) were almost entirely unified in their vision of the mission of the new theater. Politically oriented, socially engaged Brechtian performance art and its objectives prevailed on the Off-Broadway stage.

Experimental theaters	established in
The Living Theatre	1951
The Bread and Puppet Theatre	1961
The Open Theater	1963
The San Francisco Mime Troupe	1963
The Performance Group	1967
The Manhattan Project	1968

Table 1. Selected experimental theaters in the 1950s-60s (see Braun).

### THE LIVING THEATRE—JULIAN BECK AND JUDITH MALINA

The Living Theatre, an experimental group founded by Julian Beck and Judith Malina in New York, held their first performances in the Becks' Upper West Side apartment in 1947. The group performed in different venues over the course of the next three decades. Evicted in 1952 from the Cherry Lane Theater they had rented the previous year in Greenwich, "the company relocated to another nontheater space—a large loft way uptown" (Bottoms 24). Following their flight to Europe in 1963, the company would perform in even more unconventional venues, "from the prisons of Brazil to the gates of the Pittsburgh steel mills, and the slums of Palermo" ("Living Theatre Records").

In his book *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, Steven J. Bottoms recalls Malina's own words claiming that the Becks wanted to create a theater of "pure art, pure poetry, [with] the highest level of artistic adventure, the highest level of experiment, the highest level of political advance" (24). Such a mission bears clear traces of the influences of the European avant-garde. In fact, both Beck and Malina studied at the New School for Social Research in New York under Erwin Piscator, the famous precursor of political theater (Braun 322–23), where they took acting classes and learnt to theatricalize politics and to politicize theater. Jotterand also attributes their critical attitude to Brecht's influence and recalls Chaikin's words that the German playwright "would make a perfect member of The Living Theatre" (121, translation mine). Aside from the German leftist artists, Beck's inspirations derived from the aesthetics of the French dramatist, Antonin Artaud. Bigsby believes that Julian Beck, "heavily influenced by Artaud, . . . sought to assault the sensibility of the audience," therefore, "following [Artaud's] prescriptions, . . . [he] came to reject that kind of theatre in which individuals are required to sit isolated from one another

in the dark” (63). As a matter of fact, many critics, among them Franck Jotterand, perceived features of the theater of cruelty in the company’s performances such as the famous *The Brig* or *Frankenstein* (126–27).

It appears that Beck and Malina were also well aware of contemporary American artists who used performing arts as a vessel to vent their dissatisfaction with current social and political affairs. One of these rebels was Lenny Bruce, the pioneering stand-up comedian “renowned for his open, free-style and critical form of comedy which integrated satire, politics, religion, sex, and vulgarity” (“Lenny Bruce”), a satirist who “elevated street language into an art form” (Olson 76). Bruce faced a number of arrests on the grounds of obscenity, leading to a famous trial in 1964:

Back in New York City in April, Judith and Julian attended the trial of comedian Lenny Bruce on obscenity charges, both because they felt a sense of kinship with him, and because they had decided to represent themselves in their own trial and wanted to familiarize themselves with the intricacies of court procedure. (Tytell, *The Living Theatre* 192)

The Becks felt they suffered from similar oppression from the authorities; however, in their case the repression was cloaked in tax evasion charges. “[T]he Internal Revenue Service moved to shut the theater down for tax evasion. Beck, Malina and their supporters felt they were being singled out in an act of de facto censorship” (Tytell, “Troubadours Against Oppression”). During the trial, Malina represented Beck dressed up as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* (Botting 18), which seems to be a rather direct reference to the Yippies cross-dressing performances at the HUAC interrogations over a decade earlier.

The Living Theatre was as political in its art as it was experimental. The company “started off with scripted plays by new European and American playwrights, and landed at collective improvisation” (Jotterand 118–34, translation mine). For the first two decades they were a spearhead in the staging of poetic drama, promoting both American (Gertrude Stein, John Ashbery, Paul Goodman, William Carlos Williams) and European authors (Brecht, Cocteau, Pirandello, Lorca) rarely produced in the US at the time.

*The Connection*, a 1959 play by Jack Gelber, was, if not groundbreaking, certainly a milestone production for the company. The cast comprised jazz musicians, who according to Jotterand improvised as if under the influence of narcotics, while the actors remained in a state of waiting (120). The play, based on improvised music and dialogue was, apart from an artistic experiment, a close-to-anarchistic experience for the

company. In his essay, “Storming the Barricades,” Beck emphasizes this liberating dimension of *The Connection* for him and the company:

We, who had sought to develop style through variations of formal staging, found suddenly in the free movement and the true improvisation of *The Connection* something we had not formerly considered. An atmosphere of freedom in the performance was established and encouraged, and this seemed to promote a truthfulness, startling in performance, which we had not so thoroughly produced before. (139)

In their subsequent production, *The Marrying Maiden* (1960), The Living Theatre continued experimenting with improvisation. In this “theatre work created by Jackson MacLow, one of Cage’s students, in which characters and speeches were selected from the I-Ching” (Roose-Evans 146), the lines, in terms of rhythm and intonation, were strictly determined by the score. “The order, duration of speeches, and the directions for rate, volume, inflection and manner of speaking were all independently ascribed to the material by chance techniques” (Roose-Evans 146). This was achieved through the 1200 “action cards” added by Judith Malina, randomly given to the actors to perform whatever action was assigned by the card.

Other actions were inserted at random by the employment of a pack of twelve hundred cards, each one containing stage directions such as—“scratch yourself,” “use any three objects in an action,” “kiss the nearest woman,” etc. These were given to the performers, in full view of the audience by a stage manager who rolled dice in order to determine the throw of the cards (Roose-Evans, 146).

This chance factor ignited by the use of the action cards carries a striking resemblance to Viola Spolin’s games. In fact, this resemblance is far from coincidental, as one of the ensemble members, Joseph Chaikin, had first-hand acquaintance of the games, having had previously worked with “the grandmother of improvisation” herself (Styan 167).

Two more noteworthy productions of The Living Theatre with inspiration heavily drawn from improvisation are *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* (1964) and, perhaps the most famous theater work staged by the company, *Paradise Now* (1968). While the former is a collective improvisation, the first performance of The Living Theatre not based on a script by one author alone (Jotterand 122), the semi-improvised *Paradise Now*, based on discussions by the company members, was “a kind of improvised performance in itself . . . and a celebration of artistic work as a collaborative process” (Caines and Heble 116). Audience participation was a key element in both productions—though Cage’s influence is

stronger in *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*—induced by nothingness, silence, lack of movement, but also addressing the audience and demanding answers, and inviting active participation of the audiences in *Paradise Now*. Jotterand describes how actors would join the audience during intervals, “first to collect donations, then to infect them with bubonic plague, or even to drag them on stage” (129, translation mine).

### THE OPEN THEATER—JOSEPH CHAIKIN

After the Becks left for Europe with the The Living Theatre ensemble—taking up “voluntary exile”—the director Joseph Chaikin joined another Off-Broadway company. The Open Theater, which was established in 1963 by a group of former students of Nola Chilton in New York, comprised “writers, directors, actors, musicians, a painter and two critics” (Jotterand 139, translation mine). Although it was an entirely different artistic endeavor in many respects, the two companies shared a similar inclination towards experimentation, the exploration of social, political and artistic issues, and improvisation.

The Open Theater was a performance ensemble as much as it was an experimental lab, drawing heavily on Jerzy Grotowski’s ideas and experience. The Open Theater was a workshop, where actors, directors, musicians and choreographers met. In these workshops the artists improvised dialogues and situations, which formed whole performances in the process. (Braun 320–28). Chaikin was influenced by the Polish artist, who supported the American company. According to Bigsby,

Open Theatre was the only one that Grotowski was willing to endorse, doubtless because its emphasis was on the actor, and its distrust of the substitution of a physical for a spiritual, emotional or intellectual contact with its audience was one to which he responded. (114)

The famous director and theater theorist even appeared in person at one of the company’s workshops in 1967.

Chaikin greatly appreciated Grotowski’s teaching methods, although he acknowledged they were different from his own (Jotterand 144–45), which he derived from the experience of many avant-garde artists, European and American. “Chaikin had trained as an actor with the Stanislavsky System, acted in Brecht’s epic theatre and worked with Viola Spolin” (Styan 167). He shared Grotowski’s “belief in the need of physical discipline, combined with an investigation of the nature of sound of movement” (Bigsby 114), which was an underlying motif for

the exercises he engaged the actors in during the—again, Grotowski-like—lab rehearsals/workshops. The exercises were not detached from the artistic process; rather than separate segments, they were pieces of a bigger whole, parts of the artistic development. “Like Brecht, Chaikin thought of his theatre as a workshop where plays were always “‘in progress,’ always growing and changing” (Styan 167). In his words quoted by Jotterand, Chaikin claims that “exercises are worthless if, as a result, they do not engender a theatrical performance” (145, translation mine).

Chaikin also

shared both Meyerhold’s belief in the need to work from the physical fact of the actor’s presence on stage and his conviction that this meant exploring the mechanics of physical movement, but, more than that, he saw in the presence of the actor a statement about the power of human intervention. (Biggsby 121)

He was also no stranger to Lee Strasberg’s ideas, or to the teacher himself, whom he met in New York in 1966. Yet Chaikin resented his method:

He teaches the actors to use themselves, but at the same time they withdraw into themselves because of the excessive use of autoanalysis. This defers team acting. He looks at the performance in a logical, linear way. How can you stage Brecht in such a way? (qtd. in Jotterand 137, translation mine)

By examining many avant-garde ideas, techniques and methods, Joseph Chaikin managed to devise his own combination of principles, techniques and creative explorations and create his personal artistic style. Jotterand claims that Chaikin’s method is not only the key to understanding the new American theater, but that it also shows the long road that the American stage took from naturalism to abstractionism (136–40). Taking after the pioneer of socially engaged theater in Israel, Nola Chilton, and influenced by Bertold Brecht’s ideas, The Open Theater’s work was particularly political (anti-Vietnam war performances) in nature. However, according to Jotterand, adding humor to the performances was a distinctive American, and “non-Grotowski,” feature (145).

Chaikin’s adoption of improvisation was also different from what he learnt with Spolin and The Living Theatre. For The Open Theater, improvisation was a part of the process of creation rather than a basic strategy of performance (Biggsby 119). However, like some of the Spolin games and *The Marrying Maiden* staged by his former company, *Comings and Goings*, a play by Megan Terry produced by The Open Theater in 1966, was based on aleatoricism. In this production, the actors presented their



scenes in an order determined by a roulette wheel. In later productions, such as *The Serpent* and *Terminal*, the company also experimented with group improvisation.

### THE PERFORMANCE GROUP—RICHARD SCHECHNER

The New American Theater was thriving when The Performance Group, a highly experimental Off-Off-Broadway company, was brought to life by Richard Schechner in 1967. “Like Chaikin’s, this group was not formed primarily for the purpose of developing a production, but rather to explore theatrical and personal possibilities” (Bigsby 125).

Schechner had received an extensive (also Ivy League) education and earned a PhD in theater with Tulane University before starting the company. His academic research and his personal explorations orbited around experimental and avant-garde theater. “Influenced by Grotowski, whom Schechner had met in 1966, by the Becks and by the environmentalists and their Happenings” (Styan 169), he formed his own experimental company. Not unlike Chaikin, Schechner developed his own distinctive style that derived from many different sources. “Having attended a workshop with Grotowski, Richard Schechner aimed at just such precision but hardly purged his work of sentimentalism” (Bigsby 124). The early productions of The Performance Group were based on existing scripted plays with texts created by the director (*Macbeth*, 1969; *Dionysus 69*, 1968). Hinged on the William Arrowsmith translation of Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, *Dionysus in 69* was a play devised by Schechner through group improvisation. According to Braun, he would also use improvisation during rehearsals to create space and stage design (330–32) for his productions.

The company adopted a former metal stamping/flatware factory in Soho for their performance space, by visually turning it into a garage, and naming it aptly—The Performing Garage. This empty, spacious area was an ideal venue for Schechner’s spatial experimentation. He “examined the spatial relations between the characters on stage, as well as between the actors and the audience to create appropriate space for those relations” (Braun 331, translation mine). Schechner’s idea of “environmental theater,” and its core aim, was to eliminate the physical boundaries between the actors and the audiences in order to facilitate interaction between them and create a common space, which in turn would form a collective environment for everyone engaged in the performance. The company

shaped the theatre to conform to each play, constructing different audience frameworks for each production. The sets were usually based on

multilevel platforms, balconies, ramps, and scaffolds surrounding a stage that encroached on the audience's territory, providing a wider range of space for the actors and a greater flexibility of interaction between the audience and performers. The audience of the environmental theatre was invited, even expected, to participate. ("Environmental Theatre")

Such literal breaking of the fourth wall incorporates the ideas of Cocteau, Artaud and Brecht, and provides an underlying philosophy for artists rejecting traditional theater venues.

### THE BREAD AND PUPPET THEATRE—PETER SCHUMANN

Peter Schumann brought his Bread and Puppet Theatre from Germany to New York in 1961, and was also prepared to play anywhere (Styan 166). According to Roose-Evans, the one space he rejected was that of the traditional theater (121). The theatrical work of The Bread and Puppet Theater, a politically radical performance group, revolved around protesting through the means of performing arts against contemporary social and political ills. This included Anti-Vietnam War and anti-draft protests, support for Daniel Ortega, and opposition to the World Trade Organization. The group did not have a permanent location; instead, in the spirit of environmental theater, they performed in the streets. The Bread and Puppet Theater rejected not only traditional venues and manifested dissatisfaction with the socio-political situation, but also renounced any forms of traditional theater. In his manifesto-like article for *The Drama Review* in 1968, Schumann describes the mission of his company, and the theater in general:

We give you a piece of bread with the puppet show because our bread and theater belong together. For a long time the theater arts have been separated from the stomach. Theater was entertainment. Theater is different. It is more like bread, more like a necessity. Theater is a form of religion.

Puppet theater is the theater of all means. Puppets and masks should be played in the street. They are louder than the traffic. They don't teach problems, but they scream and dance and display life in its clearest terms. Puppet theater is of action rather than dialogue. The action is reduced to the simplest dance-like and specialized gestures.

We have two types of puppet shows: good ones and bad ones, but all of them are for good and against evil. (35)

Schumann took the Brechtian principle of people's theater quite literally by bringing it to the streets of New York. His Happening-like

performances involving 20 feet tall puppets could hardly go unnoticed. He soon succeeded in having his voice heard, even if the dialogues were marginal and scarce. Since the artistic means of the performances relied mainly upon music and movement, and involved audience participation, “Bread and Puppet’s scripts were minimally written, [and] the performances more or less improvised” (Secor 268). Schumann, however, unlike Chaikin or the Becks, did not use improvisation as a rehearsal tool, or an acting method. It was more of a natural outcome resulting from the very nature of the performance—annexing the surroundings to adopt them as the performance space and converting random passers-by into an accidental audience.

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### THE MANHATTAN PROJECT; ANDRE GREGORY AND THE SAN FRANCISCO MIME TROUPE; RG DAVIS

Other important experimentalists of the day that combined the ideas of the European avant-garde and contributed to the development of the new American theater were Andre Gregory and RG Davis. Gregory, before leaving for Poland to work with his former teacher, Jerzy Grotowski, led an experimental company perversely named The Manhattan Project. Having studied acting under Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner, he combined their acting techniques with Grotowski’s principles. Hence, his production of *Alice in Wonderland* (1970) was devised through laboratory rehearsals based on improvisation (Braun 333).

RG Davis’s experimental project, The San Francisco Mime Troupe, founded in 1959, was as far away from Broadway in terms of distance as it was in its mindset. The company began with Event-like performances based on music and visual art, but was soon experimenting with commedia dell’arte that, in part, heavily relied on improvisation. The troupe “began by playing Moliere and Goldoni in the style of the commedia dell’arte, until Davis took his productions out-of-doors as a form of street theatre” (Styan 166). Similarly to Off-Broadway productions, The Troupe’s performances served as critical commentaries on contemporary events. Their adaptation of Goldoni’s comedy *L’amant Militaire* aimed to criticize the Vietnam War. In addition, the group actively partook in organized anti-war protests by forming a marching band that encouraged the demonstrators to “unite theater and revolution and groove in the parks,” for which they were awarded their first Obie Award in 1968 (“The San Francisco Mime Troupe, History”). One of the most interesting of Davis’s projects subverted and put to new use a 19<sup>th</sup>-century spectacle: “In 1965, Davis, Saul Landau, and a racially mixed group of actors created

*A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel*, using a historically racist form to attack racism in both its redneck and liberal varieties” (“The San Francisco Mime Troupe, History”). Davis coalesced the formal and political ideas of Brecht, whose direction, according the Troupe’s official website, he sought, with popular theatrical forms such as *commedia dell’arte* and a minstrel show and presenting them in a distinctively American context.

## THE NEW THEATER—FROM ANARCHY TO IMPRO(V)

American artists were audacious in seeking new spheres of expression for thought and action, eagerly exploring various routes of artistic discovery and inspiration. The Reform and the European avant-garde had a lasting impact on the American theater. The ideas, principles and styles which emerged on the Old Continent found their way onto the American stage, and, by merging with distinctive American qualities and traditions, contributed greatly to the formation of the unique character of the evolving American theater.

The new theater was distinctly anarchic both in form and content. It rejected “all traditional techniques, story-line, naturalistic representation, plot, suspense, climax, denouement” (Roose-Evans 146). As such, it stood discernibly in opposition to traditional theater. In many respects, the artists also manifested their anti-government stance, which they expressed through politically and socially engaged performances, the incorporation of themes of social and racial inequality, and active participation in anti-war protests. The anarchic notion that an individual should be free of all constraints was enhanced through the choice of non-theatrical venues and the use of improvisation as a means of artistic expression. The American artists explored the wide variety of possibilities that improvisation offered them as a creative tool, a method, a component in the creative process of the performance and play development, as well as a valuable aid in actors’ training. Such an inclination towards experimentation and the exploration of new styles and methods led to the emergence of various new theatrical forms.

## CONCLUSION

This paper shows, in a very narrow yet carefully selected scope, how the American stage combined various forms and functions of improvisation and through these experiments created brand new, distinctively American

styles and forms. Out of this concoction, through various inspirations and collective ideas, the improvisational theater was born—a separate, complex entity, “a performance product in and of itself” (Napier 1), relying purely on improvisation, not only as a means, but also as an end result.

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# REVIEWS

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Poetry, Environment and the Possibility  
 of Future. A Review of Sam Solnick's  
*Poetry and the Anthropocene:  
 Ecology, Biology and Technology  
 in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*  
 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017)

The development of the field of ecocriticism has gained momentum over the last decade, with a number of publications having redefined and re-mapped what have until recently been held as crucial insights. One thinks particularly of Timothy Morton's *The Ecological Thought* and Timothy Clarke's *Ecocriticism on the Edge* but also of the publications of Hannes Bergthaller and Hubert Zapf. Among the genres of literary production that matter to the ecological paradigms poetry has been given increased attention after a period in which it was prose that provided the impetus for an increased commitment to ecocritical investigations (here the work of Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin and Greg Garrard may be mentioned). While poetry has always stood behind the ecocritical project, given its origins in Romanticism (largely disputed now) and the foundational role of poets like Gary Snyder or Wendell Berry, the contemporary poets clearly needed a more sustained attention in terms of the ecological focus of their writing. Again, here the work of Terry Gifford and, in recent years, Susanna Lindström and Eóin Flannery (both in the Irish context) has been crucial. With the release of Sam Solnick's *Poetry and the Anthropocene*, the critical scene receives a major study, one which promises to be among the cornerstones of a discipline that is only now coming into its own.

Solnick's monograph is distinguished by its breadth, as he focuses on three quite distinct poets, each representing a different tradition. While Ted Hughes and Derek Mahon are familiar choices for an analysis of poetic responses to the crises that the Anthropocene brings (Gifford and Leonard

Scigaj are as important to ecocriticism as they are central to the reception of Hughes's work), J. H. Prynne, while by all means germane to the discussion, has received far less critical attention than the previous two in general and as regards ecology in particular. If Hughes represents a naturalism descended from such poets as D. H. Lawrence and W. B. Yeats, which is coupled with a deep devotion to mythical thinking, Mahon is a cosmopolitan poet, whose preoccupation with the environment is closer to the wider conception of deep ecology. Prynne works in an experimental tradition, frequently ascribed to the Modernist projects of Pound and Charles Olson (even though such a designation is less true of his post 1990s work), which is generally alien to the more traditional work of poets like Hughes and Mahon. And yet, Solnick sets little store by traditional distinctions of literary history and reception, hunting for the three poets' ecological preoccupations in lieu of trying to set up a critical ground whereon the three poetries could be regarded as furthering a fundamentally similar intellectual project. He states at the outset that his goal is to "show how Hughes tracks the influence of communicative, agricultural and martial technologies on our relations to our own, and other animals', environments, bodies and behaviours" (12); on the other hand, Mahon's poetry is argued to pitch "too-easy environmentalism," which the poet x-rays through a consistent deployment of irony that in itself is indicated to be a "debilitating force," against "a more realistic, troubling and sometimes blackly comic form of ecological consciousness" (13). Finally, Prynne's work, poetry as well as prose, is employed "as a means through which to frame the question of materiality, intelligibility and quantification that permeate his approaches to biology, environment and poetics" (15). In thus delimited a field, Solnick unravels his argument with a view to demonstrating that "poetry is forced to find new ways of rendering, recalibrating and mutating the complex relationships between human organisms and the environments that their behaviour and technologies have shaped" (15).

Solnick opens his study with a thorough review of theoretical, scientific and ecocritical literature, highlighting the internal debates and contradictions in the field of ecocriticism and ecology in general. The scope of his coverage is as superb as it is profound and aptly phrased. While chapter one serves the function of laying out the ground for the forthcoming explorations of the three poets' work, it also offers some pertinent insights into the development of ecopoetry from the early 1990s, referring to the work of Cheryl Glotfelty and Scott Slovic (the two thinkers behind the establishment of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, ASLE) and also acknowledging the debt to pioneer critics such as Gifford and Scigaj, with an obligatory introduction of the concepts of Jonathan Bate. It is undoubtedly a merit of

Solnick's book that although he seems to feel an affinity with notions such as Morton's "embeddedness," which he explains as "asking whether, in its attempt to construct a phenomenology of reengagement and inhabitation, ecocriticism fails to show the complex ways humans are embedded in their universe" (25, see Morton 135–38), he also reconstructs criticism of Morton's ideas by for example Garrard, who warns against Morton's hankering after wilderness epiphanies. The fastidiousness of Solnick's treatment of various approaches to ecopoetics notwithstanding, his crucial contribution comes in his references to experimental ecopoetry, which he concentrates on via a discussion of the critical work of Harriet Tarlo. In the introduction to her 2009 anthology *The Ground Aslant*, Tarlo suggests that what she calls "radical landscape poetry," a category that comprises poets such as Allen Fisher, Barry MacSweeney and Prynne among others, presents "a more realistic view of nature" (Tarlo 2), one that eschews the oversimplifications of much contemporary post-pastoral poetry (Gifford's term, see Gifford 150–55). By referring to such polarities within the study of environmentally-inclined poetry, Solnick shows intellectual fairness in that he does not elevate his theses by silencing voices of dissent. One is aware that Solnick knows that he is covering a contradictory territory and the poets he is writing about would likely fail to see eye to eye on pretty much anything to do with poetry, even if they might reach a tentative truce on environmental matters. It is with these in mind that he commends the ideas of Zapf and Robert Kaufman in a proposition that amounts to a thesis of his study: "literature helps the reader to see, or perhaps experience, the limitations of the 'status quo concepts' determined by society and this can be a source of social, political or ecological possibility," adding further on that "aesthetic experience is better described not as reintegrating different forms of cultural knowledge within the social whole, but rather as drawing out their incommensurability with each other and with the subject's experience" (52). This claim testifies to Solnick's commitment to dialectics, which I would call negative were it not for the cool attitude that most ecocritics' express towards Adorno; nonetheless, Solnick emphasizes that the crucial aspect of literature, and the three poets' work is particularly important in this respect, is its ability to flesh out contrarious agendas that we tend to overlook in our daily linguistic praxis.

In the chapter on Hughes, Solnick proceeds to identify what he deems to be a frequent misapprehension of his work by critics who see him as abhorring technology, which distracts man from his connection with nature (Solnick 66). This is a rather radical position but it also serves to illuminate a number of allusions scattered across Hughes's writings, not only poetry but also prose, to scientific principles and elements of its

jargon; this is evident even in his more popular pieces, such as his essay on “Myth and Education,” in which he argues that

if the story [myth] is learned well, so that all its parts can be seen at a glance, as if we looked through a window into it, then that story has become like the complicated hinterland of a single word. . . . Any fragment of the story serves as the “word” by which the whole story’s electrical circuit is switched into consciousness, and all its light and power brought to bear. (Hughes 139)

It is immediately noticeable that the excerpt relies on Hughes’s potent use of the metaphor of a myth resembling “the complicated hinterland of a single word” but this same evocation is shot through with ideas taken from the register of science—myths are analyzable into parts and they activate their own “short circuits.” This gives credence to Solnick’s thesis that Hughes uses technology inconsistently; instead, he seems to realize that it is neither good nor bad but merely endowed with too great an adulation by the general public (he indicates as much in an interesting letter to Philip Larkin, written in November 1985, when Larkin was fast succumbing to cancer; Hughes advises that Larkin consult “a very strange and remarkable fellow,” Ted Cornish, who was a healer and whose feats Hughes discusses against “US research into what goes on under a healer’s hands” [Reid 503]). In Solnick’s reading, Hughes becomes a poet who desires to shake up our accepted modes of thinking rather than have us shift our focus from technology back to nature. There may be moments when the line of argument is tenuous, as in the suggestion that in “Crow Ego,” the eponymous bird’s reformulation of the mythical material that is used in the composition of the poem “re-tool[s] [the past’s myths] for *Crow*’s future-oriented ecological project” (Solnick 96); in what sense the volume pursues an “ecological project,” and what the nature of this project is, remain unclear. Even so, Solnick’s conclusion grasps what seems to be an important aspect of Hughes’s poetic vision:

Hughes, perhaps more clearly in his creative work than his criticism, encourages a sense that art does not just revivify our senses in the manner that early ecocriticism proposed but becomes an engine for mutating new concepts, and thereby new possibilities. This intertwined process of perceptual sensitivity and conceptual possibility means that, for Hughes, art might play a significant role in adapting humans to the environmental crisis. (Solnick 97)

Continuing his investigation, Solnick goes on to address Mahon’s poetry, first noting the sustained use of irony as a key trope of his *oeuvre*, and

then exploring the poet's interest in ecology, which has been growing since the early 1990s. Irony is shown to be both a governing trope in these poems and an injurious swerve from the matters of environmental responsibilities. However, for Solnick, irony as deployed by Mahon in his poems, which focus on anxieties over climate change, constitutes a crucial formal aspect that allows the poems to "offer a series of powerful challenges to readers interested in ecology and poetry" (Solnick 108). The problem that appears to be at issue in this part of his study centres around the idea of how a serious ecological engagement can avoid falling prey to easy dogmatism. In response to that issue, Solnick argues that Mahon's irony matters because it frees "the poetry from the complicity and complacency of simulative politics. In doing so it explores the complex and often troubling relations between concerned individuals and their environment" (129). This is quite evident in how Mahon's engagement with James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis's Gaia hypothesis is played out, so that the simplistic metaphor proffered by the two scientists in the 1970s in Mahon's "Homage to Gaia" (from *Life on Earth*, 2008) is unravelled in a series of contradictory, or ironical, images that resist being formulated into an agenda. Eóin Flannery has suggested that "the organicism of Lovelock's Gaia theory . . . is matched by the sense of poetic integrity across ['Homage to Gaia']" (37), a point that Solnick seems to take issue with even though they both agree that the poet seeks to undermine our complacency and instil, in Flannery's formulation, "artistic self-consciousness in exchanges with non-human ecology" (47). It is also noteworthy that Flannery stresses Mahon's resistance to the onslaught of capitalism, noting that "for Mahon, poetry is the peripheral alternative to the global consensus of commercialism, with its attendant deleterious environmental impacts" (48). Solnick, on an ultimately complementary note in respect to Flannery, claims that "Mahon's germinal ironies search out modes and sites of resistance, qualities within the non-identical, the potentiality and operation of the wasted and the marginalised, consistently calling on his readers to ask what—from microbes to multinationals—is implicated within the interpenetrating scales of his chaos of complex systems and how these might mutate in(to) an as-yet-unconceptualised future" (144). This is an apt transposition of what Hugh Haughton has called Mahon's "ironic conscience" onto the level of ecological awareness of the threats that modernity's rapaciousness in general, and the unhinged consumerism spurred on by capitalist economy in particular pose to the environment.

If Mahon is shown to be interested in questions of scale which Clarke has shown lead to an increasing ambiguity of all attempts at comprehending the issues of ecology, a crisis that he terms "Anthropocene disorder" (Clarke 23), Prynne is the poet crucially preoccupied with problems of



scalar ambiguities. In an early monograph on Prynne, N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge have pointed out that “poetry has not often found a way of representing events beyond the scale of direct, individual perception—events too large and slow to be observed, such as geological process of formation or dissolution, or too small and quick, such as the movement of molecules or the immediate reactions of nerve-cells” (5). Furthering this insight, Solnick explains that his reading of Prynne “moves across different scales, moving in space from the processes of gene-expression to pictures of the globe from lunar orbit, and in time from the transhuman communities of prehistory to the marginalised populations dealing with the repercussion of climate change” (148). Taking on Prynne’s affinity with Heidegger (an area of Prynne criticism that is relatively well-developed but Solnick’s restatement of the correlation between the poet and the philosopher is pithy without being reductive), as well as his critique of de Saussure and his vast intertextual apparatus, Solnick convincingly demonstrates that “the ecological challenge of this contemporary ‘carbon season’ is . . . an extension of [Prynne’s] attentiveness to the qualitative and the quantitative in the realm of the organic, something which . . . lies at the heart of his poetics” (186). Solnick writes pertinently about Prynne’s use of science and how accurately Prynne employs conceptual schemes so as to challenge their apparent objectivity and aloofness from involvement in the ideological strife of the contemporary world. This is best shown in Prynne’s *High Pink of Chrome* but also in *Kazoo Dreamboats*, a long poem that takes on the matter contradiction as derived from Mao Zedong’s essay. It is in the latter that, Solnick argues, Prynne insists with particular emphasis on “think[ing] beyond anthropocentric terms, including the ways the resistance of the world—its conflicting and dynamic materiality—exceeds both conceptual thought and technological control” (Solnick 190).

One might point out, however, that despite his pertinent insight into Prynne’s avowed search for the destabilization of accepted modes of thought commodification, Solnick overlooks what seems to be a promising connection between Mahon and Prynne. In a relatively short span of time, both poets published essays on huts: Prynne’s “Huts” appeared in 2008 and Mahon’s “Huts and Sheds” in 2011. It is notable that, adopting different critical methods, Prynne canvassing the history of English language poetry and the popular imagery and Mahon being more meditative in his explorations, they both endorse a view of poetry as a mode of resistance to the reification of thought. Mahon argues that, due to their position at the intersection of the known and the unknown, huts are “sites of reverie,” which being “immune to market forces” represent a removed hermitage that “invite[s] us to mine, to mind, our human resources and put ourselves in order” (13). This view of huts tallies with Mahon’s point, from “The

Poetry Nonsense,” which Solnick discusses at some length, that poetry nonsense “has no function and no exchange value. . . . It is indeterminate, marginal, unimportant; and therein lies its importance” (Mahon 33). On the other hand, Prynne argues that “the house of language is not innocent, and is no temple. The intensity of poetic encounter, of imagination and deep insight into spiritual reality and poetic truth, carry with them all the fierce contradiction of what human language is and does” (630). Part of this contradiction is that a word projecting as seemingly innocuous an image as “hut” (one that is “timber-framed and clad with light planks or other local materials, to provide basic shelter, to allow outward watchfulness [originally of grazing animals], in distant or non-social locations, often at language-margins, with a low-raked roof and window-spaces and one door, not a dwelling and not set up for family life but estranged from it and its domestic values” [Prynne 629]) is also underlain with implications of, for example, “watchtowers of divisive and punitive regimes” (Prynne 629). He concludes that “ruin and part-ruin lie about us on all sides,” adding that “the poets are how we know this, are how we may dwell not somewhere else but where we are” (631). For Prynne, the importance of poetry lies in its ability to let that which ideology conceals be heard and known, a premise of poetics quite similar to Mahon’s urge that poetry’s crucial feature is its untranslatability into the prevalent modes of value endowment. The association serves to indicate that the poetic projects Solnick chooses to discuss share an intellectual foundation beyond their interest in ecology.

Such minor omissions notwithstanding, Solnick’s monograph is a fine example of literary criticism that seeks to engage wider issues than just poetry’s own specific *modus operandi*. At no point does he end up preaching on behalf of the environment, using the poets’ work as a welcome excuse for popularizing an agenda; instead, Solnick works his way painstakingly through the three *oeuvres*, picking out the moments of contradiction and imaginary flourishes, which have made the work of Hughes, Mahon and Prynne such a permanent pleasure for so long. If criticism has any role to play in tackling the environmental crisis we are witnessing all around us, it is by being practised in precisely the manner which Solnick masterfully displays in his study.

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## Review of *White* by Bret Easton Ellis

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Although he has published six novels and a collection of stories previously, Bret Easton Ellis's reputation rests largely on a pair of novels whose popular culture-infused plots bookended the 1980s: his debut, *Less Than Zero*, an unflinching look into the nihilistic excess of the MTV generation; and *American Psycho*, a Wall Street satire which initially provoked outrage and disgust via one of literature's most infamously unreliable narrators, Patrick Bateman, but later enjoyed success as a Hollywood film and Broadway musical. Readers have grown to expect from Ellis darkly comic social satire mixed with increasingly stylized prose and the author as a cultural gadfly. His most recent novel (*Imperial Bedrooms*) was published in 2010 and since then, Ellis's focus seems to have shifted to posting provocative comments on Twitter and hosting his eponymous podcast. It is within the context of his four decades as a public figure that Ellis's first nonfiction book *White* appears.

Turning the old saw that "you can't judge a book by its cover" on its head, the first thing one notices with this book is the minimalist cover, which is glaringly white apart from the title, Ellis's name, and a series of reflective watermarked terms which could simultaneously describe Ellis himself and suggest some connection to the word *white*: writer, critic, lover, hater, tweeter, free-speaker, transgressive, privileged, and male. In aggregate, these terms could function as a word cloud illustrating perhaps how Ellis sees himself; or how Ellis is perceived by others; or to leverage a term Ellis deploys regularly in the book, they could simply be "poses" meant to garner attention or "likes." The collection is organized into eight loosely conceived essays—"Empire," "Acting," "Second self," "Post-sex," "Liking," "Tweeting," "Post-empire," and "These Days"—which are primarily concerned with three interlocking issues: mapping the conditions in which Generation X went from childhood on to adulthood (and the attendant worldview from said upbringing); examining the far-reaching effects of social media across artistic, political, and generational

lines (often through the lens of how current events unfold on Twitter); and tracing Ellis's life as a writer through all this, with particular attention given to the period around which he wrote *American Psycho*.

Ellis opens the book with an epigraph from Janet Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer*—itself a provocative and controversial text<sup>1</sup>—and the epigraph concludes: “Hypocrisy is the grease that keeps society functioning in an agreeable way” (Malcolm 55). Ellis uses the epigraph to both signal to the reader one of his prevailing considerations throughout the book *White*—“that empowerment doesn't come from liking this or another, but from being true to our messy contradictory selves” (120)—and perhaps to inoculate himself from the inevitable criticism his “messy, contradictory” book might provoke for being exactly what he suggests it will be. Those readers familiar with Ellis's Twitter feed or podcast will recognize the contrarian stance he frequently takes: Ellis the gay man quarreling with GLAAD and disliking the critically-acclaimed film *Moonlight*; Ellis the writer arguing for an artist's prerogative to take creative risks or inhabit characters far different from their own personal biographies while vigorously opposing the actor Matt Bomer, a gay man, taking on the role of Christian Grey in the *50 Shades of Grey* series; or Ellis the self-described bastion of inclusivity celebrating his friendships across political stripes and cultural backgrounds—he shared cocaine with Jean Michel Basquiat after all!—while at the same time repeatedly claiming that the establishment media and people, in general, take Donald Trump and his purposely divisive and incendiary remarks and attacks against immigrants, Muslims, the queer community, or the press far too seriously.

As Ellis tells it, Generation Xers are more resilient, self-sufficient, and better prepared for the complexities of life than younger generations, as he writes that “[w]e didn't get ribbons for doing a good job and we weren't awarded for just showing up: there were actual winners and losers” (17). These life lessons are cast in stark contrast to the Millennials, whom Ellis derides throughout the book as “Generation Wuss.” Part of the blame he places on his fellow Gen Xers who rejected the *laissez-faire* approach of their parents, and instead were coddling and, in a sense, failing their children by

not teaching them how to deal with life's hardships about how things actually work: people might not like you, this person will not love you

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm's book examines the murky ethical relationship between journalist Joe McGuinniss and convicted murderer Jeffrey MacDonald. MacDonald later sued McGuinniss for libel and Malcolm's book uses the McGuinniss-MacDonald dynamic as a kind of case study in how journalists interact with their subjects.

back, kids are really cruel, work sucks, it's hard to be good at something, your days will be made up of failure and disappointment, you're not talented, people suffer, people grow old, people die. (131)

Instead of processing experiences and growing into adulthood, Ellis sees Millennials as retreating to safe spaces and “victim narratives,” easily offended, and quick to silence dissenting opinions on social media or demand various forms of social justice via Twitter. On the one hand, he frames these differences along free speech lines—that the younger generation has betrayed certain ideals of liberalism—but on the other hand, his objections could be easily attributed along generational dividing lines: those whose lives have been immersed in technology, the internet, and social media since birth, and those who have not.

Throughout the book, Ellis offers a wide array of opinions on a myriad of issues (e.g., why country music is better than Kendrick Lamar; why internet pornography has ruined sex; or why wealthy white Californians forfeit the right to be outraged by the Trump administration's treatment of refugees). In a discussion comparing the aesthetic merits of the films *Fruitvale Station* and *Weekend* in his essay “Post-sex,” Ellis responds to criticism that perhaps his whiteness may contribute to him preferring *Weekend* as a film and limit his ability to identify with the black protagonist of *Fruitvale Station* being shot and killed at the end of the film to the same degree as black viewers:

I'd argue that living without a direct experience of poverty or state-sponsored violence, growing up without ever being presumed a guaranteed threat in public spaces and never facing an existence where protection is hard to come by don't equate to a lack of empathy, judgment, or understanding on my part and don't rightly and automatically demand my silence. (91)

Put simply, Ellis claims that a lack of direct experience of a given issue—in this case, being a victim of systemic racism—is not equivalent to lacking empathy or understanding of the issue. Given Ellis's position, it comes as something of a surprise when, in parts of two different essays in the book, he chastises Meryl Streep for her speech at the Golden Globes where she criticized Donald Trump for mocking a disabled reporter and celebrated the diversity of the nominees of the various awards. In his essay “Liking” he devotes several paragraphs to Streep's failure to use the speech to eulogize various people she worked with (Michael Cimino, Mike Nichols, Nora Ephron, Carrie Fisher); in “These Days,” he “takes Meryl Streep to task for her outraged anti-Trump speech . . . the same week she'd put her Greenwich Village townhouse on the market for thirty million

dollars” (248). In both cases, his argument undermines what he claims are core beliefs of his: free speech and an ability to empathize with others. In terms of free speech, Streep should be able to use her platform to express whatever she wishes; in terms of empathizing with others, the monetary value of a potential property sale has nothing to do with concern for the disabled and stands as a salient example of a non sequitur.

There are various segments in the book where Ellis reflects on his writing process with *Less Than Zero* or *American Psycho*. Some claims are easy enough to take at face value, such as when he explains how the character of Julian in *Less Than Zero* was named after Richard Gere’s Julian in *American Gigolo*. Moreover, in fairness, Ellis did position Donald Trump as a kind of surrogate father figure for the character of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, a decision he claims was deliberate after reading *The Art of the Deal* and researching various dubious dealings of Trump. However, from the demonstrable facts, Ellis looks back at various events in the 2016 election and afterward with all the self-certainty of hindsight. (There is no evidence that people in 1987 presumed Donald Trump to be a future president, for instance, and Trump’s 2016 win might appear retrospectively inevitable thanks more to recency bias than literary prophecy, but Ellis depicts those events as if he knew the outcome all along.) For a writer who claims to care so little about politics, he devotes a significant portion of the book to the presidential election, Trump’s remarks, his social circle’s response to Trump, and social-media-based outrage. If each essay were taken on its own, perhaps Ellis’s claims would be reasonably coherent, but when read alongside each other with so many disparate and conflicting ideas from essay to essay, the connections become either muddled or actively undermined.

This is not to suggest that the essays lack insight entirely. Although Ellis’s criticism of social media is often impressionistic and broad stroke, he raises a vital point when he considers the consequences for artists in the current social climate and the tendency towards silencing those with opposing views, or de-platforming speakers at American university campuses:

How could artists flower in an environment while terrified about expressing themselves however they wanted to, or take big creative risks that often walked along the edges of good taste or even blasphemy, or simply allowed them to step into someone else’s shoes without being accused of cultural appropriation? (261)

Similarly, he astutely observes that the establishment media responded poorly or ineffectively with near-constant outrage when confronted



with a legitimately disruptive force such as Donald Trump. Given the divergent elements and competing polemical aims of Ellis's *White*, it might be concluded that his project in the book is to make the world safe for hypocrisy. Consequently, his contrarian tendencies lead him into the trap of false equivalence: while it might be a useful exercise to consider that Twitter is not a space one should take too seriously, not all Twitter accounts are the same, a fact that Ellis never considers. (For instance, one particular Twitter account is backed by one of the most formidable militaries the world has ever known, replete with a nuclear arsenal. Celebrities such as Taylor Swift or Kanye West may have massive followings online, but their tweets do not have the same potential to destabilize alliances or regions, separate families, or send the stock market plummeting 600 points in a single day.) In his zeal for ironic distance, Ellis would rather take his readers through the reasons why the most important character in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* was Charlie Sheen in his brief cameo at the end of the film than to think through how empathy or free speech could be encouraged or supported amidst social-media-exacerbated hostilities. Although the essays aim at some degree of the moral complexity and nuance present in his fiction, they never quite deliver either the intellectual clarity or emotional intensity of his fictional narratives.

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