

Editors' Notes and Introduction to Ecofictions: The Legitimacy of Hope

Chief Editor's Note

With this issue HJEAS joins the Open Access journals of Sciendo, a part of the De Gruyter Group, a company with over 270 years of publishing experience that will help make the journal available worldwide. Our Archive up to this issue will continue to be maintained by JSTOR. We welcome your comments and, as usual, look forward to receiving your contributions.

Donald E Morse, Chief Editor

Issue Editor's Notes

“As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me.” Eighty years after he put that on paper, Orwell’s words have a tragic contemporaneity: they capture the grim reality for millions of Europeans today. Like all military conflicts, the Russo-Ukraine war has brought calamity to communities and individuals alike, causing immense damage to public and private properties, industries, and infrastructure. It does not stop beyond shifting frontlines but is fought in the media, in virtual space, it is a hostility raging in political and diplomatic circles, in global trade and financial networks, carrying the grisly promise of turning upside down the geopolitical order and the delicate global economic balance of the past decades.

Orwell’s remark might not fit any wartime scenario, as he is talking about bomber crews and the impersonality of their lethal activities, the anonymity of the act of destruction that allows perpetrators to free their mind of consequences and find absolution in the idea of serving a higher duty, obligation, or responsibility. But is not the blind obedience of a civilized mind to a superior rationale and greater power the irrationality of war itself, any war, a principle so much more acceptable if you fight it from war rooms and newsrooms rather than in the trenches?

War looks different from the trenches, and this I mean literally. Looking around from an inhospitable mud pit, a view of a scorched and scarred landscape opens up, nature reduced to wasteland. Such apocalyptic scenery has fashioned the cultural memory of the Great War as it will probably shape the present one, yet it is highly unlikely that our civilization will ever commemorate the ecological devastation the same way as it does the human catastrophe. We seek absolution for humanity-induced ecological

damages in nature's ability to regenerate, to cover up landscape injuries, to repopulate abandoned areas; in fact, the rejuvenation of nature often offers hope and inspiration for human communities to revitalize. Such correlation between ecology and war—with an emphasis on the paradoxical and cynical attitude of a civilization seeking hope from what it destroys—is altogether justified and carries much pessimism about our future. Nonetheless, there might be room for optimism if we consider the wider implications of the present war. Turmoil in global energy markets in the wake of the conflict might have brought the much anticipated change in consumer attitudes pushing towards lower carbon-emission economies, especially in Europe. This, if nothing else, does offer a glimmer of hope as bombs keep falling.

The thematic block in this issue of *HJEAS*, “Ecofictions for an Endangered World: The Legitimacy of Hope,” addresses some of the concerns raised above with regard to war. This selection of four articles—guest edited by Éva Federmayer and Dorottya Mozes—deal with literary and cinematic reactions to the worldwide ecosystemic crisis. At the centre of the first of these, a contribution by Ian M Kenny and Irina Souch, are stories of hope: hope we receive from the most remote regions of our planet, which are nevertheless part of the Anthropocene and are in danger of being subjected to anthropocentric thinking. Reading *Ice Diaries* (2016), a memoir of Nova Scotian author Jean McNeil together with American anthropologist Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (1986), the article investigates the narrative decentering of Romantic tropes of exploring the Antarctic and the construction of this region in literature through a multiplicity of sensorial, affective, psychosocial impressions, dreams, and visions, but also human, non-human, and more-than-human epistemologies. For the authors, polar fiction may strengthen hope in the future of this planet by embracing the idea of a complex Earth system, that is, by “moving the study of hope into ecological terrain through ethical stories that give voice to” Earth's nonhuman inhabitants.

In the second essay Lorena Bickert explores the concept of ecoheroism in Sherri L. Smith's speculative fiction novel *Orleans* (2013) as an example of turning away from both the hierarchical human–nature dichotomy and the dominant cultural context of heroism in which “heroic discourses have frequently been co-opted for the praise of soldierly sacrifice, for a legitimization of colonialist and imperialist warfare.” Bickert asserts that Smith's novel is concerned with “the heroism that lies in *daring to exist* in a crisis-state,” that is, a hopeful heroics, a new kind of eco-heroic narrative featuring heroes—cyborgs operating in techno-organismal assemblages—who

themselves exist in a state of crisis and are denied the clear objectives and optimism traditional literary characters enjoy, while fulfilling their destiny as heroes.

Sara Villamarín-Freire's piece employs the concept of waste, understood as "matter out of place, or devoid of value whatsoever," to investigate two short stories from Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's collection of short prose, *Friday Black* (2018). Examining the literary construction of the storyworlds, the author points to the manner in which derogative connotations of the concept of waste arise, when it no longer signifies negative impacts of human activities on the environment, like the release of impure, polluting and toxic substances. Instead, it is integrated into a racist and discriminatory vocabulary (for example, the color of skin as impurity), the language of consumer capitalism, and its perception of people with little value for existing socioeconomic hierarchies as disposable human waste. Hope, once again, is created narratively, in the awareness-raising potential of stories that decipher processes of waste-ification, stories featuring characters who resist this discourse and embrace non-oppressive forms of communality.

Focusing on Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) and *mother!* (2017), Annamária Hódosy emphasizes the ecological dimension of biblical motifs and Christian creation myths in these films, and claims that such strategies do not aspire to preach about ecological threats to religious audiences, but "grapple with the question of how the Christian tradition might have influenced humankind in 'causing' the Anthropocene." The analysis makes clear distinctions between the use of biblical discourse in the two films, introducing *Noah* as a Judeo-Christian critique of the Capitalocene—the embodiment of contemporary anthropocentrism—with Noah obeying an eco-friendly God, even when this obedience requires him to follow, Hódosy contends, the environmental philosophy of deep ecology. The eco-narrative is quite different in *mother!* which is an ecofeminist film with numerous religious references and allegories with a clear intent to critique patriarchal anthropocentrism—the Andropocene. Although the article ignores the question of hope, we might presume that Aronofsky's ecocritical reframing of dark eschatological visions regards the Anthropocene as unfit to lead humanity into the Messianic Age.

Might it be that by questioning the purpose-driven hero or adventurous discovery, along with the reframing of the scriptural stories and teachings, these articles and the works discussed in them claim that tackling the ecological challenges of today requires non-anthropomorphizing narratives of hope? To have hope of this kind, we need to find our non-

anthropomorphic selves in addition to clarifying the concepts of the world outside the tenets of western metaphysics. One key area of this pursuit, Peggy Karpouzou contends, is “exploring alternative structuration of space, time, and consciousness,” a task she undertakes in Don DeLillo’s philosophical, or rather, geophilosophical novel, *Point Omega* (2010). In constructing a framework to decipher “desert timescape,” a concept Karpouzou regards as the central philosophical figure of the novel, the article engages with the rich theoretical literature on the desert. For DeLillo, as suggested here, the desert is both survival and extinction, hope and despair, Life and NonLife; a temporal, spatial, and corporeal formation that exists in the perpetual processes of grounding and ungrounding. As a temporal formation, it exists through the interaction of human, non-human, animate, and geological timelines; as for corporeality, it stages the transformation of the biological form into the mineral form through fossilization. What ecocriticism in particular and humanity in general might learn from the desert is the various forms, scales, and tempos that accompany the thriving and fading of life, an awareness vital to understanding and tackling ecological challenges.

The human encounter with a non-anthropomorphic world of microscopic scale during the pandemic years of 2020–22 will be long remembered. Márió Z. Nemes’s media anthropological exploration into quarantine subjectivity in the wake of the pandemic reminds us that this form of subjectivity with rich techno-cultural, social, and political dimensions predated the recent medical-biopolitical emergency, and found expression first in what we may call “postmodern viral ontology.” The article maps the emergence of this ontology with reference to some of its early notable practitioners, Antonin Artaud, William S. Burroughs, and David Cronenberg, artists with a shared interest in “pathogenic” cultural practices that “could potentially radically uproot the system of logocentric humanism.” According to Nemes, quarantine subjectivity during the pandemic was transformed into a digitized and psychologically experienced subjectivity, the exploration of which draws attention to psychopolitics, a form of smart power complementing the already existing biopolitical regime of late capitalist technocracy. While explaining how the anthropocentric world of humanism (*bios*) distanced itself from non-anthropocentric nature (the virus as *zoe*) through voluntary immobility and self-observation during the pandemic, the article claims that quarantine subjectivity found expression at the intersection of *bios* and *zoe*, in the communicative virality of our digital practices and the zoomification of daily life. The article explicates this claim in two computer

screen films—*Unfriended* (dir. Levan Gabriadze, 2014) and *Host* (Rob Savage, 2020).

Although in a different context, the question of in-betweenness is raised by Brigitta Gyimesi's article on Nabokov's autobiographic prose, with reference to a unique narrative strategy operating in the transitory zone between factuality and fictionality. Combining possible world theory with the inquiries of autobiography studies into the reliability of memory and processes of cross-fertilization between fact and fiction, the article delves into Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory* (1967), and his last novel, *Invitation to a Beheading* (1974). The paper's central question is how the narrative construction of possible worlds and the possible selves at the center of these worlds relate to the empirical life events of their author. Claiming that autobiographic prose for Nabokov "achieves the double purpose of expressing his insecurities in writing without the danger of exposing his privacy too much," Gyimesi undertakes the demanding task of trying to understand how the real Nabokov, the Nabokov of *Speak, Memory*, and Nabokov's possible self by the name V.V.—the protagonist of *Invitation to a Beheading*—correlate. Part of the task is to differentiate between self-investigating, self-presenting, and feared possible selves. The article identifies V.V. as a self-presenting, outward-oriented possible self, one that is eager to disclose sensational and parodic aspects of Nabokov's life, often in an exaggerated and playful manner while, at the same time, it strictly guards private and feared life events.

Bearing in mind the dialogue between narrative selves that may sometimes carry tensions and conflicts, the subsequent article by Susan Savage Lee uncovers some aspects of the friction within the American Generation X literary scene with David Foster Wallace and Bret Easton Ellis in its focus. The rivalry between the two authors is explored through a comparative reading of Wallace's short story "Girl with Curious Hair" and Ellis's *American Psycho*. The article discusses their differences with reference to postmodernism, truth, cynicism, selfhood, social-emotional connectivity, consumerism, popular culture, and the narrative construction of protagonists Sick Puppy and Patrick Bateman. According to Lee, the former's identity is more individuated, it is embedded in a moral framework and personal history, allowing viewers to decipher his anti-social behavior, emotional detachment, and superficial attitudes as effects instead of causes: "Wallace does try to provide more context for this problem [of superficiality] to better understand the failures and the hypocrisy of the West." By contrast, "Ellis engages more with collective identities formed by pop culture," most notably Bateman's cynicism, which

dissolves the self into nothingness and locks the young yuppie in an eternal cycle of nihilistic consumption. On the issue of violence, a central topic in both stories, the article once again calls attention to distinct differences claiming that Sick Puppy's sadistic urges are rooted in the traumatized recesses of his identity, while for Bateman's character, violence and murders—be those real or imagined—are essential to maintain the appearance of the self.

Violence of a gendered kind, sexual violence, and its telecinematic representation in the wake of the #MeToo movement, serves as the common ground for the last two articles of the current *HJEAS* issue. Zsófia O. Réti's thorough analysis of Emerald Fennel's *Promising Young Woman* (2020) regards the film as a genre pastiche of rape-revenge films and romantic comedy that revises the oversexualized heterosexual male gaze of the former, and subverts many tropes of the latter genre (such as the so-called meet cute, happy end, masked identities, montage scenes of lovers with upbeat music). According to Réti, the revisionist employment of the revenge formula no longer perceives rape as individual but as systemic violence, calling attention to the complicity of social attitudes and cultural norms with criminal behavior: "as opposed to classic rape-revenge, rape is not a gang crime here, but a societal one. It accuses not only the actual perpetrator but the entire rape culture, the society that endures, excuses, understates and normalizes rape." In a manner similar to how post-#MeToo movement rape films redefine sexual crime by emphasizing shared social responsibility and collective victimhood, they also launch an implicit critique against the imaginations and phantasies underlying rom-com narratives, which persistently foreground the achievability of romantic love. Popular acceptance of this notion, we might contend, not only illustrates the persistence of an escapist value system that informs popular culture at large, but points to the complicity of this culture with rape culture.

Expanding on such arguments, Anxhela Filaj's article deals with the daily reality of rape culture and the underlying mechanism of shaming. Investigating the third season of the television series *Broadchurch* (2017), the article introduces the notion of shame as a self-traumatizing (self-blaming, self-negating, and self-isolating) emotion operating through the feeling that one's presumed imperfections, immorality, and vulgarity is being revealed in front of others. On par with feminist scholars, Filaj ascribes a central role to shame in the social construction and control of female desire and sexuality as illustrated by the series, the story of a divorced woman and the victim of a recent rape trauma. *Broadchurch* comes through as a nuanced portrayal of the culture of shaming and the many forms it takes, that may include living with an unfaithful husband, whose infidelity undercuts positive feedback about one's sexuality

and femininity, excessive attachment to the opinion of peers and neighbors, or the choice to live according to age-appropriate codes of sexual behavior. On a more optimistic note, the protagonist eventually liberates herself from the yoke of shame by strengthening her inwards gaze and no longer seeking validation from the social environment. Such instances of empowerment should not remain isolated cases, in fact, any film that urges “women [to] vociferously manifest each-other’s vulnerabilities in a way which ensures they are all heard, believed, and their truths are ascertained,” enhances the resolve of the #MeToo movement to transform social mentalities.

The issue concludes with a handful of reviews in line with *HJEAS*’s longstanding tradition of introducing recently published scholarly research and offering critical feedback. This time we review an engaging book on immigration on the US-Canadian border, a volume on representing childhood in recent British novels, an eye-opening study exploring contemporary Native American/First Nations novels and, last but not least, a collection of essays dedicated to the study of Arab cinema.

As for some updates on the editorial team, Marianna Gula—our distinguished Irish scholar—has taken a leave of absence from her position as deputy-editor and has been replaced by Zsófia O. Réti, a researcher of film, television, and video games, among others. Farewell Mariann and welcome Zsófi.

Should you have missed it, the new series of HJEAS books has recently published “*A wretchedness to defend*”: *Reading Beckett’s Letters* by Erika Mihálycsa of Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania and the Open Access volume is available gratis at Debrecen University Press.



Introduction to the Special Thematic Block Ecofictions: The Legitimacy of Hope

Well into the twenty-first century, we can observe an impressive increase of critical discourses about the ecocidal spiral caused by the extensive human appropriation of the biosphere. Narratives about anthropogenic climate destruction, loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification, soil contamination, resource crises, and deadly zoonotic spillovers (such as the recent waves of the Covid pandemic) abound in apocalyptic scenes. Stories of human suffering in non-resilient areas and the rising number of climate refugees that

rapidly change human geography are couched in dire terms. Most recently, chronicles of the Russian invasion of Ukraine are alarming us on a daily basis with both the war's staggering human toll and its devastating ecological impact on soil, water and air, whose effects will persist for long years to come.

Cultural images of the demise of modernity (be that second or third modernity, based on fossil fuel growth economies) have also gained ground in a variety of critical discourses, yet obsession with growth is invariably and universally hailed by capitalists, socialists or fascists alike (Daly 8). Sustainability professionals either conjecture yet another victory over "nature"—this time by green technology—or anticipate near-term, climate-induced social collapse. Hence, it is little wonder that Jem Bendell provides us with a map of deep adaptation "to navigate this extremely difficult issue," or that environmental historian Donald Worster addresses the intertwined destiny of humans and the environment within a contracting world, in which the earth has been turned into a factory, even a toy we could quickly blow up (Worster 17, 20). At the same time, the global environmental crisis—commonly watered down to "climate change," a trope that eschews human responsibility in generating the demise—signifies the concatenation of several other crises, those of the society, the culture, and the individual (Eckersley 7–32). In the aggregate, we seem to have every reason to plunge into gloom and despair. Yet, at the same time, we live in an age of inevitable hope, even if it evolves from crisis and loss. Hence, the question seems to be imminent: "How do we move forward from the melancholy of a poisoned planet?" (Morton 2).

We, the editors—in tune with ecocritic Lawrence Buell—assume that the "environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it" (Buell 2), thus we happily acknowledge the value and importance of the *literary imagination*. We were also reminded of the importance of imagination from another perspective, highlighted by the social philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis: beyond the constricting nature of the symbolic and conceptual intermediaries whereby our structures of reality are established, the *social imaginary*, he contends, could very well function as the creative core of the socio-historical and psychic worlds, capable of initiating change even toward concrete utopias. Donna Haraway explicitly summons us to stay with the trouble in our *Chtulucene* and experiment with *tentacular* thinking that enables us to live and die well in multispecies entanglements by tapping into both science and fabulation; as she proposes, "[s]cience fact and speculative fabulations need each other, and both need

speculative feminism” (4). Emphasizing the decisive role of narratives in human cultures, Sylvia Wynter identifies humans as *homo narrans*, a storytelling species (69) with a capacity “[t]o recast space, chronology, and subjectivity through sociogeny and think about *decolonial scientia*” (117). The decolonization of (the dominant Western) epistemology has the potential of inducing radical changes that also affect human and nonhuman relations.

Inspired by all the above, we have invited essays committed to environmentally-valenced literary and cultural studies on Anglo-American literary and filmic narratives (or ecofictions) for *Ecofictions for an Endangered World: The Legitimacy of Hope*, the thematic block of this issue. We were eager to learn about ecofictions that challenge the current dysfunctional global system fostered by cornucopian fantasies of unlimited expansion in the face of limited natural resources and imminent environmental collapse. We encouraged prospective contributors to map out socio-ecological transformation from crisis into communities of survival, indeed, of wellbeing to “plot a path to benign degrowth” (Dobson 155). In our call for papers, we also sought to inspire scholars with ideas to foreground the possibilities of collective hope by living in loss through “making oddkin” so that “we become with each other or not at all” (Haraway 4). We wanted to have a grasp on nowtopian and utopian experiments and guerilla narratives to expand our understanding of what is possible and conceivable. Furthermore, we hoped to receive manuscripts that would consider the role of the environment in colonial and postcolonial fictions, engage with the significance of Black, indigenous, feminist and queer modalities of ecological thinking, and theorize hope and optimism. Along these lines, contributors were encouraged to tap into and make innovative use of the existing literature of ecocriticism, including considerations of eco-narratology (as pioneered by *Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory in English Studies*).

After a long period of vetting, editing, and corresponding with a good many prospective authors, we are happy to publish four truly intriguing essays in the thematic block *Ecofictions for an Endangered World: The Legitimacy of Hope* to grace the first issue of *HJEAS* in 2023.

Few regions in the world have inspired as many narrative accounts as the polar region, which boasts of a long history of travelogues by explorers. These travelogues in turn influenced literary representation of the region, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. In “Reconsidering Polar Literature in the Anthropocene: Locating Hope in the works of Jean McNeil and Barry Lopez,” Ian M Kenny and Irina Souch

reimagine polar writing as a location of hope in the Anthropocene. Drawing on earth system theory and spatial studies, their article employs a reparative reading to counter the previous emptying of the landscape of human and nonhuman life by what they consider to be paranoid human narration. Through their readings of *Ice Diaries* (2016) and *Arctic Dreams* (1986), they show that McNeil's Antarctic memoir and Lopez's account of the Far North transform these cold and remote regions into living, breathing places undergoing immense change. Working with what they call the troubled concept of hope in the midst of an ecological crisis, the authors suggest that "both texts provide strategies for imagining various visions of collective futures and act as hopeful narratives in opposition to managerial or capitalistic perspectives that describe Earth's polar regions as (future) sites of political and military conflict, scientific field laboratories, global shipping lanes, and heightened mineral extraction."

Lorena Bickert's "Hoping for Cyborgs: Cyborg Eco-Heroism, Odd Kinships, and Hopeful Heroics in Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans*" discusses the US-American writer's Afrofuturist climate fiction of 2013, which is set in the near-future, when a city, reminiscent of New Orleans, is devastated by hurricanes and a deadly viral disease, the ensuing cataclysm also entailing a large-scale societal collapse. Delving into the novel's "hopeful heroics," Bickert focuses on the refiguration of traditional (American) narratives of heroism, calling the two protagonists disruptive "eco-heroic cyborgs" in the plot. She defines "eco-heroism," which challenges anthropocentric heroic discourses, as "a brand of heroism that makes the uncertainty of ecosystemic crisis communicable in the shape of a hero story by foregrounding the corporeal experience of crisis, that is, the heroism that lies in *daring to exist* in a crisis-state, connected to other crisis-stricken bodies." Contextualizing her fascinating argument by Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1990) and *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), she also points out how the ecosystem of Orleans in Smith's novel becomes a vital and active eco-heroic cyborg body, partaking of the city's regeneration.

Like Lorena Bickert, Sara Villamarin-Freire also addresses a contemporary African American writer, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, whose debut book, a collection of twelve short stories, received excellent reviews upon publication, in 2018. In her "Even the apocalypse isn't the end: Emotional Numbness and the Reconstruction of Interpersonal Bonding in Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's *Friday Black*," Villamarin-Freire addresses two short stories, "The Era" and "Through the Flash," from this book to examine the figurations of *waste*, which is one of the key environmental and social

problems of the global world today. The author is specifically interested in how Adjei-Brenyah's texts, which are suffused with elements of science fiction and magic realism, expose *waste* in relation to humans who are unwanted, or merely regarded as the by-products of the whirring machine of consumerism in late capitalism. What is more, waste in this essay is also specified as "an organizing strategy that is congruent with the inner rules of each narrative's storyworld."

Annamária Hódosy's "Aronofsky's Two Visions of the Ecological Fall" examines the relationship between the Christian tradition and the Anthropocene in Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) and *mother!* (2017). She explores two different creation stories in the bible and how the two films depict the different human-nonhuman relationships these stories implicate. Whereas the first creation story (Gen 1:1–2:4) seems to suggest the duality of "man" and nature and that God commands the exploitation of nature, the second creation story in Genesis (2:4b–9, 15–25) stresses the responsibilities of humans in the way of stewardship. Hence Hódosy argues that *Noah* represents a critique of the Capitalocene. Through careful readings, she shows the eco-fundamentalist, eco-fascist Noah's failure to be guided by the ecofeminist women in his household. In contrast, she interprets *mother!* as an allegory that "reinterprets the Anthropocene as the Andropocene, or the age of ecological destruction caused by male chauvinism, even if indirectly." The film dramatizes unequal gender relations between the masculine poet, who represents God, and his wife, who represents Mother Earth, as well as the simultaneous destruction of the feminine and the nonhuman environment. While both films narrate ecological disaster as a foregone conclusion, Hódosy identifies seeds of hope embodied in the women who—in spite of Noah's attempts to subdue their voices and perspectives—persist. Their ecofeminist practices of care, Hódosy argues, offer up hope for humanity as well as our planet because they encompass compassion for humans as well as the environment.

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Editors of the thematic block:

Éva Federmayer, Dr. habil, American Studies Doctoral Program, Eötvös Loránd University, published *Netting America: Introduction to the Culture and Literature of the United States* (2006).

Dorottya Mozes, Assistant Professor of American Studies, University of Debrecen, author of *Identity, Style, and Performance in the Postcolonial Novel* (2019).

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Reconsidering Polar Literature in the Anthropocene: Locating Hope in the Works of Jean McNeil and Barry Lopez

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HJEAS

ABSTRACT

This article examines the capacities of polar literature within an interwoven framework to think through climate crisis and human involvement therein in the midst of the Anthropocene. *Ice Diaries* (2016) and *Arctic Dreams* (1986) provide the opportunity to reconsider Earth's cryosphere in literary form as mediated places that participate in the global network of the planetary imaginary (Clarke). Examining polar literature through a reparative lens (Sedgwick) enables the tutelary aspects of both landscapes to emerge as they provide strategies for investigating present and future trouble (Haraway). Employing theories from Earth System Science and spatial studies, this paper locates the potential for hope in remote regions that are nonetheless embedded within global realities—climatic and political—through the sharing of stories that encourage life to flourish even in what appear to be the harshest of circumstances. (IMK and IS)

KEYWORDS: Climate crisis, planetary imaginary, polar literature, natural/cultural flourishing



Locating hopeful stories in an age of ecological crisis

Her hull coated in the russet paint that has become synonymous with polar vessels, the *RRS James Clark Ross* approaches Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands to unload its cargo for the return trip to Earth's southernmost continent. Assembled by the assiduous committees of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) in Girton College, Cambridge, the party of scientists, writers, and artists awaits transport at the very tip of the British world, an isolated living holdover, one of its previous outposts of empire. They bring with them the apparatuses of their various crafts; they populate the laboratories, bridge, aft decks, and fore-castle, keep to strict schedules, rotate duties, and gather precious information about the Southern Sea and the Antarctic Ocean climate on their way to the base located on the Adelaide Peninsula.

Among the crew of climatologists and marine biologists, Canadian/Nova Scotian author Jean McNeil compiles a poetic, factual, and fictitious archive of everything she experiences to be published in her 2016 memoir *Ice Diaries*. The memoir—at the borderlands between fact and fiction, alternating between the factual lexicon of ice taxonomies, poetry, and

prose—inhabits the in-between spaces of her 2006 journey to Antarctica with the BAS as an artist in residence. The recipient of one of few coveted spots, McNeil reflects not only on the changing climate through which she physically journeys, but also on the role of the author—and of narrative accounts—to help shape the world(s) that they fabricate and describe as a process that is also part of confronting and constituting an “inner landscape” (McNeil xvi).

Charting the interstices of memory and experience, McNeil’s text represents a contemporary reflection on and development of the polar fiction of the past that was bound up in “[r]omantic fascination . . . connected with the progress of science,” which focused on the peculiar physical—and some believed spiritual—qualities of ice (Lanone; see also Dodds). While clearly indebted to this genre, *Ice Diaries* moves beyond the Romantic tropes of exploration, typically full of the stark presence of death that populates the pages of some of history’s most well-known polar accounts,¹ employing instead a literary style that blends scientific precision with what Potawatomi biologist and poet Robin Wall-Kimmerer has called the “grammar of animacy,” born from “listening in wild places, [where] we are audience to conversations in a language not our own” (Kimmerer 49). The mixing of the precision of scientific terms, descriptions, and predictions with more affective language drawn from the Antarctic itself has the effect of creating a narrative that is not only full of objective description, but is also brimming with life (human, non-human, and more-than-human) and the hope that such considerations bring. At its heart, McNeil’s text is about dreams: about visions of the world, how those are actively (in)formed, and how they help reflect on our own individual and broader societal roles within the Earth system as we imagine various courses for its—and our own—future. In this way, her memoir echoes sentiments expressed by American anthropologist Barry Lopez in his seminal book *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (1986). Lopez spent several seasons living in the Arctic, researching not only the past and present living cultures of those who inhabit the North, including the Dorset Culture and the Tununurmiut people, but also the nonhuman denizens that populate its varied landscapes.

Lopez’s conglomerate account of his Arctic sojourns helps give theoretical body to McNeil’s ruminations. Importantly, the Arctic theory that Lopez develops is not based solely upon external ways of knowing that are superimposed upon the region. Caught up in the lessons of the lemming and the Arctic tern just as much as the living Inuit and long-passed Dorset people, Lopez’s theoretical lens is formed by the Arctic ground itself (Lopez xxviii).

Reading these texts together allows for locating hopeful narratives in a time of unmitigated change for local and global environments alike. Particularly interesting is how, in Lopez's and McNeil's accounts, landscapes, places, and their other-than-human denizens emerge not as immovable natural tableaux or resources for human exploration, but as partners within a complex Earth system, thus encouraging the seeking of connections, opening new ontological paths for our common hopeful future in the face of the Anthropocene. While some of the (future) outcomes of wide scale human intervention in the Earth system have unknown proportions, others are, sadly, more concrete. The idea of the Anthropocene—the recently proposed term to rename Earth's current geological epoch, focusing on the central role human activity and intervention has played in altering regional and global environments—provides a new theoretical lens through which to view the “heady mix of science, politics, philosophy and religion linked to our deepest fears and utopian visions of what humanity, and the planet we live on, might become” (Lewis and Maslin 7). Regardless of the perspective taken, “the story we choose to tell matters,” and the Anthropocene involves numerous stories about “how people treat the environment and how people treat each other” (Lewis and Maslin 7, 13). Thus, the Anthropocene affords context through which McNeil's and Lopez's stories might achieve renewed importance. The Anthropocene is rife with human and nonhuman suffering, as beings around the planet live through the results of unmitigated anthropogenic global warming, ever-increasing amounts of plastic in Earth's waterways, and rapidly rising sea levels (Lindsey). No matter where on Earth they make their home, “almost every living creature is affected by human actions,” and since the Orbis Spike of 1610 was discovered by scientists when coring Antarctic ice sheets, registering a drop in atmospheric carbon rates that correlates to historical mass extinctions in North America, it is increasingly apparent that “we live on a human dominated planet” (Lewis and Maslin 4, 5). In recent years, researchers argued that decreasing mental and somatic health can also be caused by perceiving the realities (both imagined and latent) of climate change (Padhy), leading to what Albrecht et al. have termed solastalgia: the loss of solace in the face of extreme degradation of the individual's environment.

If stories can be considered instructive for “staying with the trouble” as Donna Haraway suggests, then engaging with accounts like those written by McNeil and Lopez is essential. Using the methodology of cultural analysis—a means of reading cultural artifacts with the help of conceptual lenses—we investigate narrative strategies of making meaning that help

develop hope for a livable and common possible future to spring from the growing ruins and precarious phenomena that are endemic to present-day experience. Further drawing from spatial studies and systems-theory, this paper employs a braided investigative approach to help comprehend the objects analyzed, evaluating the stories that emerge. In the Anthropocene, the entire surface of the planet appears as a site of natural cultural encounters, and therefore as a text to be interpreted, made available in narrative form, dovetailing with the guiding principle of cultural analysis, which “seeks to understand the past as *part of* the present” (Bal 1, original emphasis), while apprehending the present with an eye for creating just futures.

Amidst the vastness of thinking on a planetary level in the face of biotic cleansing, extreme human intervention, and ecological destruction, Earth’s polar regions provide timely locations for the re-examination of this host of conundrums in ways that also encourage the development of (tactical) hope to not only cope with these dawning realities, but also to survive, and potentially find new ways to thrive. The septentrional topoi that the peoples living across the pan-Arctic cryosphere once viewed as stable—one might even argue, *frozen in time*—now appear in a state of unpredictable transition, while the largely unpeopled Antarctic also undergoes immense changes, unprecedented in human history. French sociologist and theorist Bruno Latour has argued that to comprehend adequately such phenomena, narratives must move beyond the language of crises and instead, employ the fluid and disruptive terminology that such transitions and slippages bring: “we were used to one world; we are now tipping, mutating, into another” (8). Rather than turning away from the often depressing narratives of disaster, we suggest that these stories contain seeds for developing hopeful visions of the future that *think-with* these ongoing states of transition.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines hope as “a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen,” which is therefore concerned with the future. Hope theorist Steven van den Heuvel has called hope an “ambiguous phenomenon” that has seen an upsurge in academic interest (v). Despite the variety of theoretical frameworks that have been developed, the core of hope “is simple: hope denotes a desire (we hope for something) and it involves probability (the chances of the attainment of desire have to be somewhere between zero and one” (van den Heuvel v). Hope, therefore, must be *cultivated* in relation to a particular or given outcome. It is, however, a slippery moniker, as it enables an endless variety of wishes to be cast forward into the future: “for some, hope signals passivity and resignation from the urgent tasks of life, whereas for others it describes the vital strength

necessary for progress in human history, as well as for individual flourishing” (van den Heuvel v). In relation to climatic questions, Michael Northcott has written that the concept of hope itself is at issue in the global ecological crisis. In the face of ongoing and future ecological crises, then, hope is a troubled concept. To be productive in the realm of ecological thought, we argue that the conceptual framework of hope must decenter the human experience which it inevitably privileges. Northcott also contends that for a fruitful relationship with hope to emerge in a time of ecological crisis, a fundamental reckoning with being and agency must occur, “so that other animals, and ecosystems such as forests, rivers, and even the Earth herself, can be rediscovered alongside humans in the work of halting the processes that are degrading life on earth” to promote planetary flourishing (216). While we cannot know if Arctic terns or icesheets “hope” in the way we do, centering the prospect of their flourishing helps see hope afresh in an age plagued as it is by the pessimistic realities that people and other Earth-dwellers navigate. Given the lack of a common “language” by which to directly understand Earth’s nonhuman inhabitants, moving the study of hope into ecological terrain through ethical stories that give voice to their presence might become a means of attuning to and perhaps even encouraging mutual flourishing.

McNeil’s and Lopez’s texts reveal that if hope is to take root, it must go beyond the boundaries of those “ideas inherited from a different time and place” that employ the “kind of thinking that created today’s global turbulence [but] is unlikely to help us solve it” (Moore 1). This is particularly important to help encourage hope on a broader scale, given the difficulty that many people have when confronting the present and future realities of climate change wrought by human intervention. While science often communicates its findings in the jargon and style of its own tradition through (for the general public) abstract entities and numbers, the writer can personalize and humanize disconcerting geological and climatological truths by using imagination, and even “dream the future into being” (McNeil 346). This is poignant due to the fact that in both McNeil’s and Lopez’s accounts, the polar regions figure prominently within what Bruce Clarke has identified as the “planetary imaginary”: a web of Earth’s ecosystems with myriad overlapping and entwined iterations, a vast archive of objects, stories, and associated experiences with the power to shape perspectives and worlds.

In her memoir, McNeil assembles a glossary of terms that describe numerous types of snow and ice contemplating the power to (re)envision our relationship with the land itself, and dwelling also on the in-between places of her Antarctic sojourn, while Lopez meditates on the tutelary peculiarities

of interwoven imagined landscapes as a physical and psychosocial Arctic “wilderness” that enables, resists, and transcends “whatever we would make of it” (Lopez xxii). McNeil and Lopez show how the Arctic—peopled for millennia by adaptive Indigenous communities as well as more-than-human life despite (settler) colonial undertakings to remove both—provokes reflection on the remoteness and the seemingly untouched “no-man’s land” of Antarctica that nonetheless bears humanity’s trace. Thus, both texts provide strategies for imagining various visions of collective futures and act as hopeful narratives in opposition to managerial or capitalistic perspectives that describe Earth’s polar regions as (future) sites of political and military conflict, scientific field laboratories, global shipping lanes, and heightened mineral extraction.

Remembering, linking, learning

As the crew of the RRS *James Clark Ross* make their halting way South, stopping every twenty minutes to gather water samples as they approach the Antarctic Convergence—a ring of cold water that enrobes the continent, emerging from its glaciers and iced-over landmasses—McNeil, both comforted and disturbed by the ship’s progress, reflects on the peculiar position that they find themselves in. In her account, the ship itself emerges as a place rather than mere conveyance, a floating research hub and community that carries with it the hopes and dreams of developed societies across the world: to comprehend the Earth system so that we might better communicate how to stop it from reaching a point of no return. Frozen in our cultural iconography as a Romantic beacon at the bottom of the world that is hostile to human life and eternal in its frigid steadfastness (Lanone), the Antarctic is, rather, a place undergoing immense change whose end results remain uncertain due to the limited perspective that even the most advanced data modeling brings with it. In the prologue to her memoir, McNeil is candid about the mission she and other artists and writers were sent on by the BAS between 1998 and 2010:

We were understood to be witnesses. The expectation was that our resulting work would further the public communication . . . of climate change science. We would make abstract entities and numbers appreciable to a more general audience than scientists could reach, through humanizing and personalizing them. People would care more. (xviii)

The mission of the polar storyteller is as massive as the continent which she attempts to narrate, trying to give voice to one of Earth's most peculiar landscapes in a way that would make those located thousands of miles away care more about its future.

Due to its physical and cultural massiveness—its near-constant mediation on art, narrative accounts, literature, documentaries, and films²—Antarctica morphs time and experience, bending it, and confusing time's seemingly linear course. And so, McNeil writes that while in the Antarctic, she felt “the press of an external consciousness on [hers]” awakening her long-dormant memories of other affective encounters with place (xvi).

Some places stay behind you. But others refuse to assume their rightful positions on the linear timeline. These form islands in the river of time and in memory, persistent and opaque. There live people and events that happen over and over again, spiraling out beyond that which can be described as already experienced and so known; something about them is being worked out on a timescale far grander than the moment, or our individual lives. They are the past, but the future also. (11)

The grammar that McNeil develops in her diary opens room for contemplating the impact mediations of different places have on the human psyche. These mediations not only affect how we perceive our self in the world, but they also have repercussions for how we experience time. Memory (both of the shifting land itself, and the human minds that apprehend it) takes on a new weightiness, a near corporeal identity felt through her narration of immediate and often striking experiences of the land. As both place and idea, Antarctica fascinates and lingers in the mind on account of an already well-established body of polar mediations.

Relevant to this phenomenon, in his 2020 book *Gaian Systems: Lynn Margulis, Neocybernetics, and the End of the Anthropocene*, historian of science Bruce Clarke describes the planetary imaginary as a collective ongoing process “whenever found or made images of worlds living or otherwise are bodied forth in some workable medium and taken up into popular or artistic images, journalistic or fictional accounts, or other currents of communication” (183). Clarke's theorizations enable places to be accessed—like Earth's polar regions—through the archive of their mediations. When thinking with the form that cybernetics enables, Earth's topoi emerge as connected nodes in a vast living network. This is what James Lovelock, one of the progenitors of Earth System Science, has called Gaia. In the 1970s,

Lovelock advanced a way of narrating the planetary system he saw before him, including the “entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae,” which could all be “regarded as constituting a single living entity capable of manipulating the Earth’s atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts” (Lovelock 9). Following Lovelock’s view of the Earth as a living network, the ability to locate ourselves and other subjects and places within that Earthly system becomes boundless. Accessible both through the cultural plane of the planetary imaginary, and on a physical level through the reality that all places on Earth are enmeshed within one another despite the apparent vastness of the network itself, room for hope opens by thinking inclusive systems, learning from more subjectivities than were previously imagined.

Similarly, in his preface to *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez is concerned with a broad spectrum of tutelary aspects of the region: “all that the land is and evokes, its actual meaning as well as its metaphorical reverberation, was and is understood differently,” depending on the goals and identity of its beholder (xxviii).³ Thus, the author links Arctic dreams—visions of its future—to these varied “projections of hope” (xxviii):

The individual’s dream, whether it be so private a wish as that the joyful determination of nesting arctic birds might infuse in a distant friend weary of life, or a magnanimous wish, that a piece of scientific information wrested from the landscape might serve one’s community—in individual dreams it is the hope that one’s own life will not have been lived for nothing. The very much larger dream, that of a people, is a story we have been carrying with us for millennia. It is a narrative of determination and hope that follows a question: What will we do as the wisdom of our past bears down on our future? It is a story of ageless conversation, not only conversation among ourselves about what we mean and wish to do, but a conversation held with the land. (xxviii)

If, therefore, our collective and individual dreams are so directly linked to hope and to encounters with the land (both physical and mediated), then the necessity of employing reparative reading approaches of Earth’s polar regions becomes essential.

In the chapter titled “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” from her 2002 book *Touching Feeling*, Eve Sedgwick explores the tendency to pursue hidden meanings in the academy since the 1960s. Contemplating Paul Ricoeur’s category of the hermeneutics of suspicion to describe a distinct

intellectual position whose “tracing-and-exposure project represents a strategic and local decision, not necessarily a categorical imperative,” Sedgwick defines Ricoeur’s approach as what she calls “paranoid reading” (125). Paranoid reading, she contends, has gradually become “less a diagnosis than a prescription” (125). Thus, she interrogates the go-to fixation on *hidden* forms of repression and marginalization that may blind for us what is concealed in plain view: namely, how US critical theory in particular has become synonymous with revealing the unseen. When interpreting landscapes, therefore, we must be explicitly aware of the influential project of paranoid reading as undertaken by Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and their intellectual offspring. Productive as such approaches may be for a variety of analyses, when narrating and studying environments, moving beyond the notion that the landscape is hiding or concealing meaning “from us,” enables the analyst to see the landscape not as something that obfuscates knowledge, but as a text and site that shelters knowledge that is deeply rooted within its ecological and ontological web. When plumbing landscapes for meaning, an element of investigation will always be necessary: uncovering different forms of knowledge ought to take the form not of overt exposure to utilization, but as an aspect of coming-to-know through careful questioning.

In Sedgwick’s theorization, reparative reading is the act of attuning oneself to the object at hand and employing appropriate theoretical frameworks to unveil the local and contingent relations of knowledge relevant to both the object and the intuitive reader (124). It is in this sense that we suggest that the landscape does not conceal its teachings in a “paranoid” manner but presents the opportunity to develop an attuned way of knowing and inquiring whose methodology is grounded in the land itself. This epitomizes a fundamental tension in learning from the land: much remains out of sight until the researcher interrogates it with open appreciation rather than suspicious intent. The Arctic and Antarctic landscapes that both McNeil and Lopez narrate highlight these tensions on account of the open archival nature of the polar regions: due to permafrost and a lack of biotic diversity of beetles and other insects as well as fungi that would normally break down organic matter, these zones instead preserve what has been left behind. “Decomposition in the Arctic is exceedingly slow, work that must be accomplished by even fewer organisms operating for even shorter periods of time . . . [in] a place where earth and decay are almost unknown, on the lifeless gravels of the polar desert” (Lopez 27). Exposing the Arctic and Antarctic to paranoid analysis would reduce them to zones of turmoil and harsh frigidity. Of course, both regions are examples of extreme habitats where only adaptive

species and specialized human technologies have a chance of surviving, but this does not mean that they are not brimming with life and that lessons cannot be gleaned owing to these particular qualities.

Reparative strategies, therefore, are especially important for comprehending Earth's polar regions as they occupy prominent positions within the planetary imaginary. Thinking with the grammar of networks, systems, and embeddedness as articulated by Lovelock and Clarke, it is possible to draw connections between various physical places and mediated iterations thereof within the Earth system. This sort of hopeful thinking also enacts a facsimile of migration, a key feature to polar landscapes both for animals that call them home, as well as the humans that would visit these remote places. Lopez describes these seasonal movements in collective terms: "The maple seed spiraling down toward the forest floor, the butterfly zigzagging across a summer meadow, and the Arctic tern outward bound on its 12,000-mile fall journey are all after the same thing: an environment more conducive to their continued growth and survival" (158). In McNeil's book, the ship employs similar seasonal habits, coming to the continent early in the Southern spring when the ice begins to melt, and departing as the days turn to night during their procession to winter. Through such rituals, the polar regions emerge as more than locations on a map but rather as places connected through the filaments of movement. Employing the language of these migrations and peregrinations, both McNeil and Lopez encourage the reader to think about the ties that bind us and the polar regions together, overcoming the age-old linguistic and narrative tendencies that have previously separated these seemingly disparate places from our experience of being in the world. Making these enormous living networks accessible to the mind, these cultural mediations also make them accessible to the terrain of hope. Just as the Arctic tern traces a yearly path from Arctic to Antarctic and back again, seeking environments more conducive to its survival, accounts like that of McNeil and Lopez breath fresh understanding into the movements that humans make as we also attempt to find places (be these physical or psychosocial) that are conducive to a broadened understanding of a communal Earthly survival. The movements of the *RRS James Clark Ross* mimic the tern, journeying thousands of kilometers a year to wrestle with the present and future realities, revealing them as new(er) iterations of much older, and perhaps eternal, states of movement.

Circuitry, connectivity, dimensionality

These migratory practices make it clear even from a distance (and by means of the most tenuous threads) that all life on Earth is linked. Seeing the filaments connecting self and landscape enables reflection upon the tendriled circuitry of life on Earth and its subsequent flows. In *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez conceives of migration as the flow not only of species, but as the breath of the landscape. This breathing is charted by the creatures that arrive and depart with the seasons, both inward and outward bound:

Standing there on the ground, you can feel the land filling up, feel something physical rising in it under the influence of the light, an embrace or exaltation. Watching the animals come and go, and feeling the land swell up to meet them and then feeling it grow still at their departure, I came to think of the migrations as breath, as the land breathing. In spring a great inhalation of light and animals. The long-bated breath of summer. And an exhalation that propelled them all south in the fall. (Lopez 162)

These breathways enable the further recognition of the landscape itself as a living entity, more than a mere backdrop to human-centered dramas. Through its annual in- and exhalations, the Arctic (and Antarctic) govern the seasonal rhythms of winter and summer not only in the regions themselves, but also, propelling their vital force through the migrations of animals across the entire range of the planet. By linking migration with breathing, Lopez embeds within the identity of the land itself the seemingly escapist tendencies of species seasonally moving away from harsh climates. Such theorizations born from the landscape not only reflect on the identity of a particular place, but also become part of a broader global process of movement. The polar regions are thus made accessible to us as key nodes in the Earth system not only in their mediations, but also in their physical capacity. In other words, imagining the land breathing returns the qualities of life to these already living landscapes that were previously emptied by paranoid human narration, and enable the consideration of “the prejudice we exercise against such landscapes, imagining them to be primitive, stark, pagan . . . It is in a place like this that we would unthinkingly store poisons or test weapons, land like the deserts to which we once banished our heretics and where we once loosed scapegoats with the burdens of our transgressions” (Lopez 255). Lopez “reads” the Arctic landscape in line with Sedgwick’s reparative sentiments. Rather than pursuing a culturally inscribed practice of interpreting Arctic landscapes as alien or hostile—even empty spaces—Lopez offers a narrative

that realigns with the land itself, examining it afresh. From this intuitive reading, the idea of the distant polar landscape as a lively ecosystem emerges in opposition to its past instrumentalization as a landscape concealing taboos. With its own tutelary qualities, the land offers room to pause and consider what might be gleaned from it.

Lopez's approach reverberates through a variety of passages in McNeil's *Ice Diaries*. At first glance, McNeil's account of the Antarctic zone utilizes the Romantic features of conventional polar literature. The scientists aboard the RRS *James Clark Ross* are concerned with studying the forces of nature that have come to characterize the southern continent, which is mostly frozen all year-round: ice sheets and glaciers, striated and compounded into massive entities over millennia that break off during the seasonal melt as icebergs, joining the gyre of floating bergs that are released from Antarctica in the spring and summer. It is a vivid landscape whose motions happen at a scale seemingly ungraspable to the human mind, and thus, appear out of reach. Rather than being pigeonholed as a barren wasteland or formidable fortress that bars human access, McNeil's descriptions of the glaring land and seascape near the British Antarctic Survey's Base R on Adelaide Island reveal these selfsame features as phenomena that enable reflection. Throughout her memoir, the author continuously ponders how encountering the Antarctic—in an almost unmediated way—involves more than the physical confrontation between her body and an extreme region. What results from such an encounter represents a change in one's inner landscape, prompting a "basic wonder about the planet and its workings," a gradually evolving intellectual-emotional position that is triggered by this very encounter between the human body and the land (McNeil 156). Placid and timeless on the surface, what lies underneath the frigid and blinding exterior of the land and seascapes is in fact teeming with life and with meaning, which is far less fixed, or "eternal" than previously considered.

Through the optical and perceptual fallacy of stillness and constancy, the ice sheets of Antarctica provoke the reflection on the *actuality* of the ice sheet which is at odds with how it is typically described. In a striking passage that mimics the language of movement and migration in Lopez's text, McNeil details the return journey that she undertook with pilot Tom to the Rutford Ice Stream, isolated from the rest of the (human) Antarctic community. After departing from Base R on a resupply mission, McNeil looks out the window, and wonders at the landscape that she is passing over:

Our shadow followed us, a perfect silhouette of our plane . . . We flew south, into the sun, over a secession of identical landscapes—nunatak, ridge, snowfield, nunatak, ridge, snowfield. We were passing beyond the peninsula’s edge and into the bulk of the continent. Now there was only ice and more ice . . . here, we were in an iterative world. (194)

Though the ice sheet might first appear as one homogenous mass, flying over its “iterative” planes reveals that it is, instead, a varied landscape composed out of multiple interactions between a rich diversity of elements. What looked static is symphonic and relational, where familiar forms echo and find resonance in each other.

Upon reaching the ice monitoring station, Oddvar, a glaciologist at a remote outpost, points out to the sparsely assembled party that “the ice sheets are in constant motion . . . Just as the continents are, just as the earth is spinning. I always try to remind myself that I’m not standing on solid ground” (McNeil 198). Oddvar employs the language of relationality to access the reality of the ice sheet that he has spent many seasons researching, plumbing its depths for information about the past and future of Earth’s climate. While appearing eternally immovable, the formation is in a state of perpetual motion; it undergoes structural change as fresh ice accumulates in the continent’s center, pushing the older ice out to the edge, flowing slowly into the sea. Featuring prominently in McNeil’s memoir, ice also allows for epistemological reflection. Inspired by *crystallomancy*—a Romantic means of mystic “future telling” by scrying through the ice (xiv)—the author examines the relationship between humans and ice, navigating both historical and present conceptions. Imbricating both the mystic perspectives of Romantic savants and climate science’s instrumentalization of ice sheets as data sets, McNeil reveals that “scrying” with the ice might present a conceptual portal to a new means of understanding. “Whether molecular or esoteric, ice promises revelation,” becoming an aperture through which to learn from the seemingly closed-off southern continent and its nonhuman and more-than-human denizens (xiv).

The ice contains perspective when fathomed by the scientist’s drill, revealing that the bottom of the ice sheet is a zone of massive friction, heating up where it scrapes along the bedrock, causing an increased outflow of ice and water into the sea as it rapidly melts. Coring the ice reveals the distant history of Antarctica itself: part of the supercontinent Gondwanaland some 180 million years ago, its fossil composition reveals that “it had been tropical, carpeted by forests of clubmoss trees, the giant ferns of the Carboniferous

era,” now buried beneath one to two kilometers of ice (McNeil 215). The landscape that on the surface is iterative in its dissimilarity from other places on Earth is also, beneath the accreted layers of ice and snow, part of a common geohistory that connects the now-distant Antarctica to us on the scale of Earth time. Rather than this history being concealed by the ice, it is the ice that has provided the portal to uncovering this knowledge while scientists plumb its depths. The outcome of these meditations ultimately allows McNeil, a stand-in for the reader, to “think of the planet as an organism whose well-being [she] could effect. [She] had considered this before, of course, but in the abstract. In the Antarctic [she] felt closer to the planet than ever before. It was almost as though [she] could hear its pulse” reverberating through the ice (171).

While in Antarctica learning from the land is undertaken nearly entirely with nonhuman partners, Lopez encounters a different form of human knowledge production during his Arctic sojourns. He reminisces ongoing hunting with members of the local Indigenous communities which gave him a newfound understanding of how humans can live fully incorporated within the land:

Hunting, in my experience—and by hunting I simply mean being out on the land—is a state of mind. All of one’s faculties are brought to bear in an effort to become fully incorporated into the landscape . . . To hunt means to have the land around you like clothing. To engage in a wordless dialogue with it, one so absorbing that you cease to talk with your human companions. It means to release yourself from rational images of what something ‘means’ and to be concerned only with that it ‘is’. (199–200)

For Lopez, “hunting” is the act of being immersed within an ecosystem so fully that imposed boundaries between self and world begin to dissipate. In his 1976 book, *Place and Placelessness* Canadian geographer Edward Relph writes about the embeddedness of people within landscape not only physically, but also culturally, and how land itself is often embedded in our systems of meaning making: “[I]n our everyday lives places are not experienced as independent, clearly defined entities that can be described simply in terms of their location or appearance. Rather they are sensed in a chiaroscuro of setting, landscape, ritual, routine, other people, personal experiences, care and concern for home, and in the context of other places” (29). Relph’s work not only helps give theoretical depth to Lopez’s account,

but also introduces the interwoven language of Earth System Science that understands Earth as an animated integrated system.

Further unpacking the politics of Relph's "chiaroscuro," in his 2001 article "Between Geography and Philosophy," Edward Casey highlights the tension between space as a "volumetric void" in which things are positioned, and place, "the immediate environment of my lived body—an arena of action that is at once physical and historical, social and cultural" (683). Casey's focus on the presence of the human body to give landscape meaning helps understand why mediated accounts of landscapes may be essential to encourage hope for mutual flourishing. Incorporating ourselves into this network urges human subjects to turn to mediations of precarious landscapes and draw new lines of association that de-link the trajectories contemporary society has bound itself to: the disembodied, logical, and often dying words and worlds that conventional Anthropocene narratives typically employ. However, while relying on human narrators to spread the story of a particular place is an inexorable necessity, this must be done with attention to the nonhuman bodies who never leave the remote landscapes humans only infrequently visit. Thinking of landscape as "the presented layout of a set of places, not their mere accumulation but their sensuous self-presentation as a whole" (Casey 683) has the potential to move towards a continuous politics of recognition of embodied subjectivities, extended through mediated encounters with the landscape's nonhuman and more-than-human denizens within the globalized web of the Earth-system even after human narrators leave.

Near the end of her book, McNeil too adds another layer onto the dynamics of learning from the landscape that meshes with Relph's and Casey's theorizations. She notes that the landscapes one encounters in the polar regions are not merely "[a] destination, but [also] a dimension" (275). This notion of dimensionality, of being within a landscape to the extent that it produces a different relationship between self and world becomes important when one starts to consider how hope and ecology are wrapped-up with one another. If ecology, from the Greek *oikos* (home) and *logos* (study), is the study of one's homescape, or one's immediate interaction with their environments, then readers become capable of accessing other ecologies through literary accounts and thus learn how to live better on Earth. Such lessons ensuing from the direct engagement with the spirit of the land, are true not only of the Poles, but of all living and ever evolving landscapes. Lopez describes this when, as previously quoted, he recognizes that the land

itself “is baffling in its ability to transcend whatever we would make of it” (xxvii). He continues,

It is as subtle in its expression as turns of the mind, and larger than our grasp; and yet it is still knowable. The mind, full of curiosity and analysis, disassembles a landscape and then reassembles the pieces . . . trying to fathom its geography. At the same time the mind is trying to find its place within the land, to discover a way to dispel its own sense of estrangement. (xvii–xviii)

These meditations on the graspable as well as ungraspable qualities of the landscape are echoed in McNeil’s book. “The Antarctic,” she writes, “lives outside our narrative, like an extra planet moored at the bottom of the ocean. It does not belong to us” (348). And so, while trying to mediate the tutelary aspects of the polar landscape, Lopez’s and McNeil’s narratives also reflect on the fact that the land cannot truly be owned or known by anyone, either immediately or through mediation. It simply *is*, and to force it to be anything other is a grave mistake. To do so destroys the vivacity with which landscapes make themselves known.

This curious bifurcation is evident throughout both texts: that the land gestures towards new modes of being in and relating to it, but also that the land itself is so abundant with meaning that it becomes nearly too much to bear. Oftentimes, the land interdicts our attempts at meaning-making just as we think we come to know it in its entirety. Instead, it opens itself to the curious observer allowing for momentary glimpses of possible avenues only to close in on itself afterwards, retreating (at least partially) from access. Walking in the dwindling Antarctic sunlight at the end of the summer, McNeil is suddenly struck by this realization:

I have been delivered here, to this moment, for a reason. The connection between us, the iceberg, the mountain, the blue-eyed shag, appeared like a gossamer invisible ribbon, binding us, although loosely. But instead of looking at some mathematical matrix I was suddenly looking into things. Once inside, emanating from this vision was an awareness of the vastness of everything. (235)

Defying complete capturing, the land continuously advances and retreats in and out of focus. “Have we come all this way,” Lopez writes, “only to be dismantled by our own technologies, to be betrayed by political connivance or the impersonal avarice of corporations? . . . Whatever wisdom I would find, I knew, would grow out of the land. I trusted that, and that it would

reveal itself in the presence of well-chosen companions” (40). Both authors describe a volumetric ability to look within the landscapes they perceive that goes beyond the physical reality they see in front of them. In nearly spiritual language, McNeil and Lopez abandon themselves to the land and its teachings, relinquishing authorial control and relishing in the wisdoms of the land.

Conclusion: hope and healing

We have argued that room for hope opens when landscape—and broadly what is called the natural world—is considered not as a resource, but as a partner within a complex Earth system. By taking this approach, different kinds of reparative epistemologies emerge from the land and its human and non-human denizens and enter the archive of the planetary imaginary that encourages seeking connections, while opening new ontological paths for our common future. This process is thrown sharply into relief by the narrative form of McNeil’s Antarctic sojourns and Lopez’s anthropological accounts of the Arctic. Reading the two together, therefore, offers a timely moment for reflection on the production of knowledge in relation to people and their environments in the present, but also on how that knowledge might be mobilized into hopeful narratives.

Attending not only to the human grief of solastalgia, but also to the ongoing nonhuman suffering helps ground hope for the future within an ethical framework of mutual flourishing based on the recognition of mutual benefit. In their 2021 article, “Ways of Healing in the Anthropocene,” Ross Westoby, Karen E. McNamara, and Rachel Clissford write that “grief, as the emotional response to loss, is increasingly used to describe the human experience of the Anthropocene” but also, that “loss and grief must be processed so that hope is possible, not blind hope but pragmatic hope” (1). Envisaged in its plethora of iterations, the Anthropocene provides a powerful metaphor for “activat[ing] new normative and ethical thinking” (Westoby et al. 2). And so, turning to stories that reconsider inherited knowledge encourages affective and intuitive interpretative practices and opens productive spaces for hope. “Instilling hope through reframed narratives may help paint a multifaceted picture of human agency . . . potentially helping to mobilize a more ‘conscious force’” than the destructive history of *Homo Sapiens* has typically allowed for (3). From this vantage point, marine biologist Gavin’s observation that “things flourish in cold in a way they never do in heat” (McNeil 226) is representative of the reframing of cold and

remote places explicit in the works of both authors not as dead spaces, but as places that are brimming with potential hope.

This process of reorientation of the relationship between self and place is not limited to the physical locations Lopez's and McNeil's books examine. They equally include a repositioning of self within a broader Earth timeline, locating not only where we are, but *when* we are, in a productive re-incorporation of space-time as it relates to our experience of the world around us. Near the end of her memoir, McNeil writes:

“But the more I think about it, I see the Antarctic like a mirror, although angled permanently toward the future,” I said. “In the rest of the world, we have to deal with certain threats. But here we’re standing on a continent whose disintegration has the potential to threaten most of what we think of as civilization—coastal cities, infrastructure, agriculture. So actually we’re at the epicenter of threat, although it’s still in the future.” (228)

Reflecting on the ubiquity of global warming and the future of place and people around the world, the author ponders the peculiar disparity of the experience of time while standing on the southern continent. The by now well documented disintegration of Earth's cryosphere, therefore, represents not only cause for concern, it also enables timely reflections on the unpredictability of Earth's environmental future. The Antarctic itself is not the source of this threat, but rather it is human activity that exerts its forces—both seen and unseen—upon this living mass of ice and snow.

Nonetheless, faced with overwhelming and unsettling data, McNeil—removed albeit briefly from civilization—can interpret how these imminent disasters are also able to influence us now, as she moves away from linear associations towards a *sticky* confrontation with our historical present: the Antarctic reaches out of its many iterations and realities to elicit an emergent emotional response. Time morphs and takes on different qualities at the poles. Thinking of the Antarctic as a living milieu that is *changing*, *changeable*, and *changed* instead of a resolute entity creates a powerful architecture for locating hopeful narratives that are both ethical and pragmatic. These do not shy away from the dawning realities of destruction but embrace it as a point of departure for developing visions for a more equitable future that extends grievability and worthiness to a whole host of non-human life forms and forces.

Lopez equally meditates on the lessons that can be learned from contemplating the land in its totality. “The individual animals we watched

tested their surroundings,” he writes, “they tried things they had not done before, or that possibly no animal like them had ever done before—revealing their capacity for the new. The preservation of this capacity to adapt is one of the central mysteries of evolution” (197). This mysterious capacity is not limited to the nonhuman animals of the Arctic alone. Both Lopez and McNeil develop their narratives along the lines of adaptivity. Such adaptive thinking can be effectively linked to dreaming, healing and hope, for it is only through the combination of these sometimes-nebulous processes and states of being that ethical, conscious, and holistic action can be taken in the present, with an eye to the future.

In the final pages of *Ice Diaries*, McNeil has a conversation with Wolff, a member of the research staff:

“But we are also adaptable,” Wolff said. “We are living in a solution-oriented time, rather than a superstitious, fatalistic Dark Age. We are tough-minded.” Wolff’s optimism was gritty, hard-earned. I had the impression that he had taken a decision to view our future with some hope, because the alternative was unacceptable. (312)

When addressing the strategies necessary for thinking through these troubling times, Wolff responds not only as a scientist, but also as someone who has incorporated—through their long affective engagement with the Antarctic sea- and landscape—more reparative attitudes than one way of knowing alone can allow for. Hope, therefore, remains interwoven with the disastrous realities of the present and future that are already at work in the world around us. Rather than hoping against all odds, hope emerges as something that might flourish on account of those odds, in the wintry recesses of the Earth system and its various mediations.

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Notes

1. The Western cultural fascination with the polar regions is long and can be traced in numerous works. Earlier writings like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) and scenes of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* provide a literary backdrop for later accounts by polar explorers, like the journals of Robert Falcon Scott's 1910–1912 expedition to the South Pole, which in turn inspired further literary engagement, resulting in atmospherically eerie works like H. P. Lovecraft's novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931).

2. In the realm of noteworthy polar art (in the Western canon), Caspar David Friedrich's iconic 1823–1824 "Sea of Ice" depicts a ship being crushed by ice that became an aesthetic blueprint for later mediations. Regarding narrative accounts, perhaps most iconic among these are *Scott's Diaries* (1912) that tell of explorer and crew's ill-fated attempt to reach the South Pole, as well as Philip Edwards's *Journals of Captain Cook* which recount (among other stories) his second voyage from 1772 to 1775, which took him to Antarctica to explore its ice mass. These travelogues became foundational for later works of fiction, including Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), and later, H. P. Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness" initially published in the 1936 edition of his *Astounding Stories*, as well as Mat Johnson's 2011 satirical novel based on the same story, *Pym*. For well-known documentary accounts, the BBC series *Planet Earth* features several episodes on Earth's polar landscapes in its various seasons and has become iconic in its mediation of Earth's various biomes. Many films have also been set in polar regions; arguably foundational among them is the 1948 film, *Scott of the Antarctic*.

3. In the same vein, Klaus Dodds and Marc Nuttall assert in their book *The Arctic*: "There is no one Arctic. Instead multiple Arctics collide, coexist, and conflict with one another" (24–25).

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Hoping for Cyborgs: Cyborg Eco-Heroism, Odd Kinships, and Hopeful Heroics in Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans*

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ABSTRACT

Building on Donna Haraway's advocacy for embracing "unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles" (*Trouble* 4), this paper reads Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans* (2013) with a focus on how, in the face of profound environmental challenges, stereotypical narratives of heroism are transformed—like in a compost pile—through cyborg-elements. The essay argues that grounding hero stories in the techno-organismal entanglements of ecosystemic crisis, yields an explicitly instable, corporeal conception of heroism in/of crisis of *eco-heroism*. Reading Smith's protagonists, Fen and Daniel, as eco-heroic cyborgs in conjunction with ideals of the traditional hero's corporeal and affective superiority creates instances of hopeful heroics in the narrative that challenge supposedly stabilizing patterns of identification in traditional discourses of American heroism. This vision of cyborg eco-heroism in *Orleans* makes communicable an unpredictable and instable crisis-state, generating hope as a composted affect in this eco-heroic story of oddkin. (LB)

KEYWORDS: eco-heroism, hopeful heroics, corporeality, cyborg, oddkin, affect studies



Introduction: American (eco-)heroism—hope as conquest, compost, and cyborg

So much of earth history has been told in the thrall of the fantasy of the first beautiful words and weapons, of the first beautiful weapons *as* words and vice versa. Tool, weapon word: that is the word made flesh in the image of the sky god; that is the Anthropos. In a tragic story with only one real actor, one real world-maker, the hero, this is the Man-making tale of the hunter on a quest to kill and bring back the terrible bounty. This is the cutting, sharp, combative tale of action that defers the suffering of glutinous, earth-rotted passivity beyond bearing. (Haraway, *Trouble* 39; original emphasis)

Stories play a central role in the construction of a supposedly *stable* understanding of reality. Traditional heroic narratives, centered on the stereotypically white, male, human hero as an agent of social order—as told and criticized by Donna Haraway in the epigraph of this paper—can be seen as such stabilizing patterns.¹ Sociologist Kristian Frisk observes that “the hero

type functions to reduce social complexity, guide perceptions and behaviour and maintain a basic level of moral consensus in society” (95). Especially in times of crisis, these stories establish the hero’s role as an emblem of hope and optimism. However, the *instable* and uncertain reality of ecological demise significantly challenges established patterns of identification in these stories. In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway urges her readers to re-think these narrative patterns precisely because ecological crisis does *not* make sense. “[W]e *must* change the story; the story *must* change” (40; original emphasis), writes Haraway, drawing attention to the difficulties that arise from attempting to communicate ecological crisis and its *ecosystemic* impact when the old stories fail to elicit the feeling of stability and optimism they promise.² In the American context, heroic discourses have frequently been co-opted for the praise of soldierly sacrifice, for a legitimation of colonialist and imperialist warfare, for processes of nation-building (Tanrisever 114–16; Shohat and Stam 101–04; Anker 25–26, 35–36) as well as for a specific subset of exclusionary environmentalist discourses that often capitalize on hegemonic ideals of human–nature relationships and stereotypical savior stories, disregarding or glossing over histories and ongoing instances of oppression. Environmental historian Jenny Price contends that “there’s been a long association of American environmentalism with personal virtuous acts” (18), which can be linked to the hero figure as a carrier of an explicit moral imperative. Environmental studies scholar Nicole Seymour criticizes such environmentalist campaigns for their reliance on only a limited repertoire of “appropriate” ecological affects, such as hope/despair, reverence, or self-righteousness, as well as for their heteronormative and white bias (5). These attitudes are also reflected in dominant narratives about American nature that reproduce a national ideology based on inequality and oppression of deviance (Sturgeon 6–7). Within these discourses of hierarchized human–nature relationships, Seymour observes, hope and optimism function as legitimating affects for a belief in progress. As such, these affects can be “easily co-opted, even used to license further destruction” (Seymour 3), to satisfy “humans’ desire for certainty and neat narratives about the future” (3–4), and “to make affective appeals based in ideals of wholesome, healthy citizenship” (15). The traditional hero story, most prominently described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), provides both a linear quest narrative and an ideal heroic figure that embodies these “pure” and hence, in certain contexts, suspicious values. Framed as an origin story, the so-called monomyth traces an allegedly universal and recurring pattern that involves ritualized processes of crossing

and movement (Campbell 6; 28). Notwithstanding its supposed universality and Campbell's use of examples from international heroic traditions, the monomyth capitalizes on a Eurocentric ideology of expansion, progress, and exploitation of various "others," including the natural environment (68; 103–04; 119), turning the traditional hero's quest into a *conquest* of otherness.³ In this paper, my reading of Sherri L. Smith's 2013 speculative fiction novel *Orleans* builds on the observation that contemporary narratives of ecosystemic crisis employ heroic discourses, not only by renegotiating heroic stereotypes, but also by featuring narrative elements of traditional hero tales that shape the monomyth as well as other American discourses of heroism. Reading Smith's novel as such a hero story in/of crisis, this paper investigates the legitimacy of hero stories as a source for a complex sense of hope in times of environmental havoc.

Critical of both hope and its binary opposite despair, Haraway notes that "[t]here is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference" (*Trouble* 4). Instead, "staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (1). Haraway calls for "stories of becoming-with, of reciprocal induction, of companion species" (40) and advocates for embracing "generative oddkin" (3), that is, multispecies kinship and responsibility beyond seemingly fixed boundaries (2–4). According to Haraway, making oddkin means that "we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles" (4). A compost pile offers a way to organically break down and reassemble the components of a discarded entity in conjunction with other elements. The process of composting involves the intricate interplay of human, nonhuman, and more-than-human participants—the human gardener(s), plants, animals, and the natural elements (water, air, heat, soil), as well as human-made tools and utensils. The transformation effected in the compost pile is always a communal effort, dependent on the balanced and mindful connection between everyone and everything involved—in Haraway's terms, a sympoiesis (58), that is, a process of "worlding-with, in company" (58), of becoming-with, of forming a relationship between oddkin. The compost as both material reality and trope, thus, stands in contrast to notions of singularity, clarity, and linear progress that frequently surface in traditional hero narratives. In the context of this paper, the compost pile emerges as a

productive metaphor to think about heroes and their stories *in crisis* as entangled with other human, nonhuman, and more-than-human bodies, likewise affected by the instability of an ecosystemic crisis-state which defies explanation on the basis of established heroic types and patterns. Thinking of heroism as a *composted concept* draws attention to both the ways in which these heroic stereotypes are in need for reconfiguration—composting—in times of crisis and the ways in which these composted hero stories can be used to make ecosystemic crisis communicable. I see this metaphorical composting of heroic discourses as a source for hope because the compost metaphor foregrounds the importance of interconnection and kinship in the face of environmental upheaval. It does so, however, without neglecting, even depending on the uncertainty and instability of crisis. Thinking of heroic discourses as composted embeds them directly in the reality of crisis, without glossing over the processes of “heroic” conquest and exploitation that have contributed to this state of crisis. Grounding hero stories in the multidimensional and multispecies corporeal entanglements of ecosystemic crisis yields a new kind of heroism in/of crisis. I call this explicitly instable conception of heroism *eco-heroism*.

I define eco-heroism as a brand of heroism that makes the uncertainty of ecosystemic crisis communicable in the shape of a hero story by foregrounding the corporeal experience of crisis, that is, the heroism that lies in *daring to exist* in a crisis-state, connected to other crisis-stricken bodies.⁴ My reading of *Orleans* emphasizes this corporeal aspect of crisis by mobilizing the disruptive figure of the cyborg. I read Smith’s novel as an eco-heroic story in which ecosystemic crisis is made communicable through *cyborg elements* in a way that generates hope as an equally complex composted affect in times of socio-ecological demise—one that does not depend on an omnipotent human hero, but on communal efforts and odd kinships for multispecies survival. The cyborg is, arguably, a figure as contested as the hero figure, but the cyborg’s disruptive corporeality—originally proclaimed by Haraway in “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” (1985) and since reconfigured in various literary, cultural, and scholarly contexts—can be used to communicate the disruptions caused by crisis.⁵ I investigate ecosystemic crisis as the cyborg-like coexistence of an ecosystem with a human-made crisis-state. The connections of human, nonhuman, and more-than-human bodies with the technologies that have contributed—and continue to contribute—to the ongoing, all-encompassing reality of ecosystemic crisis can be read in conjunction with Haraway’s original definition of the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a

creature of fiction” (“Cyborgs”191). More so, instead of reinforcing the divide between the human and the nonhuman, this idea of cyborg eco-heroism points to the embeddedness of *all* crisis-stricken bodies in the techno-organismal entanglements of ecosystemic crisis. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway makes the cyborg’s role in making oddkin explicit, incorporating it into the compost, when she states that “[c]yborgs are kin . . . [They] are not machines in just any sense, nor are they machine-organism hybrids. In fact, they are not hybrids at all. . . . Cyborgs are constitutively full of multiscalar, multitemporal, multimaterial critters of both living and nonliving persuasions” (104–05). As “other” heroes, cyborgs “damp down the certainty of [traditional heroism and] villainy and explore the complexities of cyborg worlding” (115).

Haraway’s rejection of a binary conception of hope and despair in light of ecological challenges and her emphasis of complex relations between human, nonhuman, and more-than-human beings aligns with recent interdisciplinary scholarship that acknowledges the importance of affect as a relational experience for understanding and rethinking social, political, and environmental relations in times of crisis—beyond hope and despair (Bladow and Ladino 15–16; Berlant 1–2; Seymour 26–27). Nicole Seymour emphasizes that “[a]ffect, in all senses of the term—emotional pull, visceral reaction, comportment—plays a central role in this current reality” of crisis and points to ecological issues as a source for “great emotional distress” (2). The late cultural theorist Lauren Berlant’s highly influential study *Cruel Optimism* (2011) acknowledges that sometimes even supposedly positive attitudes to a crisis-stricken reality, like hope and optimism, “might not *feel* optimistic. Because optimism is ambitious, at any moment it might feel like anything, including nothing: dread, anxiety, hunger, curiosity . . .” (2; original emphasis). Thus conceived as “visceral,” even “cruel,” affect always has an explicit bodily dimension. As ecocritics Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino contend, “[b]odies, human and nonhuman, are perhaps the most salient sites at which affect and ecocriticism come together” (3).

Smith’s heroes’ bodies reflect this crisis-stricken cyborg state in various ways, turning their joined quest from a heroic savior story into a composted, instable eco-heroic narrative of embodied ecosystemic crisis that lacks the linearity, clarity, and hopeful progression of a traditional hero tale. From this perspective, hope is no longer guided by a naïve and optimistic belief in a heroic resolution of crisis but is equally complex, arising from an instable conception of heroism in crisis. I employ the term *hopeful heroics* in this paper to denote instances of eco-heroism in Smith’s narrative where the

traditional hero story is disrupted precisely because the reality of ecosystemic crisis defies any sense of stability, but where this instability generates hope despite uncertainty. My analysis first discusses Smith's protagonists Daniel and Fen as eco-heroic cyborg figures, then explores how their odd kinship challenges the individualistic hero's quest. As Haraway's *Terrapolis*, which "makes space for unexpected companions" (*Trouble* 11), Smith's fictional storyworld also embraces nonlinear, entangled stories of oddkin, suggesting a "composted" affect of hope.

Hopeful heroics: cyborg eco-heroism in *Orleans*

Reading the cyborg as a hero figure and a narrative like *Orleans* that features cyborg-like characters as a hero story is an endeavor that already confronts heroism in crisis.⁶ *Orleans* is set in a dystopian American society shaken by Delta Fever, an epidemic caused by the far-reaching socio-ecological ramifications of several severe storms in the area of former New Orleans. The quarantined zone, now called Orleans, is walled-off from the so-called Outer States, because, according to the government's "Declaration of Separation" (Smith), "[t]he shape of our great nation has been altered irrevocably by Nature, and now Man must follow suit in order to protect the inalienable rights of the majority . . ."⁷ Despite the fact that the *multidimensional* crisis affecting both Orleans and the Outer States has caused "deaths by debris, cuts, tetanus, or loss of blood; suicide; heart attacks caused by stress of loss, or stress of rebuilding, . . . [d]omestic violence . . . [and] murder," depleted resources (47), and led to the emergence of the uncontrollable virus as well as to a looming war in Orleans (216–19), the government frames this crisis as a stereotypical heroic battle between humans and "Nature." "Nature" is constructed as a *singular*, homogenized threat, clearly outside of the human realm, in fact, allegedly contained behind a wall. Capitalizing on images of the glory and exceptionalism of a seemingly "great nation," the rhetoric surrounding the epidemic in the narrative evokes discourses of traditional heroism, supposed to uphold a constructed sense of stability in the face of a profoundly *instable* and uncertain state of crisis.

Other readings of Smith's novel have focused on its depiction of African American identity through Smith's protagonist Fen de la Guerre, a sixteen-year-old Orleans native. Melanie Marotta reads *Orleans* as an Afrofuturistic narrative of emancipation, which she links to the generic structure of (neo-)slave narratives (56–58), tracing Fen's "journey from object to subject, from powerless to powerful" (57), as the young woman learns to assert her individuality as a black female leader (60–62).⁸ Similarly to Marotta,

Sam Morris highlights *Orleans's* “racial positionality” (265) in comparison to other Young Adult novels, but also adds the element of hope to the discussion of *Orleans*. Focusing on the Blochian “idea of utopia as an impulse that exists in people rather than as a place” (265), he discusses Fen’s potential for embodying hope despite uncertainty (265; 271). My reading of *Orleans* builds on these observations about Fen’s “other” heroic journey to individual agency, but also highlights the connective aspects of crisis. Therefore, I also discuss Smith’s “secondary protagonist” (Morris 265), scientist Daniel Weaver, who enters Orleans from the Outer States.⁹ Daniel’s stance as a traditional, individualistic hero on a “quest” to single-handedly “solve the riddle of Delta Fever” is challenged by the reality of ecosystemic crisis in Orleans and his odd kinship with Fen as the two unlikely allies navigate the city (Smith 74). I am especially interested in how elements of traditional hero stories continue to surface in this narrative as communication tools of ecosystemic crisis that can provide a complex—composted—sense of hope in times of profound instability and uncertainty.

At the same time, Smith’s novel, while speculative fiction, is clearly rooted in not only the rich cultural history of New Orleans, but also its history of disaster. Interdisciplinary scholarship on Hurricane Katrina acknowledges the intricate connections between racism and official responses to the hurricane, including insufficient evacuation efforts and rescue work, lack of medical assistance, and racialized media representation. Thus, similarly to the far-reaching effects on human, non-human, and more-than-human bodies presented in Smith’s narrative, the aftermath of Katrina unveiled the impact of long-standing class and racial segregation in the city of New Orleans, as those most affected by the disaster were predominantly poor African Americans (Levitt and Whitaker 5–7; Marable x-xiv; Robillard 133; 143–44). However, in the face of crisis and failure, these communities came together, rebuilding and recovering alongside their crisis-stricken environment in a way that calls to mind the process of composting. Heroic efforts emerged—and continue to emerge—not from narratives of human hubris and exceptionalism but from narratives of ecosystemic crisis, in which discarded human bodies and bodies of land and water rebuild and thereby transform each other like elements in a compost pile. Disasters like Hurricane Katrina—and their speculative explorations in fictional works like *Orleans*—disclose the intricate connections between human and environmental health (Robillard 143–44) as well as the complexities that lie at the bottom of affect and heroism. When coping with disaster, notions of the heroic do not necessarily become intertwined with hopeful images of rescue but can also be linked to

“overwhelming stress, anxiety, and uncertainty” (Robillard 148) during the process of rebuilding, “juxtapos[ing] great loss with great personal strength” (149) in communities united through recovery. Embedded directly in the reality of ecosystemic crisis as a corporeal experience, eco-heroism draws attention to the interwovenness of human, nonhuman, and more-than-human bodies in crisis—beyond an organic conception of corporeality. The interplay between technology and organisms (Hayles 162–64) in a state of disaster evokes the image of the cyborg as a disruptive, eco-heroic figure. As a narrative of hopeful heroics, *Orleans* communicates ecosystemic crisis through its protagonists’ crisis-stricken bodies that I read as eco-heroic cyborg corporealities as well as through a shaky quest that challenges notions of linear heroic progress.

Daniel

The American hero’s connection with the natural environment—his wilderness adventure—has historically been constructed as an exclusionary process, in which “connecting to nature is a corporeal act, an act that requires a complete, whole, preferably fit body” (Ray 37). Environmental studies scholar Sarah Jaquette Ray links the heroic wilderness adventure to an ideal white hypermasculine corporeality when she contends that “[t]he individual white male who escapes to the wilderness is thus a defining trope in wilderness culture and environmentalism” (41). In this context, hope can be read as an explicitly corporeal affect, yet one that, in its alleged purity, is used to justify, or *purify*, the hero’s movement through space—his (con)quest. *Orleans* recounts scientist Daniel Weaver’s “quest” of developing a cure for Delta Fever. Daniel casts himself as the “hero” (Smith 197) of his battle against the epidemic; however, contrary to the traditional hero story, Daniel’s savior “quest” does not look like the stereotypical hero’s linear progression towards inevitable success. Instead of producing the desired treatment, Daniel’s efforts have led to the creation of an even deadlier virus that would kill patients upon contact. Afraid that the military might abuse his creation as a weapon to regain control of the Delta region and its vast resources, Daniel ventures into the quarantined zone to work on a cure on site, taking the new virus with him (46–47). Despite his failure to produce a cure, the scarcity of reliable information about Orleans, and his lack of basic survival skills (72–74; 134–37), Daniel is convinced that he “was here [in Orleans] to save the world” (109). His fantasy about Orleans as “[t]hat mysterious, abandoned city . . . [that] was legendary in the rest of the United States” (52) exposes his adherence to dualistic thought structures that cast the natural space as “other”

from the autonomous human individual. Daniel's scientific interest in "support, research, [and] evidence" (109), and his "morbid curiosity" (109) about Orleans are reminiscent of the traditional hero who, according to Campbell, eventually "establish[es] . . . the foundations of our human civilization" (272) by invading and transforming the wilderness. Likewise, Daniel concludes that the information he has gathered about Orleans equip him with the right to explore the city, and that "[n]avigating the empty streets of Orleans should be simple enough" (72). Consequently, for Daniel, Orleans becomes an explorable wilderness, only vaguely reminiscent of civilization (71). Morris calls "the hopeful Daniel" (270) out for his "naïveté or stupidity" (270), and Marotta notes that, over the course of the narrative "Fen's voice will dominate Daniel's, thereby showing that hope for Orleans's future generations exists with an African American female who prizes community and survival" (58). However, Daniel's perspective is precisely that of an alleged heroic stereotype in crisis. As an eco-heroic narrative, Smith's novel grounds a new vision of hopeful heroics directly in Orleans's crisis-stricken ecosystem, as Daniel becomes entangled with all the "other" "snaky, unheroic, tentacular, dreadful ones, the ones which/who craft material-semiotic netbags of little use in trials of strength," like in a compost pile (Haraway, *Trouble* 43). This metaphorical process of composting traditional heroic discourses as well as naïve notions of hope and optimism attached to such stereotypical conceptualizations of heroism can be seen as a new way to communicate ecosystemic crisis. Daniel's "quest" is not easily resolved by the "shining hero going against the dragon" (Campbell 293). In *Orleans*, the reality of ecosystemic crisis puts Daniel's strife for scientific quick fixes and heroic glory in jeopardy on various levels, which also complicates his idea of him being "the best hope for Orleans" (Smith 197).

As an eco-heroic figure, the cyborg and its configuration as a disruptive body can be used to make communicable the intricate interconnections between discourses of ecosystemic crisis, affect, and heroism. The corporeal dimension of traditional heroic discourses draws attention to the continuous commodification of "other" bodies—of women, people of color, animals, land, and water—thus legitimized by these bodies' alleged inferiority. To this day, gendered, racialized, disabled, and otherwise "unideal" bodies are disproportionately affected by environmental threats. Yet, their perspectives and experiences continue to be frequently marginalized or completely erased in contemporary environmentalist discourses (Sturgeon 8–9; Seymour 9; Houser 10). Such exclusionary and oppressive discourses also significantly impact the accessibility of hope

(Berlant 14; Houser 12). Paradoxically, Daniel's healthy body makes him "other" in the toxic environment of Orleans, requiring him to depend on his high-tech encounter suit as a requisite for his "wilderness" experience. His hazmat suit, which Daniel has specifically "upgrad[ed]" prior to his departure, not only protects him from contracting Delta Fever, but also provides nutrition and waste-processing mechanisms (50). Alongside his datalink, a small wrist computer linked to an implant behind his ear as well as his goggles (51–54), Daniel's encounter suit turns him into a human machine hybrid—a cyborg. The cyborg's contradictory stance as a hero figure challenges supposedly "universal" hero narratives like the monomyth. On the one hand, as a potential superhero, the cyborg is situated in the American tradition of idealized heroic corporeality, often in connection with racialized and gendered images of white hypermasculine (super-)power (Alaniz 4–6; Isaacs 136–38), similar to Campbell's depictions of the stereotypical hero. On the other hand, as literary scholar Marit Hanson observes in her work on cyborg superheroes and disability, "in contemporary science and particularly literature and popular culture, what does and does not constitute a cyborg or a cyborg body, and how that cyborg body is integrated (or not) into its world changes from field to field, and even between different story narratives" (101), making this cyborg appear as simultaneously empowered and "other," in different contexts (101; 104–06; Bukatman 73). Jeopardizing the "pure" corporeal connection with Orleans's ecosystem that would bring him closer to the traditional hero ideal based on the notion that "modernity, especially technology, has severed our connection to nature" (Ray 37; 43–46), Daniel's stance as an empowered cyborg in Orleans disrupts the dualisms of human/nature, organism/machine, and hero/other. Simultaneously this hero's cyborg body is grounded directly in an ecosystem impacted by the techno-organismal entanglements of crisis.

Through these cyborg-elements, Daniel's hubristic mission is turned into an eco-heroic narrative of hopeful heroics. Daniel's cyborg-ness may be a catalyzing force of empowerment for what he sees as his heroic savior quest, but, at the same time, it enables him to immerse himself in the reality of ecosystemic crisis in the city—a viewpoint he has previously been unable to experience on the other side of the Wall to the Outer States. In fact, Daniel cannot function in Orleans without the protective cyborg-like enhancements provided by his suit and datalink. His cyborg-ness is less a knightly armor than a testimony to N. Katherine Hayles's observation that "humans, animals and intelligent machines are more tightly bound together than ever in their cultural, social, biological and technological evolutions" (162). Daniel's full

potential as an eco-heroic cyborg emerges only when he—in Haraway’s words—“make[s] kin” with the city’s rebellious community and breaches the cultural gap that keeps him from comprehending this ecosystem’s insurgent survival (*Trouble* 1).

Fen

Smith’s novel paints an intricate picture of group identity and resilience in times of a crisis that spans across and beyond the entirety of this abandoned city’s ecosystem. In Orleans, identity is based on blood type, creating blood tribes that provide both community within, and hostility between, the tribes. Tribe members “talk tribe” (91), a local color dialect that connects them as a community, while also making it easy to recognize outsiders. The so-called “Rules of Blood” (16), a type of nursery rhyme, lay out the foundations of the city’s tribal affinity. When Daniel meets Fen de la Guerre, the sole survivor of an attack on her tribe, she is on a mission to take her diseased friend’s newborn across the Wall before the little girl contracts Delta Fever. Centered on notions of motherhood, community, and care—ideas that stand in direct opposition to stereotypical images of the hero as an individualistic conqueror (Campbell 103–04)—Fen’s “quest” thus differs from Daniel’s hubristic savior story that is altered by his immersion in Orleans’s crisis-stricken ecosystem. Unlike Daniel, Fen is different from the heroic ideal of the white male adventurer in terms of both gender and race, and her composted form of heroism springs directly from her experience as an “other” heroic body in *Orleans*. The fact that traditional notions of heroic conquest and exploitation continue to influence crisis management in Orleans has left traces on Fen’s body that reflect the complex, cyborg-like entanglements of affective, corporeal, and heroic discourses.

A childhood survivor of blood rape—a traumatic experience of corporeal invasion, during which Fen’s blood was forcefully taken against her will by an unnamed man who paid for her blood—Fen has experienced the other side of the traditional hero story as a tale of domination (Smith 94–99). In a city where identity is based on blood type and blood transfusions can be used to combat Delta Fever, universal O-type donors like Fen are likely targets for blood hunters and blood slavery (16–17). At nine years old, newly orphaned Fen was welcomed into what she thought would be her new family, her new home (88; 91), without realizing that she was actually joining a children’s blood cult run by a religious fanatic, “Mama Gentile,” whose name is in itself an ironic telling name, implying the kindness of the blood slave holder (94). The fact that Fen’s “arms be smooth and free of needles” (94–

95), made her “[a] virgin, untouched by needle or knife” (95), and, thus, a pricy blood slave to be sold to older men. Hence, even in a place that has itself been othered by the dominant fraction of the United States population in the Outer States as “dead, diseased” (110; 172–73), otherness stems directly from the body, echoing discourses of traditional heroism centered on the conquest of sexualized and racialized “others.” In the narrative, Mama Gentile casts Fen’s blood rapist as a kind and honorable “gentleman”—a designation that calls to mind traditional heroic discourses of male superiority (95). Historian Richard Slotkin identifies the American hero figure as a part of the class of “natural aristocracy” (176), whose “primary sign of social and moral superiority is not nobility but *virility*” (176; original emphasis). This uniquely American hero represents “a new racial type” (175) in a Social Darwinist sense, justifying his “use [of] violence in a privileged manner” (180) against various “other” bodies.¹⁰ From this perspective, the invasive act of violence against Fen’s “other” body can be read as a scenario reminiscent of the stereotypical hero’s courteous encounter with the figure of the goddess in Campbell’s monomyth. According to Campbell, this female figure “represents the hero’s total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master” (101). In the novel, this image of domination is reinforced by the “gentleman’s” insistence that the blood “virgin” Fen wear a long white dress (95), which he later “rip[s] . . . down the middle,” further underlining the quasi-religious, ritualistic character of this act of bodily violation (96). Discourses of traditional heroism gloss over, and thereby legitimate, oppressive practices through a reliance on a stabilizing discourse of heroic civility. The stereotypical hero looms large above the crisis he creates, unfazed by its consequences, and the hopeful vision of his destined path to glory remains intact. However, when Fen’s blood rapist invades the little girl’s body in a way that parallels a sexual assault, “enter[ing] . . . [her] through the skin,” the imagery in this memory clearly evokes the violence and horror that emanate from the phallic symbol of the “needle, sharp and hot” (96), thereby linking together discourses of heroism and affect in ways that fundamentally challenge notions of the stereotypical hero as a carrier of hope in times of crisis.

In this scene, the heroic body as carrier of hope is put in jeopardy as it becomes, instead, the carrier of a virus that threatens a multispecies community. The “gentleman” is not the allegedly heroic character Mama Gentile sets him up to be—a masculine body in *power*—but an infected body in *crisis*, dependent on Fen’s blood for survival. The sense of pervasive powerlessness, emanating from both the rapist’s and Fen’s body, disrupts the

idea of an explicitly heroic race (Slotkin 54; 175)—the fittest race, surviving at the cost of “other” bodies. Viral and human bodies coexist in a state of multispecies corporeal connection that spans beyond infected bodies, impacting not just other human bodies, like Fen’s, but Orleans’s entire ecosystem (314).¹¹ In this eco-heroic narrative of crisis, human, nonhuman, and more-than-human bodies become linked together, corporeally and affectively (Bladow and Ladino 3), surviving *together* in complex entanglements. Fen’s fear and terror in this passage, her inability to move, and the fact that, bound to the bed, she “do[es]n’t fight” and “do[es]n’t know how” evoke uncertainty and immobility instead of hope and a belief in progress, the “expected” affective responses to a traditional hero’s presence (Smith 96). Stabilizing narrative patterns and elements of traditional hero stories— notions of heroic (con)quests, attached to an image of the hero as a knightly nobleman—are, in turn, *destabilized* and disrupted by cyborg eco-heroism in *Orleans*.

In the closing statement of her Cyborg Manifesto, Haraway states that she “would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (223). In the vein of the cyborg figure’s stance as an “Ironic Dream” (190), this statement can—ironically—be linked to Campbell’s description of the goddess (101) as the traditional hero’s submissive Other. Indeed, Fen is no goddess, but another cyborg eco-hero in Orleans, whose composted heroism and crisis-stricken cyborg body can be seen as a way to make ecosystemic crisis communicable. According to Haraway, cyborgs “seiz[e] the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” (“Cyborgs” 217). In the novel, instead of succumbing to her fate as a blood slave, Fen reclaims her agency through self-mutilation, wrapping her arms around a hot pot “’til they burned near to the bone” (Smith 98), hence rendering them useless for blood-taking. Contrary to Daniel’s, Fen’s cyborg eco-heroism departs from the original definition of the cyborg as a hybrid between organism and machine. Nonetheless, she, too, is immersed in the cyborg-like crisis state in Orleans and directly impacted by the ramifications of this techno-organismal crisis. As corporeal traces of crisis, Fen’s scars can be read as empowering, cyborg-like enhancements—albeit organic rather than technological—that help her break down the boundaries of gender, race, age, and blood type supposed to disable her (Haraway, “Cyborgs” 193–96; Shaviro 171–72; 176–77; Federmayer 108–09).¹² Fen’s scarred arms are a testimony to the cyborg-like coexistence of crisis-stricken bodies with an all-encompassing, multidimensional crisis state that transcends anthropocentric strategies of crisis management and human-centered conceptions of individualistic, omnipotent heroism. When read as a hero story in crisis,

Orleans points to a new and different way of imagining heroism as an instable concept in times of crisis, whose shakiness, nonetheless, creates instances of hopeful heroics. In *Orleans*, this reimagination of the traditional hero story of conquest and exploitation as an eco-heroic story of oddkin points to the complex sense of hope that arises from Orleans's regeneration in the face of crisis.

Tribe

In its function as a stabilizing structure, the heroic quest narrative is, ultimately, a story of binaries—human/nature, male/female, organism/machine, amongst others—which reinforce the heroic individual's superiority and prevalence over any type of "other" threat (Hourihan 2, Plumwood 43–44). Within this framework, Ahu Tanrisever sees the American hero figure as "a contingent construction that is embedded in specific (cultural, economic, political, or social) context and participates in the perpetual articulation and negotiation of concepts of individual and collective identities—by embodying as well as producing social meanings and social practices" (5). As "world-maker" (Haraway, *Trouble* 39), the traditional hero is endowed with "the divine prerogative of naming" (Shohat and Stam 141–42). Deeply rooted in settler colonial history, this practice—the hero's "Weapon of Knowledge" (72), in Campbell's words—thus, creates the very structures of meaning and power that assure his domination over nature and "other" bodies. Comprised of "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (28), Campbell's monomyth establishes progress, linearity, and clarity as central pillars of the traditional hero's (con)quest narrative. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note that such traditional stories of Western progress "provid[e] a sense of the purposeful movement through time of fictional entities bound together in a narrative whole," creating "the notion of a linear, comprehensible destiny" (102; Campbell 274). My reading of *Orleans* as an eco-heroic story calls into question the problematic power structures and hierarchies that lie at the bottom of these stereotypical stories of progress. Fen and Daniel's odd kinship constitutes a move away from individualistic notions of hope, attached to a single human hero figure, creating—in Haraway's words—"potent and taboo fusions" of eco-heroic cyborg identities that generate hope as a composted affect in a vision of hopeful heroics ("Cyborgs" 215).

Daniel's misguided individualistic conviction that "[h]e had a world to save" (200), is put in jeopardy when Fen agrees to take him to "the Institute of Post-Separation Studies" (52), a research facility set up by a group of Outer

States scientists in Orleans. Daniel's reverent recollection of the scientists' "ultimate sacrifice" (52) of staying in the quarantined city as "a last, heroic attempt to make a name for themselves" (198) during what he sees as "a silver age, an age of hope" for Orleans (200), evokes notions of the traditional hero's ultimate victory, linked to an optimistic belief in progress and science (Campbell 72; 272; Shohat and Stam 2; 14–17). At the Institute, he realizes that the professors he idolizes experimented on Orleans inhabitants like Fen, devising the system that divides the population by blood type to investigate blood tribes as "[a] new form of racism" (Smith 207). In creating the identity categories that shape Orleans's social structure, the scientists acted in the role of the traditional hero as meaning-maker. Created under the premise that tribal identity based on "the rules of blood make[s] race irrelevant" (207), with "[b]lood tribes cross[ing] all ethnicities" (207), this new practice of corporeal categorization can be seen as a strategy to construct a new sense of stability, without, however, providing treatment or a cure for Delta Fever (207). Similarly to how the Wall is supposed to keep the virus from spreading to the seemingly "healthy" Outer States—" [f]or the safety of the population at large" (n. p.)—this attempt at stabilization through a clear-cut division of "other bodies" happened at the expense of the commodified bodies of Orleans's inhabitants. However, as Haraway puts it, in times of ecosystemic upheaval, "[n]one of the parties in crisis can call on Providence, History, Science, Progress, or any other god trick outside the common fray to resolve the troubles" (*Trouble* 40). In *Orleans*, hope does not arise from an individualistic heroic fantasy, nor from a reliance on supposedly stabilizing anthropocentric categories that do not adequately describe the all-encompassing state of ecosystemic crisis. In this eco-heroic narrative, hope emerges from the complex interconnections between human, nonhuman, and more-than-human bodies coming together in the face of crisis.

The act of bodily division by blood type in the narrative, ultimately, does not lead to the tribes' disempowerment; instead, it provides a new conception of community as a catalyst for Orleans's process of recovery, which calls to mind communal efforts of rebuilding in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Robillard 148–49). At the same time, the narrative refrains from presenting the central idea that "tribe is life" as a one-dimensional pathway out of crisis (Smith 190). In *Orleans*, the construction of tribal identity has conditioned cyborg-like entanglements of recovery and loss that challenge conceptions of hope attached to optimistic progress. The professors' hubris leads to their becoming consumed—composted—by the crisis surrounding them when they contract Delta Fever. Kept alive by

intravenous feeding tubes, yet abandoned in the ruins of the Institute, their own crisis-stricken bodies continue to exist in a cyborg-like stasis, able to communicate as computational voices as the city's natural environment begins to creep in through the Institute's supposedly stable walls (181–83). *Orleans* paints a nuanced picture of a crisis that not only affects humans, but their relations with each other and an entire ecosystem in crisis. Heroism, in turn, also ceases to be outside of crisis with the hero “coming to the rescue.” Instead, cyborg eco-heroism in *Orleans* generates hope as a complex composted affect that can be empowering while it is also grounded in a profound sense of loss.

The narrative gestures towards a process of recovery that moves away from individualistic ideas of heroic saviorhood. It is not independence and individualism, but community, exemplified by Daniel and Fen's odd kinship, that points to a composted vision of hopeful heroics as a way to communicate crisis in the novel, grounded in the human heroes' cyborg-like entanglements with Orleans as a crisis-stricken ecosystem. Orleans and the Outer States exist in a complicated state of interconnection, “no longer a nation” (Smith 253), yet their mutual survival would depend on their cooperation, made impossible by the constructed division between the two parts of the crisis-stricken country. In the novel, Fen's focus on community—her conviction that “[i]f Orleans gonna have a better future, we in this together now” (207)—points to the merits of a communal eco-heroic effort in the face of crisis. Despite her mistrust in Daniel's failed research and the deadly virus he carries, she decides that their odd kinship means “[n]o more ‘every man for himself’” (207). Hence, with his humbling encounter with Orleans's cyborg scientists, Daniel's quest turns from an allegedly linear tale of progress into an exhausting race against time as he unites with her on her mission to save “Baby Girl” Enola. As they navigate the city, Daniel loses his supposedly firm grip on science, when he loses his deadly virus in the overgrown ruins of Orleans. As a result, he is forced to abandon the idea of “trying to be a hero . . . to set things right” (315) when he is unable to retrieve the vials. The constant presence of Delta Fever—“in the water, the air [, i]n [Fen]” (314)—as well as the uncertainty surrounding both Orleans's and the Outer States' future, also disrupts the clear-cut narrative structure of the traditional hero's quest.

Orleans resists notions of linearity, progress, and closure, connected to the traditional hero tale. When the group reaches the heavily guarded Wall, Fen poses as a mother with a baby as a distraction, while Daniel and Enola cross the border to the Outer States (Smith 320). By using her own “other”

body and giving her life—shot by the guards (323)—to protect both Daniel and Enola, “[her] tribe” (320), Fen asserts her agency as an empowered eco-heroic cyborg. Both Marotta and Morris suggest a reading of Fen’s emancipatory journey as a hopeful impulse that transcends the borders of Orleans with baby Enola (Marotta 62; Morris 271). From this perspective, Fen’s rescue mission calls to mind traditional tales of heroism with Enola as “the Golden Fleece . . . the boon [that] may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds” (Campbell 167), brought to safety by Daniel like a beacon of hope. However, the reality of multidimensional ecosystemic crisis in the narrative complicates the idea of hope attached to a single act or body, thereby challenging traditional notions of individualistic heroism (Marotta 69; Morris 277).

Daniel and Fen’s quests ultimately do not lead anywhere. As the soldiers’ bullets puncture her already-scarred body, Fen does not embody the heroic ideal of purity and hope, and her death does not promise redemption, change, or “release” (Campbell 303; 299–303). Unlike in a traditional hero’s quest, her death is not an epitome, nor does it mark the completion of a heroic destiny (306–07; Shohat and Stam 102). Rather, the bullets rupturing her body can be read as emblems of the techno-organismal entanglements of crisis. As an eco-heroic cyborg, Fen does not progress, but stays behind like a discarded part of a bodily whole, ready to be composted. Likewise, Daniel’s cyborg eco-heroism is no longer an individualistic quest, but a story of oddkin that intertwines his own body with Orleans. Daniel’s cyborg-ness discloses the bodily link between affect and heroism with his encounter suit not only functioning as a life saver for him and, by extension, Enola (Smith 320), but also as a keen reminder of his terror and helplessness. The suit processes his corporeal response—his “cold sweat” (322)—to the danger he faces, “recycled for later” (322), similarly to his formerly fixed heroic expectations that become transformed—composted—in Orleans. Moreover, the fact that Enola crosses into the Outer States with Daniel does not provide closure, nor does it re-establish order or bring certainty. After Fen is shot by the guards, the narrative does not evoke praise for Daniel and Enola’s safe return to the Outer States. To the contrary, the fact that “[t]hey had made it” (323) is overshadowed by Daniel’s exhaustion and the “wasteland, thirty feet of barren ground” (323) he faces upon reaching the other side of the Wall that does not keep crisis from seeping into the Outer States. Orleans is not completely sealed-off; its seams are porous, with crisis leaking out as Daniel steps across the border—the return of a cyborg eco-hero whose immersion in crisis significantly disrupts traditional tales of the hero’s hopeful

completion of his (con)quest. By contrast to the shining hero carrying the Golden Fleece, Daniel's body carries crisis, organically in the shape of his own bodily waste, his exertion, and his memories, but also in the shape of his now worn-out, wet, and dirty cyborg suit—and baby Enola, another body that corporeally connects him to his immersive experience in Orleans. These cyborg-like eco-heroic connections, between two human bodies, between organism and technology as well as between human and ecosystem, can be seen as a new way to make crisis communicable through heroic discourses—beyond the anthropocentric definitions of a returning hero. Daniel and Fen's shaky quest communicates crisis not through stabilizing patterns of optimistic and linear progress. Its focus on the disruptive, instable aspects of crisis, grounding these eco-heroes' cyborg-bodies directly in the reality of crisis that does not end on the final page of the novel but leaves gaps and loose ends, without a closure or a solution, makes this eco-heroic narrative a story of oddkin and hopeful heroics.

(No) conclusion: envisioning a cyborg ecosystem

While reading *Orleans*, I have focused on how, in the face of profound environmental challenges, stereotypical narratives of heroism are transformed—like in a compost pile—through cyborg-elements. I have argued that, as a disruptive eco-heroic figure, the cyborg embodies the techno-organismal entanglements of ecosystemic crisis. My reading of Fen and Daniel as eco-heroic cyborgs in conjunction with ideals of the traditional hero's corporeal and affective superiority grounds the figure of the hero in the multidimensional, multispecies reality of crisis. The instances of what I call hopeful heroics in the narrative also challenge supposedly stabilizing patterns of identification in traditional discourses of American heroism that capitalize on linearity, predictability, and closure. This vision of cyborg eco-heroism in *Orleans* makes communicable an unpredictable and instable state of ecosystemic crisis, generating hope as a composted affect in an eco-heroic story of oddkin.

While my paper on *Orleans* has discussed the human eco-heroic cyborg figures Fen and Daniel, an ecocritical perspective on heroism as an embodied, corporeal experience of ecosystemic crisis also encourages a reading of odd kinships and cyborg eco-heroism beyond anthropocentric heroic discourses. Within this dynamic, an ecosystem can be conceived as another eco-heroic cyborg body in crisis, which exists as the product of the techno-organismal entanglements that condition its crisis-stricken state daring to exist eco-heroically because and in spite of crisis. In the novel the

cyborg ecosystem of Orleans can no longer be conceived as a passive space outside of heroic discourses, but—as a vital—and *active*—participant in the city’s regeneration.¹³ Haraway’s argument about cyborg bodies that “[t]he regrown limb can be monstrous, duplicated, potent” (“Cyborgs” 223) also applies to the overgrown cityscape, where, in Daniel’s words, the regenerative power of “Mother Nature’s gargantuan fist” (Smith 163) is reclaiming Orleans as a space for human, non-human, and more-than-human cyborgs. As another empowered eco-heroic cyborg, the regenerating natural environment is connected with Orleans’s multispecies community—as well as with the Outer States—in what can be read as another odd kinship (70–72; 224–27; 249–56) and an instance of hopeful heroics in *Orleans*.

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Notes

1. Parts of this paper have been presented at the 2020 X Lisbon Summer School “Ecoculture.”

2. I use the term “ecosystemic crisis” to highlight that the effects of the human-made crisis-state affect all human, nonhuman, and more-than-human bodies embedded in an entire crisis-stricken ecosystem, beyond an anthropocentric view of crisis and corporeality.

3. Despite its problematic framework based on a dualistic worldview that legitimates the hero’s inevitable domination, Campbell’s study continues to influence heroism scholarship, and definitions and classifications of the heroic still tend to be built on a recognizable symbolism and Western social standards (Frisk 95–96; Allison et al. 5–8; Kinsella et al. 25–28). In my analysis of eco-heroic narratives of crisis, like *Orleans*, I critically engage with the ongoing impact of traditional heroic discourses and narrative patterns of identification on the communication of ecosystemic crisis in these novels.

4. When I discuss narrative patterns of hero stories as a way to communicate ecosystemic crisis, I build on American Studies scholar Priscilla Wald’s observations about the connective aspects of communicable disease. In her influential study *Contagious* (2008), Wald defines what she calls the “outbreak narrative” as “a contradictory but compelling story of the perils of human interdependence and the triumph of human connection and cooperation, scientific authority and the evolutionary advantages of the microbe, ecological balance and impending disaster” (2). Wald’s observations make clear that instances of crisis never exist in isolation. In fact, attempts to make crisis, such as the emergence of a new virus in *Orleans*, comprehensible, and hence, controllable, always deliberately mask the complex intersections between the different dimensions of crisis, systematically stigmatizing “other” bodies to uphold a constructed sense of stability (8–9). In this context, eco-heroism means *daring to exist* in this state of crisis—a wordplay I use to reference *Merriam-Webster’s* definition of the adjective “heroic,” which, amongst other explanations, includes “exhibiting or marked by courage and daring” (“heroic”).

5. Haraway's cyborg is linked to feminist empowerment as much as to an abandonment of the narrative of domination and conquest. In "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," Haraway highlights the constructed nature of allegedly "natural" differences, based on sex, gender, or race, in the old dichotomies, rendered visible by the obviously technological character of cyborgs, robotics, or artificial intelligence (203–04). However, a reading of cyborg-hybridity as a mere combination of an otherwise unrefuted dualism inherently perpetuates these binaries, leading N. Katherine Hayles to argue that "the cyborg . . . is not *networked* enough" (159; original emphasis), and, hence, an inadequate representation of the interconnected state of humans, animals, and machines (Hayles 162–65; Isaacs 140). The cyborg has since been redefined both by Haraway and in interdisciplinary scholarship on Black cyborgs in media and film (Isaacs; Shaviro), on African American rebellion (James), and on interspecies connectivity (Federmayer), emerging as a versatile critical tool that gestures towards new ways of existing—daringly and eco-heroically—in a state of crisis.

6. *Orleans* is part of a long line of speculative fiction works whose representations of heroic characters challenge exclusionary definitions of heroism. Among these, Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean* (1986) and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable* series (1993, 1998) are yet another two examples whose depiction of non-white, non-male—even alien—heroes, and communal forms of heroism constitutes an impactful move away from Campbell's heroic archetype, and towards a reconfiguration of traditional heroic discourses in their portrayals of ecosystemic crisis in the sense of eco-heroism.

7. The novel is divided into a "Before" and "After" section, and only the "After" section—the actual narrative—has page numbers. "Before" is a collection of the fictional documents surrounding the formation of Orleans, that is, a brief impression of when the storms began, the timeline of hurricanes, the casualty report, and the "Declaration of Quarantine" as well as the "Declaration of Separation." The inclusion of these fragmented narrative elements constitutes a break with a linear narration style and genre conventions from the beginning. This narrative instability can be linked to the difficulty of communicating ecosystemic crisis, as familiar narrative structures, only inadequately capturing the toll of crisis, are shaken up.

8. Like traditional hero stories, slave narratives frequently feature the quest motif and its themes of spiritual and physical transformation, independence, and self-assertion, while also challenging the quest narrative's link to histories of conquest and domination in favor of a future of freedom and equality (Gould 12; Stauffer 204–07). In 1994, cultural critic Mark Dery coined the term "Afrofuturism" to describe "[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). Afrofuturistic texts, like *Orleans*, actively engage in the renegotiation of hope in times of crisis as these texts "both revise history and imagine impossible trajectories of black freedom" (Zamalin, 10) as alternative futures beyond linear narratives (Iheka 27) and stereotypical hero tales.

9. The idea of Daniel as the "secondary protagonist" (Morris 265) can be linked to the novel's narrating style. Both Fen and Daniel are focalizers in the narrative. Fen narrates her own perspective on the story autodiegetically in the present tense as events unfold, and hence, she is also narratologically immersed in Orleans. To the contrary, while Daniel also functions as an internal focalizer for just over one fourth of the story, the narration that focuses on his perspective is neither autodiegetic nor immediate, but temporally removed, employing past tense, without, however, providing external information or knowledge. His

perspective is, therefore, in various ways more distanced and more limited, lacking crucial insights about Orleans. Thus, Daniel's less informed perspective on Orleans complicates the idea of an allegedly objective, scientific view which he strives for. At first separated structurally into different chapters, Fen and Daniel's perspectives eventually mix and overlap over the course of the narrative, which can be seen as another instance of making oddkin in Haraway's sense (*Trouble* 2–4). The fact that Daniel, ultimately, remains the sole narrator at the end of the novel—with his perspective now fundamentally transformed and affected by Fen—further points to the novel's reconfiguration of narrative patterns, leaving the supposed traditional hero as the focalizer whose altered view serves as a new and eco-heroic way to communicate ecosystemic crisis.

10. Specifically, Slotkin discusses one of the most influential literary depictions of American heroism, Owen Wister's 1902 cowboy novel *The Virginian*, which contributed to the establishment of the cowboy frontier hero as a stereotypical American hero figure in the likes of Theodore Roosevelt (169–83).

11. Reading “victims of natural disasters and global economic collapse a[s] the new living dead” (175), cultural studies scholar Sheryl Vint contends that, in times of crisis, “humanity becomes split between ‘real’ humans and infected, dangerous posthumans . . .” (175–76). Vint's observation points to the problematic effects of a continued reliance on constructed dualisms. Simultaneously, it highlights the instability of these categories as human life is already intricately intertwined with other organisms in multispecies connections (Wald 2), calling into question the ongoing hierarchization of different bodies and the devaluation of “other” crisis-stricken lives.

12. American studies scholar Éva Federmayer discusses a similar idea of organic cyborgs, when she argues for a cyborg-reading of Octavia E. Butler's Xenogenesis series wherein alien species mate and fuse with humans, creating cyborg-like superbeings to ensure species survival. Federmayer's criticism of traditional science-fiction narratives for their focus on conquest and their lack of female or POC characters as protagonists (103–04)—alongside her discussion of Butler's cyborg protagonists' journeys towards preventing species extinction (108–12)—demonstrates how Butler's novels, like Smith's *Orleans*, reconfigure supposedly stable narrative patterns, shifting the focus away from the individual heroic protagonist towards a vision of interspecies kinship.

13. I examine the idea of “nature itself as a participating actor in ecological battles” (Bickert 16; 15) in “Heroes in Body Bags: Renegotiating Heroism in Rebecca Roanhorse's *Trail of Lightning*,” published in *COPAS* (2020).

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“Even the apocalypse isn’t the end”: Emotional Numbness and the Reconstruction of Interpersonal Bonding in Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah’s *Friday Black*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the role of waste as a categorizing mechanism in the formation of storyworlds in two of the short stories featured in Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah’s *Friday Black* (2018), “The Era” and “Through the Flash.” These two stories “waste” is a category defined according to the internal rules that govern their respective storyworlds, and in this case it arguably takes inspiration from preexisting classifications that have shaped, and continue to shape, the Black experience in the US under (late) capitalism. Analyzing how the relation between emotions, interpersonal bonding, and waste is constructed in each story, the essay demonstrates that understanding the power of waste as a classifying device helps shed light on mechanisms of oppression, which could contribute to dismantling the resulting classifications as well. (SVF)

KEYWORDS: waste, storyworld, emotions, wasted lives, waste-time, Adjei-Brenyah



Introduction

Even though most people would agree that establishing what waste is or looks like is a pretty straightforward task, consensus would certainly be hard to reach. The study of the environment has prompted an interest in its least appealing side: trash. However, upon closer examination, the very limits of what makes waste waste, or even the limits between natural and man-made within the environment itself, are harder to pin down than it might appear at first.

How do we recognize waste? In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas famously argues that dirt is matter out of place (36). Meanwhile, Michael Thompson understands waste—or Rubbish, as he terms it—as the mediating step that enables value transformations between the cultural categories of Transient and Durable, with waste encompassing “the possibility of things with zero value” (Reno viii). These two path-breaking definitions agree on the mutability and potential of transformation that the presence of waste may entail. In addition to these definitions, William Viney makes a case for waste as “matter out of time,” and differentiates between “use-time” and “waste-time” depending on the work objects may do or the future imagined for them

(4). Overall, these definitions of waste point towards the material reality of things that have expired, are no longer usable, or have lost their (economic, social) value.

Furthermore, there have been noteworthy attempts to apply the concept of waste to describe human experiences outside hegemonic standards. In the words of Zygmunt Bauman, “[t]he production of ‘human waste’, or more correctly wasted humans . . . is an inevitable outcome of modernization, . . . an inescapable side-effect of *order-building* . . . and of *economic progress*” (5; original emphasis). The existence of those wasted lives attests to the fact that any “[a]ttempts to create order require classifying matter as dirt” (Zimring 51). In this case, the features of waste as matter out of place, or devoid of value whatsoever, are inscribed into communities whose mere existence is deemed threateningly toxic to existing socioeconomic hierarchies.

In this paper, I examine the role of waste as a categorizing mechanism in the formation of storyworlds in two of the short stories featured in Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah’s *Friday Black* (2018), “The Era” and “Through the Flash.” In this collection of twelve short stories, Adjei-Brenyah exposes the inner contradictions of diverse (and entwined) systems of oppression, as well as the corrosive dehumanization endured by those living within those systems. Overall, *Friday Black* addresses the dangers of consumerism and late capitalism, and the many ways in which individuals become waste(d) in such contexts, all combined with high doses of satire, magical realism, and SF elements.

Even though the collection as a whole toys with the blurry frontier between dystopian ambiances and the current state of affairs (most notably in stories such as “Zimmer Land”), these two stories appear to take place in distinctly futurist settings—albeit they bear no relation to each other. “The Era” portrays a dystopian society organized around the notions of efficiency and profit; by marking certain individuals as unproductive and therefore “wasteful,” the caste system that is paramount to the correct functioning of society can be preserved—even if that entails perpetuating abuse. In “Through the Flash,” an unexplainable temporal loop and the ensuing collapse of society are employed by the main character as valid justification for her killing sprees. Her subsequent change of heart proves that altruism can only exist outside the confines of a system that revolves around the notion of profit. A textual analysis will shed light on the dehumanizing strategies present in “The Era” and “Through the Flash” through the lens of waste. It is my contention that in these two stories, “waste” is a category

defined according to the internal rules that govern their respective storyworlds, and in this case it arguably takes inspiration from preexisting classifications that have shaped, and continue to shape, the Black experience in the US under (late) capitalism. By analyzing how the relation between emotions, interpersonal bonding, and waste is constructed in each story, I demonstrate that understanding the power of waste as a classifying device helps shed light on mechanisms of oppression—and, hopefully, could contribute to dismantling them as well.

Waste and order

Discourses about toxicity can be—and have indeed been—employed as a means of introducing clear-cut divisions between those deemed “clean” as opposed to others deemed “dirty.” At different stages throughout the history of the United States, publicly available narratives on pollution have located it among the underclass (see Isenberg). Carl Zimring notes that “skin color emerge[s] as marker of purity and pollution” in the nineteenth century (6) and detects a “growing conflation of race and cleanliness” that soars in parallel with the “insecurities about slavery and racial hierarchy” (46). Whereas the first half of the nineteenth century saw a rise in the association between urban sanitation, fear of contagion, and the existence of a “dangerous underclass characterized as the dirty, immoral, and dissolute poor” (29),¹ often conflating morality to cleanliness, the postbellum period solidified the public understanding of hygiene in racial terms: “The attitudes regarding racial identity that grew corrosive as the racial hierarchy was challenged had already insinuated race into concepts of purity and danger. During the war, fear of germs and fear of a social order without slavery produced fears that would endure and intertwine” (Zimring 43). These fears steadily gave shape to the association of Blacks with waste—an association that was further emphasized during the twentieth century due to practices of urban (re)location such as redlining and zoning (see Taylor).

If waste is an ordering principle, then applying such a principle to individuals will inevitably sort them out according to certain inner rules and assumptions about what makes something “wasted.” Furthermore, rules governing waste tend to be “unequivocal,” as Mary Douglas argues: “[Pollution rules] do not depend on intention or a nice balancing of rights and duties. The only material question is whether a forbidden contact has taken place or not” (131). It is paramount to stress that, as Zygmunt Bauman has it, “no objects *are* ‘waste’ by their intrinsic qualities, and no objects can *become* waste through their inner logic” (22; original emphasis). When applied

to entire communities, these seemingly arbitrary rules become a means of channeling societal anxieties.

The looming threat of waste overpowering us is the reason why, according to Susan Signe Morrison, “we respond by ignoring it, rendering it invisible, powerless, and non-existent . . . myopically avoid[ing] that which disturbs us” (97). Applied to social organization, the rules of pollution incur a striking paradox: their borders are porous inasmuch as they are movable; yet once contact has occurred, the contaminated object finds itself trapped within the rigid boundaries of wasted matter. In other words, the porosity of those boundaries only works in one way. After being categorized as “wasted” or “wasteful,” it is practically impossible to retrace one’s steps and become un-wasted again. As we shall see in the ensuing textual analyses, this corollary of waste as an organizing device is painfully brought to the fore in “The Era,” whilst “Through the Flash” explores whether it is indeed possible to go back and become un-wasted after the collapse of the socioeconomic order.

Bauman aligns with this outlook and contends that classifying human beings as waste is a rather unavoidable conclusion to the way modern societies function under a capitalist logic: “Where is design, there is waste. . . . Some human beings . . . do not fit into the designed form nor can be fitted into it” (30). Unlike *homini sacri*, Bauman contends, these “wasted humans”—who he refers to as “surplus population”—are “the victims of order-building designs . . . unintended and unplanned ‘collateral casualties’ of economic progress” (39).² Rob Nixon concurs with this reading, and reasons that the dynamics of forced removal that often follow from order-building designs depend on “the administration of an imaginative violence whereby certain communities were designated indispensable to the nation and others designated expendable are driven out of sight” (151).³ Paradoxically, those deemed expendable and driven out of sight are likewise indispensable to maintain that same social order from which they are forcefully removed. Order cannot be generated without discarding something that will inevitably become waste.

Let us consider the way in which waste as an ordering mechanism relates to storyworlds. A storyworld can be defined as the simulation of “autonomous textual domains that readers must temporarily inhabit mentally and emotionally while reading” (James 21). For David Herman, “storyworlds are mentally and emotionally projected environments in which interpreters are called upon to live out complex blends of cognitive and imaginative response” (570).⁴ In order to understand a story, readers “must imagine and mentally live in another world with a different set of space–time coordinates and simulate the experiences of an alternative consciousness” (James 21). It

is through textual cues that readers are able to engage with narratives, given that these orient and ground our imaginative construction of the storyworld. Some of these textual cues include “the representations of such categories as spatialization, orality, senses other than sight, and the transgression of ontological boundaries” (James 42). Textual cues can offer insight into the particular workings of waste in any given storyworld.

However, as James observes, “mental models of a narrative’s world are based upon an individual reader’s presuppositions and interpretations of textual cues,” which implies that “no two storyworlds will be the same” (22). Upon accepting the suspension of disbelief, readers immerse themselves in a world governed by rules and exhibiting a sort of materiality that might converge on or diverge from their familiar reality. The way those textual cues inform each person’s private storyworld may lead to radically different readings—and experiences—of a text.⁵ Still, it is assumed that the existence of shared experiences orients and shapes our reaction to particular cues.

The diverse storyworlds in *Friday Black* are grounded on the overarching experience of late capitalism, commodification, and consumerism, which are immediately recognizable to anyone living in a globalized world. By entwining these fairly common experiences with issues of racism and discrimination, these short stories translate rather specific experiences of oppression within a common framework that is in itself another manifestation of oppression.

Even though these stories present readers with events that may appear preposterous and grotesque, more often than not, they are drawn from real life. What might feel absurd on the page under the codes of a fictional story, does bear a noteworthy resemblance to the gruesome realities of people actually exposed to systemic racism and capitalism.⁶ In other words, reading about how people in these stories are treated as disposable human waste due to their inability to live up to some haphazard set of rules may trigger reactions of disbelief. Nevertheless, upon closer examination, those rules are revealed to bear resemblance to those shaping the world we inhabit. This effect of uncanniness or *Unheimlich*, as theorized by Sigmund Freud, is partly achieved by embedding existing categories of waste in what appear to be dystopian contexts, noticeable in the use of textual cues informing the storyworlds of “The Era” and “Through the Flash.”

“You’re thinking now; this is then”: wasteful feelings and capitalist profit in “The Era”

“The Era” takes place in an undetermined distant future, although details about what everyday life is like are not overabundant, nor are readers provided with a painstaking chronology. The main character and narrator of the story, a teenager named Ben, shares some data about the world he lives in while going through a series of ordinary scenarios, including his school and his home. It appears that the world still revolves around family and school for teenage boys like Ben and therefore falls within parameters of familiarity. Nevertheless, several details in Ben’s daily life disturb this purported homeliness, hence marking the emergence of the uncanny. It is soon made clear that this stems from the disruption of socially accepted norms of behavior. For instance, the opening scene features a high school teacher telling a student to “shut your mouth because you’re a youth-teen who doesn’t know shit about shit” and calling another student “hideous” to her face (Adjei-Brenyah 29; 30). The focalization of the story through Ben’s eyes gives us complementary information to corroborate that the constant verbal violence in which both teacher and students engage is not an oddity, but these people’s bread and butter, thus subtly confirming that society is governed by a different set of rules that sets it apart from what the reader is accustomed to. The violation of certain rules of decorum that readers might take for granted, and the subsequent reaction of the students—or rather, the absence thereof—is one of the first textual cues that offers us information about the way in which human interactions have changed.⁷

Another important landmark in establishing the storyworld of “The Era” is that of the chronology of events shared by Ben, which introduces the stark opposition between “before” and “after,” which will prove seminal to the story. Even though there is no specific mention of dates, he refers to a series of armed conflicts that have shaped his world and are known as “the Long Big War” and “the Big Quick War,” conjointly labeled as “the Big Wars” and, alternatively, “the Water Wars” (30–31). These appear to have been nuclear wars, although the state of the environment is not discussed. However, judging from the description of the different scenarios, it can be surmised that the story takes place in an urban setting. After the wars came what appears to be a change of socio-political regime, since “the Old Federation became the New Federation” following “the Turn” (29; 31). Even though the scope and impact of this “Turn” are not further addressed in the story, it becomes apparent that their relevance infuses the characters’ perception of time.

“The Era” follows Ben’s journey of waste-ification and subsequent demotion in the social hierarchy. Ben’s transformation is articulated around the temporal notions of “before” and “after.” It is worth noting that his reflections on how things used to be and how things are in the present seem to have been modeled after the Turn. If the Turn is what effectively separates the “before” from the “after” in this storyworld, then Ben’s transformation mimics this clear-cut distinction on a lesser scale. And just like the process of becoming waste(d) I referred to in the previous section, the Turn is a one-way road from which there is no coming back. Arguably, the past (that is, everything predating the Turn) becomes irretrievable, and therefore the time delimited as “before” is marked as the space of the unthinkable.

Aside from time organization, the other defining attribute of the storyworld of “The Era” stems from society’s obsession with efficiency. The Turn allegedly made people cognizant of the dangers of “emotional truth-clouding,” presented as the leading cause that provoked the destructive Big Wars. By presenting society with the conclusion that the wars were the direct consequence of “everyone” being “a liar,” a discursive opposition between “truth” and “lies” at the time of the Turn is created (29).⁸

It might appear that associating “lies” with “war” is not in itself a censurable action if the goal is ultimately to end all wars. However, that is not the case. The Turn did not eliminate wars, but perpetuated them; the only difference being that, as Ben notes, the wars currently fought “are valid/true because we know we aren’t being emotional fighting them” (31). According to the “science and philosopher guys,” before the Turn occurred “people had been living wrong the whole time before. *Sacrificing themselves, their efficiency, and their wants*” (29; emphasis added). Thus, it appears that the Turn ushered in a socioeconomic model based on extreme forms of efficiency and individualism—and proceeded to mark emotions as taboo since they stood in the way of optimization and efficiency.

With “emotional truth-clouding” turned into the main detonator of unwanted wars, emotions are reduced to a childish impulse. Truthfulness, pride, and intelligence emerge as the core societal values after the Turn (31); meanwhile, any sign of emotion is generally despised and loathed, to the extent that it becomes codified as taboo. Being nice to someone is interpreted as humor, given that it represents a subversion of what is considered normal behavior. Moreover, saying nice things to people is akin to telling lies. Since truthfulness is held as a core value, those saying and doing nice things are considered to be on the fringe of what is acceptable, whereas those openly expressing any emotion are directly classified as human waste. The puerile

distinction between “valid” and “invalid” wars based on “emotional truth-clouding” showcases how easily these polarized discourses spread and become the norm when they benefit the system.

Those who indulge in emotional outbursts are deemed untrustworthy and therefore expendable. In fact, within the system, “shoelookers” are defined by their status as liars: “People say that if you tell a lot of lies you eventually start being all depressed and weepy like them” (35). In reality, shoelookers are likely individuals who cannot keep up with the high standards of excellence required by the system to be considered optimal workers. Certain enhancements are available to those who meet societal demands, such as genetic engineering. However, there might come a point when such enhancements are simply not enough for some individuals who get discarded regardless.

Those marked as shoelookers live miserable existences and experience a gripping sense of inadequacy. As Morrison points out, class systems dependent on a code of conduct enforce submission or exclusion, which in turn arouse feelings of regret and shame (51). In “The Era,” Ben observes that “[t]he shoelookers don’t feel anything but sad. They feel it so much you can see it in everything they do. They’re always looking at the ground” (Adjei-Brenyah 35). It becomes apparent throughout the narrative that shoelookers struggle with diverse mental illnesses, most often depression, which are likely a byproduct of the highly competitive system they are forced to live in. Nevertheless, shoelookers are never considered to be ill, and neither are they offered any treatment whatsoever besides Good, a state-distributed drug that is probably a type of antidepressant.

Anyone can become a shoelooker as soon as their productivity begins to plummet. The moment when the effect of Good is not enough to mask the symptoms signals the transition from the socially acceptable to the socially unacceptable. Once the symptoms of depression become evident to others, struggling subjects are first ostracized by their peers, and then finally expelled from the social body to the outskirts of cities. If, as Bauman puts it, “[t]he destination of the *unemployed* . . . was to be called back into active service,” then “[t]he destination of waste is the waste-yard, the rubbish heap” (12; original emphasis). Thus, “assignment to ‘waste’ becomes everybody’s potential prospect—one of the two poles between which everybody’s present and future social standing oscillates” (71).

Even though descriptions of places do not abound in “The Era,” a good deal of sensory information corroborates the status of shoelookers as garbage, thereby confirming Morrison’s observation that “[i]f we ‘other’ a

group successfully enough, ultimately they then turn into the very filth we accuse them of embodying” (108). According to Ben, “the poor people all live cramped together in small spaces that are cheaper” on the outer part of urban settlements (Adjei-Brenyah 43). This label includes shoelookers but also the Anti, a group whose role in the story will be discussed later. Most shoelookers have “been abandoned by the people who used to be their families” and left there so those “on the inner parts don’t have to come in contact with them all the time” (43).

Housing in these areas is not “nice in looks,” nor does it fulfill basic requirements such as “keeping warm/dry, being absent of animals, etc” (43). When Ben visits the Antis, their housing complex is described as “not nice,” with dirty walls and peeling paint, with a “bunch of cats and a raccoon” fighting in the lobby area and a “stairwell that smells like a toilet” (44). At the edge of the section, Ben spots “many shoelookers slowly moving through the walk-streets” in a zombie-like manner (43). It is worth noting that other spaces in the story are not as thoroughly portrayed as these quarters, which indicates that the physical presence of shoelookers is disruptive enough to deserve a lengthy description.

Yet, before being physically removed to the outskirts, the shoelookers potentially serve several purposes—mainly social, but also economic. Shoelookers are pariahs, non-members of society, but they still possess some value. Ben’s remark that “[s]hoelookers don’t really do anything to anybody except make them proud to be themselves and not a no-good shoelooker” (35) suggests that they fulfill a twofold function as scapegoats and walking cautionary tales that remind others of what would happen if emotions interfered in one’s capacity to be productive. The shoelookers’ misery functions as a permanent reminder for other people that they need to “police each other’s and their own behavior” (Morrison 51) in order to avoid becoming an outcast. Arguably, being in a state of constant awareness, noting which behaviors are socially acceptable and which are not, makes any shortcomings all the more conspicuous.

In the case of Ben, this pressure is something he is keenly aware of, as he constantly scrutinizes his own thoughts so as to match his peers’ expectations. For instance, upon being insulted by his teacher, Ben feels tempted to call him out on his bigotry but refrains from doing so “because, even though I’m being true, they’d say I was being emotional and it was clouding my truth” (30). After having received an extra dose of Good, he worries over the fact that he is already “feeling things other than good, which isn’t how it works” (36). As the effects of the drug begin to wash away, Ben

begins spiraling: “Without any Good in me, everything looks like a different kind of bad. And all I can imagine are the worst things about everyone and everything. . . . Ideas that scare me run around in my head” (42). Since emotions have been obliterated from the social sphere, thereby disarticulating any public discourses available, Ben starts feeling like shoelookers do—except that he does not realize this, because he lacks the sense-making tools to understand what is happening to him. In the end, Ben falls prey to the same unbearable sadness that afflicts the shoelookers, effectively turning him into one. However, he still tries to adhere to social codes and remains seemingly unaware of his own waste-ification: “I just stand there looking at the ground because I’m not a shoelooker even though, with my head down, and the feeling in my head, and the tears almost in my eyes, *I probably look like one*” (50; emphasis added). It is remarkable how Ben, who is admittedly acting like a shoelooker and even feeling like one, is unable to perceive himself as one, due to the extreme form of othering they represent. In this sense, shoelookers embody the notion of antagonism—as opposed to conflict—as described by Frank B. Wilderson (qtd in Kline 52). Whereas conflict involves the possibility of resolution and undoing whichever loss has been inflicted onto others, antagonism requires the complete obliteration of the other and in turn leads to social death (Kline 52–53). Having been raised in a social order that does not regard shoelookers as fully human, Ben cannot wrap his head around his own transformation.

Once one becomes a shoelooker, social integration ceases to be an option. This appears to be so because shoelookers are not reliable workers: they cannot earn credits to pay for decent housing or more Good. Not only is efficiency key to this extreme form of capitalism, but also to consumerism. As Morrison sharply sums up, “[t]he wasted do not consume; in late capitalism, one must consume and waste—in order not to become wasted oneself” (107). As long as shoelookers continue to linger in the liminal space of being visible yet already marked as “wasteful” by their peers (for example, being made fun of in school but still attending school), they retain some usefulness. However, once they lose their financial power, they become wasted for good.

The only group that maintains contact with the shoelookers in spite of everything is the Anti. The Anti constitute a social group of their own: they do not seem to be part of the caste system—which places bioengineered OptiSelected people at the top and shoelookers at the bottom—but appear to exist in a sort of limbo, as they are defined by their position towards social

advancement. The first Anti introduced in the story is Leslie, one of Ben's classmates:

Leslie is always telling lies about how great things are or how nice everyone looks and how everybody is special. Leslie McStowe is one of the least truthful people around . . . The McStowes and the people my mother called idiots are part of the Anti. They're anti-Good, anti-prebirth science, anti-progress. At my school I can count the number of Anti families on my hands. But there are a lot of them in worse parts of the New Federation. (36–37)

The only Anti with whom Ben interacts are Leslie and her parents. Upon being invited to celebrate his birthday at their house, Ben walks to the outer side of his section, where the McStowes live among shoelookers. In contrast with the exterior, the housing unit where they live is “bright inside” and “smells like something good,” with “walls covered in sheets of paper with too many colors on them” (44–45). Soon after his arrival, Ben asks for some Good, but Leslie's father explains that they “like to think of [their] home as a throwback to an era before industrial Good”: “*You're thinking now; this is then.* . . . Think of our home as a place where no one needs industrial Good” (47; emphasis added). This apartment, called the Era, stands out amidst the wasteland where shoelookers live, but also as a soothing alternative to the brash and cold-hearted behavior of Ben's family and classmates. In other words, the Era represents the unattainable “before” to which society cannot, or will not, go back. In this oasis, the McStowes ask Ben to think about “the other person,” offer him cake, and tell him jokes, all behaviors that might appear familiar to readers but are far from common according to the storyworld's inner rules. All these activities belong to another time, as Father McStowe explains:

Truly, we like to think we, as you've seen, have created a space that is really a throwback to a time *before* the Big Quick or even before the Long Big. My family and I re-create that decent era for people who might want or need it. . . . What we . . . offer here is a way to feel and be happy without Good. We can feel good just by being together, and you can join us a few times a week depending on the package that works for you. (48; emphasis added)

Thus, the Era represents an oddity within the storyworld as it subverts its rules: it represents a fragment of “before” that has somehow made its way into the “after”—similarly to how the Anti represent an oddity being in touch with shoelookers without completely sharing their social status. Meanwhile,

the fact that its norms are in tune with what us as readers might find familiar creates a sense of normalcy and thus relief from the uncanny reality we have witnessed so far.

Within the conditions of the storyworld, readers may feel more inclined to trust the McStowes because they remind them of the rules of their own real life world, where being nice and friendly is socially acceptable. Ben's classmates and relatives are nothing but awful to him, ultimately ostracizing him. The McStowes, beginning with Leslie, seem to genuinely sympathize with Ben. Whereas Ben refers to the fact that the McStowes are considered untruthful among their peers, readers may refuse to believe it because the family are "being nice" in a manner that is akin to how "being nice" works in real life. However, the McStowes seek their own profit by taking advantage of the shoelookers' despair. Knowing that they desperately seek to soothe their malaise, the McStowes charge those shoelookers still in the liminal space mentioned before—that is, those who have not been forcefully removed from their families yet: "Different amounts of time are trailed by different credit values. . . . If any package feels right for you, let Leslie know. We recommend starting off with at least three days a week here with us in the Era" (48–49). The climax of the story comes with the revelation that the McStowes are not truly friendly, nor are they interested in making Ben's existence less miserable: they are driven by their own individualistic desire to earn credits, conditioned by the socioeconomic system they need to navigate.

Despite the fact that their son, Leslie's brother, was himself a shoelooker who committed suicide, the McStowes do not appear to perform these actions altruistically—whether by choice or need is not revealed. It is highly likely that the McStowes will not continue to receive Ben once he has run out of money to pay for his subscription. True altruism cannot exist within the conditions of a system that only promotes efficiency and individualism as its true core values. Nevertheless, there might be a slight chance that Leslie and Ben look after each other in a sincere manner, as the story's closing shows how Leslie sits with Ben after he has been beaten at school. The promise of a better future for Ben will continue to be uncertain as long as the same norms continue to apply in his world.

"It's the little things": undoing waste-time in "Through the Flash"

Whilst the storyworld of "The Era" is articulated around a clear-cut distinction between "before" and "after," temporal markers in the short story "Through the Flash" appear to have been rendered meaningless. The central event that gives the story its title deforms time and shapes it into a never-

ending loop from which there is no way out. The opening sentence—“*You’re safe. You’re protected. Continue contributing to the efforts by living happily*”—has been repeated “for the last forever” (165; original emphasis), according to main character and narrator Ama. Temporality appears to be fundamentally distorted, which is made apparent by the fact that nobody has aged ever since the event. The internal rules of this storyworld seem to be a consequence of the Flash—likely to have been triggered by nuclear bombing—“a light so bright it obliterates you” (192), from which there is “no escape,” since “you can only get so far before the Flash takes you” (172; 174). This would explain why the storyworld is restricted to Ama’s neighborhood, given that it constitutes the maximum spatial extension that can be reached by bike before the Flash hits.⁹ “Watching it,” Ama explains, “you know it’s the kind of thing you should only get to see once. Something that happens once and then never again” (192). However, with each re-start of the cycle “everything goes back to how it was the day the bomb dropped” (169). Still, despite this seamless continuity, some anomalies occur that give the characters hope the Loop might end someday. Ama recounts that she noticed the first anomaly after she realized her six-year-old brother “was speaking like an adult”:

That’s when I started keeping through the Flash. It’s like realizing you’re in a dream except no matter what you do you can’t wake up . . . we each came to realize we were replaying the same thing over and over, and the realizing happened at different times for everyone. It was a pretty alarming thing. To see you’re trapped in infinity and know that no one can explain exactly how or why. (172)

Unlike Ben and the Anti in “The Era,” Ama does not wish to go back to the time “before” (before the Flash, that is) but to awaken to a new “after”: “[W]ouldn’t that be a shame if your own father already had killed you the day the Loop broke and *you actually would have had a tomorrow?*” (170; emphasis added). Unlike in “The Era,” in “Through the Flash” the comfort lies ahead, in a time that has not come around yet but that contains the promise of things being different—being better. After all, the only mentions of Ama’s life before the Flash reveal that her father was abusive and her mother committed suicide (177), the latter leaving her emotionally scarred: “If she’d waited two months, she would have been with us forever. There aren’t enough words for forever” (171). The origin of Ama’s trauma, placed before the Loop, affects and shapes her way of relating to others, thus suggesting that the Loop itself

may be a reflection of the never-ending cycle of trauma and abuse in which Ama finds herself immersed.

This leads to the second anomaly, the so-called process of “accumulating,” whereby certain individuals acquire supra-human talents or perfect those that they already possess. For instance, Ike becomes smarter than anybody else, whereas Ama becomes “the Knife Queen” (173): “I use my body better than anyone. I can jump Olympic. I can break grown men with my bare hands. When I have a knife, I’m basically the queen of the world” (174). The profound alteration of the rules in her world, together with the trauma of her mother’s tragic death, affects Ama’s perception of herself and others. Upon realizing what is going on, noticing that she is “faster and stronger,” Ama does not “know what to do” (180). However, she comes to the conclusion that “maybe I was supposed to be on top now. I thought I was getting rewarded. And so I did what I wanted” (180). Finding justification in the notion that they are all “supreme and infinite” (165), she goes on killing sprees partly motivated by the fact that no one can die for good. Not knowing how to deal with her suppressed emotions, she shuts down her humanity. In order to do so, she begins to treat others as less than human—like trash, disposable dummies for her own satisfaction.

In “Through the Flash” the anomaly of arrested time precludes Ama’s narrating capacities from helping her cope with her trauma, and, at the same time, acts as a metaphor of trauma.¹⁰ Here William Viney’s conception of waste as “matter out of time” (2) proves useful to account for the relation of time, waste, and narrative: “[W]aste frequently requires a sense of how time has somehow passed, paused or is no longer available to us through the things that surround us. Whilst waste things might often be associated with the inoperative, the unused or misused, this always makes this inaction distinct in time” (3). Viney goes on to argue that “narrative plays a crucial role in organizing time” insofar as it helps “delineat[e] the transition between use and waste,” as “judging waste requires these legislating acts of narrative, [because] acts of narration solidify temporal relations and divide waste from more desirable things” (5). Without those acts of narrative, what belongs in the sphere of waste-time becomes indistinguishable from what ought to be part of the sphere of use-time.

Even though Viney mainly refers to the cycle of use undergone by material objects, I find his thought-provoking views on waste particularly apt to grasp the conflict in “Through the Flash.” Without the possibility of being projected into the future that is distinctive of use-time, the world of “Through the Flash” enters the dimension of waste-time, that is, “a state of material

being that is marked by a temporal *dis*orientation . . . a time without a functional, and therefore a temporal, end” (Viney 8–10, original emphasis).¹¹ Ama attempts to reintroduce temporal cues that exist independently from the Flash, and by doing so she becomes capable of narrating again, in the sense proposed by Viney, which in turn allows her to take responsibility for her actions. Devoid of precise external cues to keep track of time and forever anchored in a perpetual present tense, Ama divides her existence between before the Flash (“the old me”) and after (“the new me”). This classification sorts out moments in her life after the Flash according to how she perceives her actions and behavior towards others: “Now that I’m the new me, I try to be appreciative. . . . If I get too angry, I might go back to being the old me and be just like Carl on Kennedy, who is a monster” (Adjei-Brenyah 167).

Interestingly, “accumulating” and “keeping through the Flash” are first perceived as anomalies with regard to the general rules of the storyworld, since they fracture the static chronology of the Loop and, consequently, alter the repetitive nature of its temporal cycle. The existence of these two phenomena introduces free will and choice in the story. In other words, if people were simply condemned to repeat the same day without retaining any memories of it, human agency would disappear altogether. Keeping through the Flash and accumulating present individuals with a choice regarding who they want to be in a world where their actions will not have any outcomes in the foreseeable future. Here everybody survives regardless of what they do to themselves or to others. Trapped in a perpetual present that lasts but a few hours each time, morality loses its grounding in futurity: due to the constant resetting of time, there are no tangible consequences for anybody’s actions.

Likewise, it is telling that the plot of the story revolves around the finding of what could be a third anomaly in the loop. Ama dreams of her mother in the interstice between her death and her coming back to life at the beginning of a new cycle:

I had a dream. I saw my mother in a dream. It’s something new. New things never happen anymore. There are no dreams except the ones you had the morning of the Flash. I haven’t had a dream in forever. And still, I saw my mother. . . . I saw something I’ve never seen before. I dreamed a dream. That never happens. (168)

In the dream Ama feels the “strong hand” of her mother on her head, and smells her scent as well as “the pinewood and dust of the Ramapo Middle School Gym” (167–68). She can “feel” her mother’s “strong hand[s]” as she

hugs her, reassuring her that “[i]t’s okay” (168). Later on, discussing the dream with Ike, she remarks that “this was before,” even though the scene seems to have been modeled after a real memory of Ama and her mother after a game in her school. The hug, she tells Ike, “made me feel better” (169). As Morrison aptly points out, “[t]he only way to redeem wasted and forgotten people is to embrace them, a gesture of both protection and yet integrity” (187). Even if we became immortal, supreme, and infinite, we would still need the warmth of others.

After having been, allegedly, a “breaker of men and women and children,” Ama works on recuperating interpersonal bonds. There are several hints suggesting that some time before Ama became a murderer there were attempts at comforting each other among the neighbors. For instance, they would “throw a party each time somebody kept through” (172), and they also used to “watch the Flash” together (188). In the moment the story is narrated, Ama has been her “new self” for a while. Her motivation may not be as important as the fact that she strives for improvement, and her efforts seem to be paying off. Even though the world still appears to be doomed, and there is no foreseeable future, there might still be little moments of communion: “I’m thinking maybe we watch the day end. Together” (171). Although the characters are still entrapped by the confines of the Loop at the end of the story, Ama’s compassionate attitude could eventually help her find a way to heal her trauma and thereby bridge the gap between her arrested present time, the time before, and the possibility of waking into a new tomorrow someday.

Bonding amid waste

When seen through the lens of waste, the dehumanizing strategies present in “The Era” and “Through the Flash” acquire new and unexpected implications. As pointed out in my introduction, waste is a malleable category that adapts to the rules governing its surroundings. In “The Era,” waste is primarily used as a classifying mechanism that divides society into clean and contaminated, thereby masking the destructive toll that forms of capitalism take on mental health. Bauman’s, Nixon’s, and Morrison’s insights into what makes a human life waste(d) sheds light on the commodification of oppression under late capitalism. The imaginative violence directed against the shoelookers involves classifying them as less than human. Instead of caring for those who are struggling, the system impels individuals to go against each other. Even the Anti, represented by the McStowes, shamelessly capitalize on the shoelookers’ despair before they become destitute, offering the experience of community and interpersonal bonds—for a price.

In “Through the Flash,” the concept of waste linked to time as developed by William Viney allows for a reading of Ama’s trauma against the backdrop of waste-time. Here, as well as in “The Era,” reversing the process of waste-ification proves to be a dispiriting task. Both storyworlds are constructed around a world-defining event—the Turn in “The Era” and the Flash in “Through the Flash”—that triggers a dichotomous understanding of temporality split into “before” and “after.” Not unlike the process of waste-ification, once the border has been crossed, it is nearly impossible to retrace one’s steps and become un-wasted again. Both Ben and Ama try to imagine different ways of undoing that path, either by spending time in the fake “before” of the Era or by seeking older forms of community that existed prior to the Flash but were obliterated by it.

The conjoined application of the notions of waste and storyworld corroborate the assumption that the very existence of altruism and genuine interpersonal bonding is conditioned by the milieu where they occur. The world of the Era demonstrates that the capitalist logic of profit-seeking contaminates any sign of altruism, whereas the temporal loop only reinforces that perception. However, Ama’s little acts of care prove to be truly altruistic because there is no futurity as of now, and there might never be one again: no other profit can be expected than basking in each other’s company.

Waste thus functions as an organizing strategy that is congruent with the inner rules of each narrative’s storyworld. Understanding the power of waste as a classifying device can shed light on mechanisms of oppression, but can also help us devise alternative configurations precisely due to its malleable, porous nature. What we perceive as idiosyncrasies in the storyworld nonetheless affects and limits the life of the characters. Awareness of the existence of such limitations facilitates the recognition and, as a result, the understanding of similar limitations in the real world.

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Notes

1. With regard to the relation of class and waste, the most obvious example comes from the pejorative epithet “white trash,” which, according to Zimring, implies “a racial aspect to cleanliness”: “While whites were ostensibly superior, poor whites joined Blacks and Indians in being described as dirty and immoral. Class joined skin color in shaping notions of racial superiority and hygiene” (39–40). For a deeper dive into the racial and class tensions involved in the making of the white underclass, see Zimring and Isenberg.

2. Bauman’s distinction rests on the explicit will to target and exclude *homini sacri*. He notes that “[i]n Agamben’s characterization . . . [t]he life of a *homo sacer* is devoid of value, whether in the human or in the divine perspective” (32). Conversely, “the victims of order-building designs . . . are not ‘legitimate targets’ exempted from the protection of law at the sovereign’s behest. . . . Being but a sideline of economic progress, the production of human waste has all the markings of an impersonal, purely technical issue” (39–40). For more on the similarities and differences between *homini sacri* and “surplus people,” see Bauman.

3. Nixon illustrates his point with the example of “surplus people” in South African apartheid that “were deemed superfluous to the labor market and to the idea of national development, and were forcibly removed or barred from cities” (151). It is often the case that those deemed “disposable” are expelled from the body politic and yet indispensable to the capitalist system by means of their role as expendable labor force. In this light, the category “surplus people” can be understood through the lens of racial capitalism (see Robinson).

4. The cognitive functioning of storyworlds is paramount to Herman’s definition. He stresses that reading does not merely imply reconstructing a sequence of events, but also requires the reader to “imaginatively (emotionally, viscerally) inhabit a world in which things matter” (570). For further reading on the cognitive aspects of storyworlds, see Herman.

5. Erin James reflects on the variety of readings that a text may spawn depending on how the textual cues are informed by diverse experiences. She shows interest in “[w]idening the ecocritical conception of ‘environment’ to include also unfamiliar, creative, and nonrealist representations of the physical world and people’s experience of it,” as it would help “literary critics grapple with the regional and cultural particularities of space, time, ‘environment,’ and environmental experience that are often embedded in the structures of narratives” (26–27).

6. Regarding the hyperbolic nature of some of his plots, Adjei-Brenyah has declared that he often relies on real-life situations and then amplifies them in order to call attention to that particular matter: “But what I do like is sometimes turning the volume up on something so that you can’t ignore it. Or pushing the needle just a little bit, shining a light on whatever issue. I like to be right in that space where it feels maybe hyperbolic or maybe not” (Adjei-Brenyah qtd in Martin n.p.).

7. Choosing an approach that relies on showing a scene rather than telling (for example, through indirect speech) what has happened in the classroom, magnifies the sense of estrangement and embarrassment that most readers, who are familiar with the rules of decorum in a classroom, might experience upon reading this passage. For further information on the distinction between showing and telling, see Rabinowitz.

8. It is unclear who orchestrated this “Turn,” since there is no mention of anything like the ruling class or even leading figures. It is worth noting that not a single reference is

made to the people in charge within the system, other than the occasional mention of the “New Federation that stands proudly today” (31).

9. It is likewise stated that before the Flash first hit, the soldier-police “took away everyone’s cars” (173), making it impossible to know for sure the total extension of the area affected by the Flash.

10. Here I draw on Dominick LaCapra’s idea that trauma possesses a belated temporality: “in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realize one is living in the here and now with future possibilities” (699).

11. Viney distinguishes “use-time” from “waste-time,” and defines the former as “provid[ing] an occasion where time materializes in and through use. The value of objects, whether they be buildings, sacred relics or financial products, represents a style of time keeping: material made conspicuous in the time of use” (7).

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Aronofsky's Two Visions of the Ecological Fall

Annamária Hódosy

*HJEAS***ABSTRACT**

The unfolding ecological crisis is often blamed on an excerpt from the bible, according to which humans should “[b]e fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28). This command is repeatedly contrasted with another, saying that “[t]he LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Gen 2:15). Could the current climate change have been avoided if the “second” command had carried more weight? Darren Aronofsky directed two films that deal with this question. In *Noah* (2014), it is the “second,” “eco-friendly” command that seems to reflect the intent of God; therefore, the secular techno-capitalist development of humankind, which is leading to an ecological disaster, is a revolt against this command and a manifestation of the Fall. As opposed to this, *mother!*, made three years later, suggests that it is the intertwining of the Christian tradition with patriarchy and anthropocentrism that lies behind the destruction of the environment, which in turn implies that the disaster can actually be interpreted as an adherence to the “first” command. (AH)

KEYWORDS: Aronofsky, *mother!*, *Noah*, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, eco-apocalypse, stewardship

**Aronofsky, climate crisis, and the bible**

The highly successful documentary about climate change, *Before the Flood* (dir. Fisher Stevens, 2016), is structured around a painting by Hieronymus Bosch, the *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1490-1500), which visualizes the Fall from the bible, the founding myth of Western Culture describing the transition of the first man and woman from a state of happy, innocent obedience to a state of disobedience and misery. In the film, according to the famous actor's, Leonardo DiCaprio's interpretation of the artwork, the depiction of the Fall portrays a world where a perceived harmony between humans and nature is lost and may eventually lead to a living Hell.¹ The title of the documentary plays on this biblical parallel, too, suggesting that our current epoch, the Anthropocene, which may be best characterized as the age of human-made ecological deterioration, is a Fallen world waiting for redemption. If we do not save it, we will be swept away by the climate catastrophe that can be aptly represented by the image of the Flood from the story of Noah in the bible.

The filmmakers of Hollywood are often inclined to showcase the implications of climate change with the help of the Christian myth, as will be shown later on. Darren Aronofsky seems to be a prominent representative of such artists: his *Noah* was made two years earlier than *Before the Flood*, which may have even been influenced by it, while *mother!* was released a year after the aforementioned documentary. According to the Book of Genesis, God punished humankind with the Flood because the Lord saw that “the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5, 11–12). In *Before the Flood* as well as in Aronofsky’s *Noah* (2014) and *mother!* (2017), this “evil” gains ecological meaning and embodies the disrespect for life and the exploitation of nature, for which humans will eventually be punished. In *Noah*, which is an innovative but more or less straightforward retelling of the story of the Flood in the Book of Genesis, God orders humankind to be the guardian and protector of the non-human world, and it is this commandment that humans disobeyed and were punished for by the Flood. *mother!* is a more allegorical retelling of the bible, in this case not only of a specific story, but of the whole narrative from the Old Testament up to the Apocalypse “with an arguably feminist twist on the patriarchal qualities of Christianity, U.S. American politics, and climate change” (Hauke 1). In this film, the eventual destruction of nature is not the result of people disobeying God’s will, but their very obedience to it.

What does this change imply? How can the well-known biblical story be interpreted in both ways? Indeed, why can it be claimed to hold such ecological meaning at all? What do the films say about the correlation between the Christian religion and the attitudes toward the environment in the West? Are Aronofsky’s films alone in film history by attesting to such correlations, or are they part of an ongoing artistic tradition? Although the Christian myth is often used in environmental films to highlight an ecological message, Aronofsky does not use it just to lend ethical or aesthetic authority to his work or to offer simply a shared cultural reference point to the Euro–American audiences for his arguments as do many other Hollywood films. Instead, his films grapple with the question of how the Christian tradition might have influenced humankind in “causing” the Anthropocene, this way participating in a debate that has gone on in the ecocritical discourse for some time.

Lynn White’s controversial study, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” which appeared in Cheryl Glotfelty’s groundbreaking *Ecocritical Reader* of 1996, treats the Christian myth as a negative influence in

environmental history because it places humankind in the center of the created world and orders (or allows) humans to rule over all the other creatures. This anthropocentric idea has contributed to the exploitation of the natural world, argues White, leading to the current ecological crisis or the Anthropocene (a term White does not yet use). But as Alister McGrath lists in detail, other thinkers have not accepted this line of reasoning (30–31), and many ecocritics have also objected to it (cf. Hódosy 115, 132–33).

Indeed, there are two creation versions in the Old Testament, one suggesting a different attitude toward nature from what Lynn White discerns. As Carolyn Merchant sums up the difference: “The strong interventionist version in Genesis 1 legitimates recovery through domination, while the softer Genesis 2 advocates dressing and keeping the Garden through human management (stewardship)” (Merchant, *Reinventing Eden* 134). If we take the *second* creation story as a basis for interpretation, then God’s intention can easily be perceived as requiring humans to protect the Earth. Therefore, the much debated “original sin” of Adam and Eve that caused the Fall may be the sin of anthropocentrism itself.

The following analysis intends to show that Aronofsky’s films significantly differ from each other in *which* creation-version from the bible and what interpretation they adhere to. *Noah* seems to prefer the second creation story in Genesis with its eco-friendly approach—that is why the Flood as the punishment of humankind is interpreted here as a breach of God’s commandments. In contrast, *mother!* implies that ecological deterioration is the consequence of the special place given to man by God himself in the first creation story in the bible. In this case the word “man” emphatically means not humans in general, but *men* specifically. The film suggests that the bible may support a view that women are not “fully human,” and indeed, throughout history, they have been more closely linked to nature (Creed 22; Birkeland 30). It is therefore reasonable that a woman may represent the grievances of the non-human world, which is exactly what happens in *mother!*.

Noah is a critique of technological development and individualism, which is presented as a deviation from a godly life and leading to an environmental collapse. It may even be called a Judeo-Christian parable of the Capitalocene, “the historical era shaped by relations privileging the endless accumulation of capital” (Moore 176). However, the film argues that an excessive fixation on a “godly life” can become a source of evil, especially if it is realized within the framework of patriarchy. That is what *mother!* explicates in more depth, representing an ecofeminist indictment of the

effects of the Judeo-Christian tradition, if we accept that “ecofeminism is a value system, a social movement, and a practice . . . that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction” (Birkeland 18). If *Noah* depicts the era of anthropogenic climate change as the Capitalocene, then *mother!* reinterprets the Anthropocene as the Andropocene, or the age of ecological destruction caused by male chauvinism, even if indirectly.

Ecocriticism and the two creation stories in the bible

Early ecocriticism saw the effect of Christian ideology mostly in its contribution to the exploitation of the Earth (L. White 12; Worster 27–28; Allen 243–45). “The possibility of escaping anthropocentrism has fundamental importance for any attempt to address the contemporary environmental crisis,” argues Eric Katz (18). In this respect, the responsibility of the Christian tradition is repeatedly assumed. “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (9), Lynn White stated in 1996, and his argument is often exemplified by the first creation story in the bible (Gen 1:1–2:4), where God commands the first humans to “[r]ule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen 1:28). Does this mean that God intended nature to be a purely functional entity to be exploited by humans? If so, it cannot be a coincidence that this passage is immediately preceded by the one according to which “God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them” (Gen 1:27). This elevated position of humankind and its special closeness to God gives an implicit explanation as to why the non-human world is inferior to the human race, justifying the subjugation of nature. White claims:

Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends. (10)

Of course, anthropocentrism is certainly not a Christian invention. The idea that “Man is the measure of all things” (as Protagoras put it) has a long tradition. Still, the Christian creation story also incorporates it, legitimizing the need “to evaluate non-human or human life according to its ‘usefulness’ for human purposes” (Katz 19).

However, there is a countertrend in ecological criticism demonstrating that the claim to dominate nature is inherent only in certain parts of the biblical text, which could also be interpreted in numerous different ways (cf. McGrath 80–82; Tuan 47–49; Sale 122; Maiteny 50). The idea that humans should “dominate” the Earth may be a misunderstanding; the idea of “rule” could instead be understood as saying that humans should be the guardians of the non-human world, and it is they who should take responsibility for the corruption of the ecosystems.

This interpretation is highly supported by the second creation story in Genesis. As Ronald B. Tobias claims, a more nuanced translation of the Hebrew passage would be one that “concludes that God delivers dominion of nature to humankind for the purpose of repairing (dressing) and maintaining (keeping) it” (7). Tobias also demonstrates that the view of humans’ entitlement to use the rest of the world for their benefit became particularly strong only after the scientific revolution when “man’s lot” was increasingly seen “to accept God’s mandate to preside ‘over the works of thy hands’ by claiming his God-given rights of dominion over nature” (7; cf. Merchant, *Radical Ecology* 11).

Could it be that the potential agricultural activity outlined in the second creation story (Gen 2:15) presents the desirable ideal of ecological farming? Does the command “take care” suggest an interaction between the land and its inhabitants that aims at preserving the fertility of the former while sustaining the lives of the latter? If so, it is the very urge of Adam and Eve to eat the Forbidden Fruit that metaphorically expresses the human desire to dominate the world, while the Fall is the symbol of their breaching the command of ecocentrism that requires non-hierarchical coexistence with other forms of life. The story may reflect on how people began to outgrow their ecological footsteps. The ensuing horror conceived as “punishment” comprises the consequences of the anti-ecological drive to grow. In Yuval Harari’s account, the expulsion from Eden may refer to the Agricultural Revolution about 10,000 years ago, which “left farmers with lives generally more complex and less satisfying than those of foragers” (89). Harari describes the life of the early foragers in a chapter entitled *A Day of Adam and Eve*, so the change in the lifestyle of our ancestors can easily be associated with the Fall.

The magnificent and lush Garden of Eden is quite well defined in Genesis since the rivers are named: they represent the area around the Persian Gulf, southern Mesopotamia, now part of Iraq, where the Tigris and the Euphrates flow into the sea. This area, situated in the Fertile Crescent, is often

described as the cradle of civilization from both a socio-historical and economic perspective, and has been widely written about. However, it is not so fertile and lush today, which may have resulted from human activity. As Joseph Tainter states in *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, “[i]n this area, agricultural intensification and excessive irrigation lead to short-term above-normal harvests, with increasing prosperity, security, and stability. Within a few years, though, the rise of saline groundwater erodes or destroys agricultural productivity, and thus stability” (48). Apart from Tainter, Jared Diamond and other experts in historical ecology also argue that it was precisely these catastrophic anthropogenic changes that caused the desertification and decline in the importance of the Fertile Crescent (Maingue 217, Christensen 17), which in turn might have influenced the mythic concept of the Fall.

Should we believe that the task God has given to humankind is to cooperate with nature, and the Fall is a breach of that command? Or should we stick to the idea that “it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (L. White 10)? Aronofsky illustrates the difference between the two creation stories in the bible and their implications with the two films explored in following sections.

In *Noah*—in accordance with the second creation story—God expects ecological behavior from Adam and Eve and expels them from Paradise precisely because they embrace a worldview that threatens the destruction of the Earth. As opposed to *Noah, mother!* presents a God who encourages his people to honor him at the expense of all the rest of Creation—in accordance with the first Genesis version—which also brings about total devastation. Sadly, the human race seems to be inclined to destroy its “home” whether it is encouraged to do so (*mother!*) or is banned from doing so (*Noah*). And although the explanation of this ecocidal and suicidal behavior differs in the two films, the attitude that might save our home and the future of humanity if embraced is the same in both: empathy for our fellow creatures, whether humans or not.

***Noah* and the tradition of eco-fiction films**

In *Noah*, Aronofsky assumes a God who, in accordance with the second version of creation, made humanity the guardian of nature. The Fall is the result of Adam and Eve’s rebellion against this command; they are punished via their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, while God’s purpose in the Flood is to wipe out sin completely. In both cases, the retribution is something humans brought upon themselves; in the latter case it is their

aggressive industrial activities and urban developments that turned the world into a dreary, rocky desert (spotted by acid ponds) following the Fall. The coming “punishment” for these sins, the Flood, is a clear reference to the oft-mentioned consequences of the climate crisis, namely floods and rising water levels—which are also the result of human activity.

Although *Noah* seemed unique in using a biblical theme to portray environmental problems in 2014, this approach is not unprecedented in film history. Contextualizing the environmental movies of Hollywood, Brereton claims that European romanticism and American transcendentalism celebrated

the restorative powers of nature, where “the gods talk in the breath of the woods.” . . . Such natural idealism continues to infiltrate the film medium. This rise of nature worship in many ways reflects a “foreboding of impending loss; a melancholic anticipation of the advance of civilization” and the “disappearance of the natural world.” (51)

The quest of the cultural hero is often accompanied by the depiction of the hero’s environment; in the narrative, the resolution of the conflict is symbolized by a transformation of the barren and chaotic world into one of order and abundance. This is also a traditional element of the Christian salvation myth called the “recovery plot” by Carolyn Merchant (*Reinventing Eden*, 133), where the recovery justifies the “faith in the legitimate claim to dominion over nature and the mandate to transform the wilderness into a ‘fruitful garden’” (Tobias 9). In the United States, “the experience of conquering the continent of nature has developed into a theme of exceptionalism and the destiny of the ‘universal Yankee nation’” (Tobias xii), best exemplified in the genre of the western film, which is based on precisely this idea of providence. Here, the claim to dominion over nature is visually emphasized by the frequent panoramic scenes of vast plains and running animals herded by cowboys, which “perpetuates the colonizing impulse that has historically fueled western expansionism, and . . . reinforce[s] hegemonic appropriations of the land” (Berila 118).

In the 1970s, however, the vision of the environment changed in the wake of Rachel Carson’s alarming book *Silent Spring* (1962), which revealed the dangers of widespread pollution, and *The Limits to Growth* (1972), the warning of the first report to the Club of Rome, which predicted what lay ahead if society remained on a collision course with industrial-scale production, consumption, and population growth. Then, in response to the

growing interest and fears, a series of eco-fiction films appeared, which explored the theme of ecological destruction in the established pattern of the Christian salvation story. In the previous decades, this story had already been used frequently and successfully in big-budget “sword and sandal” films that explored religious themes in a biblical setting or in classical antiquity (Detweiler 110–11). As Adele Reinhartz contends: “These movies explicitly pit Christianity, Christian beliefs, and Christian values against the idolatry and atheism of the pagan Roman empire” (98), and they “identify American values as Christian values” (97). In more recent eco-fiction films, Christian values turned out to be environmental values, and parallels between the impending ecological crisis and the Apocalypse came to the fore.

End-of-the-world scenarios in cultural imagery are often influenced by the bible and the teleological, linear perception of time that is characteristic of the Judeo-Christian worldview. The dominant presence of eco-apocalyptic rhetoric is demonstrated both in the scientific literature and the media (Killingsworth and Palmer 38; Patrick 141), as well as in fictional works (Buell 302–08), and it can also be evidenced in the various post-apocalyptic films’ environmental references that proliferate nowadays (Dodds 39–40). When used in fiction with environmental messages, this rhetoric is usually not limited to the representation of a dead and barren world or impending doom. Instead, it is blended with the Christian narrative of the journey toward redemption, in which a Christ-like protagonist “converts” his fellow men by setting an example of the “appropriate” attitude toward the environment, and eventually sacrifices himself for the rest of his community, which is “redeemed” in this way.

This redemption structure can be found in most of the popular American environmental movies from the 1970s, like *Soylent Green* (1979), *China Syndrome* (1979), *Silent Running* (1972), and *Pale Rider* (1985) (cf. Hódosy 103–05). In *The Day the Earth Stood Still* of 2008, an alien representing intelligent life in the wider universe arrives on the Earth with the mission to exterminate humanity and to collect samples of all the existing species in an “Ark,” so his errand is a clear allusion to that of Noah. In the Christian myth of redemption, and in all the aforementioned films, a sacrifice is needed to save humankind from original sin and its consequences. As Holly Pahl points out, “films about sacrifice can raise profound and classical questions about the human condition, God, moral action, and cultural meaning” (478). In an ecological context, the moral may become ecological.

Eco-psychologist Sandra White claims that from the 1970s on, the trope of “sacrifice” has been an integral part of ecological discourse, and it is

this element that is the least acceptable to the general audience. We hear again and again that we should make sacrifices in order to achieve a better world; we should make our carbon footprints smaller and waste less; we should not consider material goods as the basis of our well-being; and, above all, what is the most “required is the sacrifice of our collective illusion of separated superiority” (S. White 223). White assumes that, in such a context, references to the Christian myth and the use of archetypes function to supply the collective imagery and state of mind necessary for such a giving up. It offers “a unified, strongly bonded context of a shared frame of reference in which sacrifices can be lovingly or fearfully made and their purpose commonly understood, compassionately witnessed, and universally upheld” (217).

On the one hand, as an apocalyptic narrative with a redemption structure that features a self-sacrificing hero in the role of the protagonist, Aronofsky’s *Noah* seems to be deeply embedded in this tradition. On the other hand, the film does not meet the need to represent “universally upheld” values in every sense, as it tells the well-known story in a way that is nothing like what we are used to and nothing like the way it is usually told. The central concept of the film is that, after the Fall, humans split into two factions. The descendants of Adam and Eve’s third, godly son, Seth, of whom Noah is one (Gen 5:28; Chr 1:3), try to live a life that they imagine is in line with God’s will (and thus partly atone for the sins of their ancestors) by holding fast to the “true” teaching, that is, trying to be the guardians of the Earth. In contrast, Cain’s heirs, represented in the narrative by the antagonist Tubal-Cain, insist on the anthropocentric interpretation of the creation. Tubal-Cain explains to Ham, one of Noah’s sons: “When the creator finished making the sky, the ground, the sea, and the beasts, He wasn’t satisfied. He needed something greater. Something to take dominion over it and subdue it. So He made us in His image. Us” (*Noah* 1:33:54–1:33:55).

In a way more suited to fantasy or post-apocalyptic films than the usual sword-and-sandal bible treatments, the film *Noah* shows how Cain’s followers built a civilization based on an oil-like substance and machines and how these contributed to their destroying the world’s organic life-support systems. This concept has earned Aronofsky the resentment of many spectators who stressed the importance of a literal (or more traditional) interpretation of the bible (cf. Kosior). However, as Moore and Ruah-Midbar Shapiro demonstrate, Aronofsky’s version is not entirely unfounded in the biblical tradition.

In the narrative of the film, Cain and later Noah is aided by strange, alien-looking—or transformer-like—beings who, at first glance, only serve to

bring the story closer to the fantasy genre. But such creatures, the “Nephilim,” or giants, are actually mentioned in Genesis 6:1–4, and in the apocryphal Book of Enoch as well as in certain midrashim, Jewish interpretive texts that have in many other respects contributed to Aronofsky’s creative reimagining of the canonical story (Moore and Ruah-Midbar Shapiro). These texts may be interpreted to describe non-human beings: the “Nephilim” are referred to as the “sons of God” and were interpreted as giants and “fallen angels” (Prophet 10).

It is these giants who are imagined to have helped men “invent” urban civilization. In *Noah*, they first assist the rebellious Cain with their technological ingenuity and then, seeing the destruction of the world and realizing the harmfulness of their actions, help the protagonist build the ark and hold back the “sinful” multitude. In doing so, they sacrifice their lives for the chosen one, which ultimately leads to their successive absolution and ascension—or rather, perhaps, their return—to heaven. As such, the story of the Nephilim stresses that those who convert will be redeemed, just as the story of the Ark emphasizes that those who are firm in their faith will be saved. The fallen angels reinforce the message of the “eco-narrative” because their repentance and subsequent atonement are rewarded. But as the inventors of urban infrastructure, these characters also have the capacity to bring the concept of the “Capitalocene” into the film.

***Noah* and the Capitalocene**

Through the deviation from the well-known story by incorporating unauthorized elements and the unusually free interpretation of the authorized ones, Aronofsky is able to give a view of Western history that highlights the interconnectedness of religion, historical and socio-economic processes, and the destruction of nature (since the latter is not a central problem in the sacred text). The film begins with an animated sequence with a voice-over illustrating the industrial devastation wrought by Cain’s heirs, which provokes the wrath of God (*Noah* 00:41–01:33). There are a number of anachronistic moments in this story that refer to later, historical events. The apparently “biblical” times in the film clearly represent the era of our present economies when

apart from exhausting scarce resources and exploiting colonies, the industrial growth model also produces ever-increasing mountains of waste, of toxic garbage, it destroys the ozone-layer and is responsible for the greenhouse effect. . . . The continuation of the industrial growth model can only lead to further ecological destruction and to greater inequality, deeper poverty. (Mies 252)

Thus, the Fall in the film may mark the mythical beginning of the Anthropocene, while the Flood is an artistic vision of “The Sixth Mass Extinction Event: caused by the Anthropocene, caused by humans” (Morton 13). This epoch, incidentally, might also be understood as the ‘Capitalocene’ in the film, as the process that led to the present of the film is likened to that of exploitative capitalist production and accelerated consumption.

The argument for renaming the Anthropocene as Capitalocene stresses that only a minority is responsible for the ecological crisis, using technological progress to exploit others and the natural resources for profit. But in *Noah*, (almost) the whole of the human population is held accountable and gets punished—they drown in the Flood. The fact that all of humankind is doomed except for the family of Noah implies that the whole race is understood as complicit in the devastation, which may be alluded to by the bloody and violent scenes of Tubal-Cain’s campsite right before the Flood, where everyone is trying to survive at the cost of others’ lives, primarily to obtain meat, which evokes both the consumptive frenzy of modern society and its expected consequences (54:54–56:48). The alternative that Noah’s family presents can therefore be understood as a representation of a voluntary socio-political withdrawal from the global capitalist socio-political system.

In one of the first scenes of the film, one of Noah’s sons wants to pluck a pretty flower, but his father warns him that he should not do it if he cannot use it for anything (05:07–05:43). This call for the reduction of consumption to the bare minimum and the avoidance of unnecessary waste strongly echoes some of the main ideas of today’s green movements whose

new definition of a ‘good life’ will emphasize different values such as: self-sufficiency, co-operation instead of competitiveness with others and with nature, respect for all creatures on the earth and their diversity, belief in the subjectivity of not only human beings but also non-human beings, communality instead of aggressive self-interest. (Mies 254)

This is exactly how Noah’s family wants to live, and this is the kind of values they want to preserve. They pursue a vegan diet, they do not kill animals, cure them if they are wounded by meat-eating hunters (as we see at the beginning of the film) and in every respect try to leave a minimal ecological footprint. Noah tries hard to make his children understand that satisfying their desires is sometimes not permissible for the sake of an ecological greater good.

However, the idea of the “greater good” makes Noah require his sons to eventually die without a mate and offspring—thus sparing the ecosystem

from the impact of the human factor. But this sacrifice proves too much even for his fully devoted family members. The film suggests that the (spiritual) violence of Noah's methods is just as harmful as the evil forces he fights against. His blind faith leads not only to his own personal tragedy (he lives out the rest of his life in shame and seclusion) but alienates others from his agenda—as environmentalist movements may do if they emphasize the necessity of sacrifice. Here the film echoes the debates about whether green politics should emphasize the virtue of abstinence and suffering according to the ideal in the Christian tradition or whether it should highlight the alternative pleasures of a lifestyle abandoning waste (Lányi 62–63).

Noah's beliefs and morals in the film evoke the eco-fundamentalist agenda of deep ecology. This may be best seen in Noah's conviction according to which the Ark is not a means to save humanity by saving the system that supports their life, but a way to save the existing ecosystem for *itself*, without the parasitic humans who only destroy it. This is the idea that Murray Bookchin, the forefather of social ecology, criticized when he expressed his concerns that deep ecology's "celebration of nature as an end-in-itself" turns into anti-humanism and a disdain for science, technology, and human progress in all forms (60–61). Bookchin contends that deep ecology, with its focus on biocentric egalitarianism, fails to see the possibility that humans could collaborate with the natural world instead of using it for their own ends.

While Noah is blind to such possibilities, his worldview in the film is balanced by another eco-conscious attitude, which is less misanthropic and more sensitive socially. As Moore and Ruah-Midbar Shapiro conclude, "ecofeminist sensibility is denoted in the film through the women in Noah's family. Both Na'ameh and Ila express a feminine-maternal perspective that advocates life and is pro-humanity." Unlike Noah, who shuts humans out of the sphere he should protect and would kill his own grandchildren to prove his devotion to God (and relinquishes this only because God seems to give a sign of approval), the women in the family, though equally devoted, seem to respect life in every form. They would even help the drowning people if they could. It is their stance that offers hope for humanity, as it is their love and care that could balance the "evil" punished by the Flood. As Ariel Salleh writes,

the actuality of caring for the concrete needs of others gives rise to the morality of relatedness among ordinary women, and this sense of kinship seems to extend to the natural world as well. . . . These understandings

engraved in suffering make a sharp contrast to the abstract philosophical formulations of deep ecology. For ecofeminism, the body is indeed an instrument of our knowledge of the world. (Salleh 228)

While Noah's worldview is sharply contrasted with the anthropocentrism and egocentrism of Cain's descendants, it still remains patriarchal. He silences and controls all the women and children in his family. The radical idea of "species equality" is not paired with gender equality, and that is why Noah eventually misses the opportunity to alter the future radically.

***mother!* and God the father**

Noah does not portray God in an anthropomorphic way but rather invokes Him indirectly, metonymically, through His miracles and signs. The God in *mother!* is anthropomorphic but is entirely an intertextual construct as such: there is no direct narrative evidence for such an allegorical interpretation beyond certain abstruse clues and vague allusions. The story seems to be about a human couple living in an old house far from any human settlement. The man is an artist whose reputation attracts more and more guests to the house until chaos breaks out, and the woman, after suffering several atrocities, finally burns the house down. Some surrealistic but highly allusive turns indicate from the outset that the narrative is allegorical: the couple is, in fact, God (traditionally depicted as male) and Earth or nature (which has female attributes in most cultures), while the sequence of guests represents humanity, beginning with Adam and Eve.

One of the first important conflicts in the narrative is what can be interpreted as Cain's fratricide, and soon afterward, we come (again) to the Flood, this time manifested in the form of a burst pipe (after the guests, despite being warned, break the sink that has not yet been installed). "We are being punished," one of the guests shrieks (*mother!* 1:05:20). But unlike *Noah*, the plot of *mother!* does not stop there. The woman becomes pregnant, and after the husband completes a new work of art (presumably the New Testament)—which brings another wave of celebrating guests to the house—she gives birth to a baby who evokes Christ, who is torn apart by the guests shortly after his birth in a horrendous and orgiastic parody of communion. While on the surface, the second part of the plot appears to be a frenzied rampage of guests, it soon becomes clear that the narrative, just like the story of Cain's heirs in *Noah*, is an allegory of the history of Western civilization, with specific uniforms and distinctive historical allusions to important events

and eras. But in this case the driving force behind this bloody and violent history is the need to conform to the supposed will of God.

The film seems to ask the question: how much of this religious framework can be seen as moral support or compass in the pitfalls of history? Or, how much of it has had downright harmful consequences? The enfolding human drama also has ecofeminist implications. The different meanings ascribed to the character of the woman highlight the parallels and correlations between the hierarchy of the non-human world placed under the rule of humans and the realm of the “feminine” placed under the rule of men (cf. Merchant, *Radical ecology* 110; Warren 124–25).

While the husband has work that is admired and acknowledged by everyone (even if most of the time he does not do anything but waits for inspiration), the woman has typically feminine, caring duties. She beautifies the house, the “nest,” prepares dinner, and her greatest wish is to have a child, through which she can finally fulfil her potential—partly because she feels that she is not given enough appreciation. She is the embodiment of the housewife “whose labor in the household is assumed but denied by the ‘autonomous subject’ as household head in his appropriation to himself of the social and economic rewards it makes possible” (Plumwood 28). The film seems to point out the fact that the attitude of the husband towards the woman is also a reflection of the traditions of Christian culture: “If God in ‘his’ heaven is ruling ‘his’ people, then it is in the ‘nature’ of things and according to the divine plan and the order of the universe that society is male-dominated,” as in the feminist classic Mary Daly wrote half a century ago (13).

The arrival of the coveted baby makes the situation of the woman even worse, as she cannot prevent the death of the child, whose function, according to the father (and indeed, patriarchal law), is to serve his father’s reputation. If the child is interpreted as a reference to Christ, it is not the promise of redemption that is evoked by the crucifixion scene, nor does this scene merely illustrate the anthropological idea that the ritual in question can be traced back to the sacrifice of the innocent, offered as gifts to the gods. The husband gives the Child to his devotees so that they may feel themselves closer to Him and/or benefit from the remnants (the guests are also shown to be busy collecting “relics” in the house in the form of plates and other objects). The fate of the baby illustrates the patriarchal view, taken for granted until the 20th century, that the child is part and ‘property’ of the father (and not the mother) and must sustain the paternal name.

The representation of the mother seems to be informed by feminist criticism of the figure of the Virgin Mary, which usually focuses on the fact that self-sacrificing and self-abandoning motherhood is an ideological construction that aims to make the subordinate female role a normative model (cf. Hauke 11). Behind the association with the Holy Mother, however, lies the possibility of seeing the woman as the embodiment of a more ancient power:

The sometimes God-like status of Mary (always officially denied in Roman Catholicism, of course) may be, as Simone de Beauvoir suggests, a remnant of the ancient image of the Mother Goddess, enchained and subordinated in Christianity, as the “Mother of God.” (Schüssler Fiorenza 83)

This possibility is supported by evasive visual and narrative signs. For example, at the end of the film, it is revealed that the husband creates a flourishing world from the remains of this woman, a diamond—which suggests she is not just “a” woman. Indeed, she is not even *one*. The film begins with a vague female face in flames, but it is only at the end that the spectator may realize that she is not identical to the female protagonist of the film. In the end, the mother character is replaced by another similar figure, and it is revealed that the story is actually cyclical, with each woman killing herself and the creation being replayed.

Not only the cyclical renewal of the woman’s body, but also her relationship to the house, suggests that she can be understood as the mythological Mother Goddess, who in turn represents the life-giving power of the non-human world. According to Freud, a place that seems “familiar” to one is “the place where each one of us lived once upon a time . . . the place as being his mother’s genitals or her body” (Freud, *The Uncanny* 244). The eco-psychoanalyst Dodds adds: “what for Freud are merely symbolic stand-ins for the mother’s body may themselves point in a quite direct way to something even more ‘primal’: the idea of a return to the Earth itself, the home from which we come” (119).

“The word ecology comes from the Greek word Oikos, meaning ‘home’ or ‘a place to live’” (Dodds 115), and there are some “mystical” moments in the film that create an association between the house and the lady who renovates it, partly for her future child. An example of such a moment is when the woman touches the wall she is painting, and seems to be able to feel the “condition” of the house through its living, pulsating material (*mother!* 05:21–05:58). The interdependence of the woman and the

house is further emphasized by the fact that the center of the wall seems to be a heart which shrinks and becomes increasingly sickly and eventually dies as the female protagonist becomes more and more stressed by the rampage of people (1:49:58–1:50:04). Although the house “coming to life” has a strong tradition in horror films (Hauke 7, 10), this time it is more plausible that the etymology of “ecology” comes into play here: the throbbing “heart” of the house implies that it is a metaphor of the life-sustaining power of the environment, while the growing and bleeding hole that appears on the floor after Cain’s fratricide highlight the association between the material aspects of femininity and the environment (47:28–47:45).

***mother!* and the Andropocene**

Although the woman of the house in *mother!* seems to live for caring for the home and everybody that comes to live in it, this caring is not rewarded in any way, reinforcing Shiva’s assertion that “[w]omen are devalued, first, because their work co-operates with nature’s processes, and second, because work that satisfies needs and ensures sustenance is devalued in general” (75). The creatures that are nurtured by this feminine nature take all their gifts for granted, while her needs are not respected. As Plumwood puts it:

Primary among the Others whose contribution is assumed but denied is nature, the sphere of the non-human, including animals, plants, and the biospheric cycles and processes of which they are part. The relation of the colonizing master subject to the sphere of nature is one of centre to periphery. The centre sees the peripheral other or external sector as a place outside. (28)

In accord with this, the woman in *mother!* is not only subordinate to the Lord God and the Savior as a mere wife and mother but appears as a subordinate to God as a representation of nature too. With this portrayal, does the film follow or rather criticize traditional Christian gender roles? Since it focuses primarily on the “loving” husband’s unwitting humiliation and insulting of his wife, which ultimately leads the woman to suicide, the movie highlights that unequal gender relations can be harmful in more than one way. The personified relationship of God and nature as husband and wife is instrumental in illustrating the power structure that is built into the cultural perception of what we conceive as “nature,” too. In contrast to *Noah*, which blamed self-interest and conspicuous consumption for the destruction,

mother! takes an explicit ecofeminist approach to the question of how the anthropocentric worldview of man as the image of God—which Lynn White criticized and Val Plumwood defined as also necessarily *androcentric*—can lead to an ecological crisis.

In “pagan” myths and tales, we often encounter female deities and are more liable to find strong and important female characters than in sacred Christian texts. These figures fulfilled their roles not despite their reproductive and maternal attributes but often because of them. “Powerful goddesses are related to a stage of human religion focused on the fertility of the earth, animals, and land. Women’s fertility is related magically to the fertility of the land, both in the hunter-gatherer stage of human survival and in early agriculture” (Ruether 260). The transformation of women into subordinate figures in mythology is usually associated with changes in cultural or social history. For Freud, “this shift from mother to father is above all a triumph of the spiritual over the senses, a cultural advance since motherhood is proved by the senses, whereas fatherhood is a conjecture based on inference and presupposition” (*Moses and Monotheism* 180).

The demonization of sexuality, witch-hunts, and the glorification of asceticism and martyrdom in the history of Christianity, all alluded to in the second part of the film by the guests’ ranting and raving, are all examples of the fear or denigration of the “senses,” materiality, and femininity. And although the spiritual and disembodied God of Christianity does not in principle have a “gender,” He does (and has been generally portrayed as such throughout history) carry masculine attributes. Therefore, it is men who have traditionally been expected to fulfill roles associated with spirituality, not women, who have been identified with bodily function(s) and are treated as more “natural” beings. In Timothy 2:12–13, we read: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve.”

In the movie, God is presented as a contemporary celeb writer—perhaps not *just* because he “authors” the bible. “Patriarchal etiology . . . defines a solitary Father God as the only creator of all things,” Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write, adding that, therefore, the “proudly masculine cosmic Author is the sole legitimate model for all earthly authors” (7). The patriarchal notion that the writer “fathers” his text just as God fathered the world is and has been all-pervasive in Western literary civilization, so much so that, as Edward Said has shown, the metaphor is built into the very word, *author*, with which writer, deity, and *paterfamilias* are identified (Gilbert-Gubar 4). However, the authority of the *paterfamilias* is not celebrated or approved in

the film. Rather, it is increasingly contrasted with the constant neglect and humiliation of the woman, whose hard work is taken for granted and is never acknowledged. Even when she becomes a mother, it is considered by her husband and his fans to be much less than the father is capable of.

The patriarchal structure, in which the Spirit is associated with the male and the corporeal is subordinate to it, subordinates both the woman and nature (conceived as female) to the human (conceived as male); the former is seen as a servant of the latter's needs and the inspiration and/or raw material of his activity—as is the case with the muse or the beautiful natural landscape. “Oh, my genius!” the husband's (female) editor remarks when she meets the man at the party celebrating the launch of his magnum opus, and when she meets the wife, she exclaims: “ah, the inspiration!” (*mother!* 1:24:46–1:25:01). The hierarchy of the creative mind and the material of creation necessarily transforms the relationship into dependence and even oppression. A relationship where “you give, and you give, and you give, and it is never enough,” as we hear Eve say in the film about motherhood (1:00:11–1:00:20), while the other only expects or accepts cannot be balanced and sustainable in the long term. But it is not only the exploitation of women but also of material nature that is the result of such unequal relations.

When the godlike man unhesitatingly allows the mob to destroy the house—that is, the created world that was renewed by the personified nature—and let his devotees take whatever they want, it can be interpreted as an uncanny representation of “free will” which was also scrutinized and criticized in *Noah*. However, *mother!* implies that the status of woman in a religious cult *predetermines* how people behave towards their environment. In the film, God sets an example of how men should silence women, which justifies people's indifference to the “household” and its caretakers, which ultimately leads to a crisis.

The effects of the subordination of the wife/nature become perceptible through the effects of the psychic “stress” she constantly feels and are manifested by her growing anxiety and physical suffering. “Humans are stressing the planet in a variety of ways” (Lenton 30), and stress with its consequences is a common topic in environmental sciences, now usually in the context of catastrophic climate change. This is how William Ophuls highlights the similarities:

Although natural systems are resilient when subjected to one-time insults, chronic stress causes progressive damage because the constant pressure of even low-grade stress inhibits or frustrates the forces that promote

homeostatic recovery. Just as the human body can tolerate the occasional overindulgence without serious harm but succumbs to the accumulated effect of bad habits, so too the steady drip of man-made chemicals into the environment causes ecosystems to sicken and die. (32–33)

It is not only “stress” that becomes an appropriate concept to represent the interconnected problems of women and the Earth; the idea that there comes a point in life where you can no longer swallow the humiliation and abuse, and an “explosion” occurs, is also something that can be imagined in both cases. The careful depiction of the intensification of the stress of the woman in *mother!* helps the audience to understand the closure when the woman ends her suffering by blowing up the barrels under her house—which corresponds to the idea of the “tipping point” in environmental studies:

Tipping points are processes of discontinuous and, at times disruptive change. Generically they are critical thresholds, which offer various timescales of onset and impact . . . tipping points are perhaps best understood as metaphors to help deal with uncertainty and complexity, wholeness, and the unpredictability of the future. (O’Riordan et al. 3)

That is why the “andropogenic” stress on the woman is also a perfect metaphor for the “anthropogenic” stress on the environment and the theory of the environmental tipping point, which may (or may not) lead to the “end of the world”—at least as their current inhabitants know it. Besides, and regarding climate catastrophe especially, the barrels may be associated with oil and the carbon dioxide released by burning it, hence the fire as an image visualizing global warming. Then the world may begin anew with a new “body”—as an ecosystem recovers after a natural fire—just like in *Noah* after the Flood. The use of oil, which is sometimes called the blood of Mother Earth, recalls the rapid technological advances and the intensifying greed for profit in the last 200 hundred years that may or may not qualify *Noah* to be a representation of the idea of the Capitalocene. *mother!*, however, represents the ensuing ecological problems as “the consequences of the continuous and interconnected exploitation of women and nature” (Hauke 14) and therefore allows for the renaming of this particular era as the Andropocene.

Conclusion

mother!, in stark contrast to *Noah*, works not with the ecological but with the anthropocentric description of the creation, testifying that Aronofsky is not adhering to one concept or the other but is merely taking

stock of the options that our Western, Christian culture offers. In *Noah*, it is anthropocentric pride and technological (mal)development that is primarily blamed for the crisis; in *mother!* the devaluation of the non-human environment and unequal gender relations are demonstrated to be both modeled after the idea of the dualism of the spiritual God and the material Mother. Although these problem-areas seem to be sharply different at first sight, which impression is also promoted by the difference in the filmic language of the movies, in ecological criticism, the problematic factors of the two films are very much compatible (cf. Federmayer 65). In growth-based economics—which *Noah* seems to critique—“self-provisioning is non-productive work,” Vandana Shiva maintains (*Women's Indigenous Knowledge* 170). “This is the viewpoint that counts women’s heavy workload as non-work,” she continues, describing a phenomenon that is at the center of *mother!*

For Shiva and Mies the problem is not only that the devaluation of women’s contribution may harm their human dignity and well-being, but that their traditional work is that which is more nurturing of life and life support systems: “The marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand. Loss of diversity is the price paid in the patriarchal model of progress which pushes inexorably towards monocultures, uniformity and homogeneity” (Shiva, *Women's Indigenous Knowledge* 165). The problems highlighted by ecofeminism are also present in *Noah*, especially if we heed the conflict between the protagonist and the women of the story. Indeed, these differences are informative of the altercation between the environmental movements of deep ecology and ecofeminism. As Ariel Salleh muses: “For deep ecologists, overcoming the division between humanity and nature promises a release from alienation. For ecofeminists, it promises release from a complex set of exploitations based on patriarchal identification of femaleness with the order of nature” (225).

Although the influence of the Christian religion is presented as different in the two films, the consequences are equally gloomy in both cases. Whatever interpretation of God’s command we choose, humankind seems to be going in the wrong direction. In *Noah*, those who live ecologically sound lives remain an absolute minority despite that this is what God demands of his creatures. In *mother!*, the general principles of Christianity in relation to nature and the “role model” attributed to God the Father seem to be crucial in the misbehavior of humans. It seems humans harm each other as well as their environment irrespective of being supported by a higher authority or not. In *mother!* there are no exceptions to this rule. In *Noah*, even the exception is problematic: the protagonist becomes an eco-fascist who accepts genocide

as the possible solution to ecocide (Moore and Ruah-Midbar Shapiro) while oppressing and silencing the women who could be the representatives of an ecofeminist sensibility. Disaster seems inevitable, and it is not a real consolation that the planet itself will survive (as in *mother!*) and perhaps some people will be able to start anew (as in *Noah*).

Both movies function as a cautionary tale: they do not just represent history as a mad crusade of humankind, but they also take stock of the faulty influences and false motivations behind history to show what may compose the environmental “wide gate” of Hell. While they each convey a different message, Aronofsky’s two films about the ecological Fall together suggest that it is not religion, or at least not Christian or Deep Ecological fundamentalism, that can save us. What can help us avoid destruction is a sense of compassion for human and non-human others and an acknowledgement that the created world is built on the interdependence of beings, which is threatened by the very attachment of some creatures to their perceived state of privilege.

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Note

1. I mention Bosch’s painting because it seems a significant and otherwise unlikely point of reference in an environmental documentary. I do not intend to analyze *The Garden of Earthly Delights* any further in this study. For material related to Bosch’s work, see Gombrich, “Bosch’s ‘Garden of Earthly Delights’: A Progress Report”; Belting, *Hieronymus Bosch: Garden of Earthly Delights*; Mason, “Rhetoric after the Fall: sin and punishment in Christian visual culture”; Michael, “The Garden of Earthly Delights by Hieronymus Bosch as a dream to be deciphered”; Falkenburg, *Hieronymus Bosch: The Land of Unlikeness*.

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Becoming-Mineral: Desert Timescapes and Post-Neoliberal Geontopower in Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*

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ABSTRACT

In the age of the Anthropocene, capitalism's expansion and damage to the planet can ultimately be seen as "becoming extinction" (McBrien). This essay discusses post-neoliberal structurations of space, time, and consciousness by examining the "desert timescapes" featured in Don DeLillo's philosophical novel, *Point Omega* (2010). The desert, placed at the novel's heart, is analyzed as a prominent religious, aesthetic, and philosophical topos of the crisis of human subjectivity. Furthermore, the investigation of the conceptions in the novel of the "Omega Point" (as the ultimate point of consciousness toward which the universe is heading) reveals an interplay of transcendence and immanence about matter and human evolution and offers a geological perspective of "becoming-mineral." Finally, this paper claims that the "desert timescapes" polychronic perspective challenges anthropocentrism and the ontopolitics of the neoliberal state, and paves the way for reflection on "geontopower" (Povinelli), Life and NonLife in a geophilosophical mode of planetary thinking. (PK)

KEYWORDS: Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*, Anthropocene, desert timescape, mineralization, geophilosophy, extinction



The Anthropocene is claimed to be a new geological epoch where Anthropos is a major destructive force, rivaling some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth. Relevant research commonly asserts as a fact that "the world is likely entering its sixth mass extinction event and the first caused by a biological species" (Steffen et al. "The Anthropocene" 850). Nevertheless, this situation does not represent humankind or contemporary human civilization as a whole (Chakrabarty; Hamilton et al.; Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*). The responsibility falls on a fraction of human beings and nations who have adopted the neoliberalist capitalized way of Life, production, and consumption, which downgrades Nature as an endless resource provider. The kind and the degree of violence involved in the accumulation of capital can be understood as leading to a generalized necrosis or "becoming extinction" (McBrien), threatening the advent of a period of mass extinction. Therefore "Capitalocene" is this new geological epoch's most widely used alternative denomination (Moore, *Anthropocene or*

Capitalocene?). By combining natural history with social history, the geophilosophical approach facilitates reconsidering the human position as a species and a carbon life form. Deleuze and Guattari define geophilosophical thinking as a form of “thinking that takes place in the relationship of territory and the earth” (*What is Philosophy?* 85). This geological turn in philosophy, arts, and humanities is critical of anthropocentrism. It involves a deep time perspective, an understanding of time as an inhuman force that has a “capacity to hide in objects” from microscopic to macroscopic scales, whether living or non-living, past or present (Grosz 132).

Neoliberalism’s culture is characterized by a significant acceleration of traditional temporal structures (Rosa) and a shift toward greater flexibility in all aspects of social life. Thus, acceleration and mobility appear to have lost their cultural value as a means of escaping the oppressive social assemblages and boundaries set by global capitalism. Anthropocene discourses have embedded the ecological crisis in the modern regime of temporality based on a future-oriented chronological timeline. Anthropocene’s hallmark narrative about “the great acceleration” (Steffen et al. “The trajectory of the Anthropocene”)—the fact that the major Earth system changes have become directly linked to changes largely related to the global economic system—points to a clash of tempos. Namely, the clash between the slow pace of the Earth’s history and the fast track of human technological achievements along a single universal timeline (Bensaude-Vincent 217). The notion of “Anthropocene” veils the fact that there are as many times as many lifelines of animate and inanimate things. It requires that all times be uniform and commensurable to fit in a global chronology. The current crisis incites us to explore or even adopt a polychronic view. This would involve, for instance, thinking across ecosystems’ temporalities. In the latter, multiple timescales are simultaneously functioning as they involve a variety of heterogeneous temporal trajectories of humans, carbon, rocks, microbes, and so forth, beyond the uniform timeline imposed by western metaphysics claiming human supremacy over the Earth. This paper discusses eventual forms of this polychronic view by exploring alternative structuration of space, time, and consciousness through “desert timescapes,” as featured in Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* (2010).

The different narrative forms displayed or mentioned in the novel (triptych narrative structure, haiku, visual art) perform a de-chronologization of time, making the effects of Capitalocene’s crises more visible. These crises lead to death and extinction through various types, scales, and tempos of seen, unseen, or even unseeable violence and terror. Violence in the plot is

portrayed through America's war machine in the Middle East and the ideological subtext of the War on Terror (Travers 193). It extends to the characters' existential terror and the endless replay of Douglas Gordon's video art installation *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), an extremely slowed-down projection of Alfred Hitchcock's iconic film *Psycho* (1960). This video art, by its enormous dilation of time and theme, is analogically related to the paleontological species disappearance, human extinction and to the death of the universe. As it is noted in the novel, "it was like watching the universe die over a period of about seven billion years" (DeLillo 47). Finally, both films have also been implanted as clues to the mysterious disappearance of Jessie—probably stabbed to death—in the desert.

In their literary and philosophical texts, modern and postmodern European and American authors privilege the desert as it seems to be the spatial correlate of twentieth-century capitalism. If the exhaustion of history and culture for several European writers, including Jean Baudrillard, is displayed in American deserts, American writers have often seen the historical legacies of European colonialism, war, and genocide in deserts (Tynan, *The Desert in Modern Literature* 124). The desert ecosystem offers an exemplary "timescape" constituted by anthropogenic and natural forces in interaction. The concept of timescape extends the landscape perspective to the dimension of time (Adam 9). It highlights the complex web of heterogeneous and interdependent temporalities included in a territory such as the desert timescape: mineral, plant and animal life, nature's "deep" or geological time, and anthropogenic culture's traces. Typified by drought and extremes of temperature, deserts can be harsh and hostile to organic life. Furthermore, fossils that are abundant in deserts as organic remnants in sedimentary rocks provide glimpses of past species, the gradual loss of biodiversity, and the extinction of planetary life itself. Fossils organize the material structure of geological time in their substantiation of the geologic record. Fossil fuels, in particular, are a material condition that subtends contemporary geopolitical life. Capitalism's desertification of the planet as the spread of physical deserts has come to define our contemporary environmental condition. It has been acknowledged as a critical aspect of life in the Anthropocene (Chakrabarty). The "slow violence" of environmental degradation—a kind of structural violence that operates on much larger timescales than events that we usually code as violent—remains unobserved and regulates the rhythm of extinction (Nixon). As Claire Colebrook notes,

there will not be complete annihilation but a gradual witnessing of a slow end, and that we are already at that moment of witness, living on after the end. Indeed, this is what an ethics of extinction requires: not an apocalyptic thought of the 'beyond the human' as a radical break or dissolution, but a slow, dim, barely discerned and yet violently effective destruction. (*Death of the PostHuman* 40)

Potential counterpoints to the neoliberal state's violence are posited in the novel via the idea of a needed change in perspective and human perception. This change is suggested by "slow observation" and "polychronic view" through the desert timescape's example.

Desert timescape, polychronic perception, and the Omega Point

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's thoughts about the evolution of the Earth and humans, as expressed in his treatise *Man as a Phenomenon* (1955), is the novel's substratum. Elster, the novel's main character, is an avid reader of the Jesuit Father and distinguished paleontologist's work, to which he directly refers in his discussions about the Omega point, also referred to in DeLillo's novel title. Teilhard posits in his "Foreward" a claim of refining sight as the condition of understanding the living world's evolution: "And that, doubtless, is why the history of the living world can be summarized as the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes" (31). He states that his purpose is "to try to develop a homogeneous and coherent perspective of our general extended experience of man. A whole which unfolds" (35). Besides, Teilhard presents his syllogism about cosmic evolution as a projection of a film: "Neither do I want any misunderstanding about the degree of reality which I accord to the different parts of the film I am projecting" (35).

DeLillo's novel's narrative structure is built as a triptych. The central section, set in the Anza-Borrego desert, revolves around a philosophical discussion about species evolution and extinction between the two main characters, Elster and Finley. It is enfolded in two sections, entitled *Anonymity 1: September 3* and *Anonymity 2: September 4*, concerning an anonymous man who visits and revisits Gordon's visual artwork *24 Hour Psycho* at the MoMA in the summer of 2006. These two scenes occur chronologically before the book's untitled central section. The screen in MoMA is the site of projection of the light of images alluding to the mirages of the geographic desert. As Baudrillard notes in *America*, "[t]he unfolding of the desert is infinitely close to the timelessness of film" (1). In the novel, there is an interplay between surface and depth and a correlation between the desert's geological time and

MoMA's room exhibiting the extremely slow-paced *24 Hour Psycho*, a conceptual installation that, according to Elster, stages "the heat death of the universe" (De Lillo 47). The machinic perspective—the unnaturally slowed-down frames of Hitchcock's *Psycho*—allows the human eye to experience non-human durations and angles, like those provided by the geologic time (cf. Sammarcelli). Such a change in perspective *encompassing* the submicroscopic moments and the macroscopic scales joins Gilles Deleuze's request from philosophy to open us up to inhuman perception, to "durations which are inferior or superior to our own, to go beyond the human condition" (*Bergsonism* 41). Teilhard also points to the need to get a geologic perspective at the study of the human as a phenomenon and, through this perspective, to reveal "all that is bad in anthropocentrism":

When studied narrowly in himself by anthropologists or jurists, man is a tiny, even a shrinking, creature. His overpronounced individuality conceals from our eyes the whole to which he belongs; as we look at him our minds incline to break nature up into pieces and to forget both its deep interrelations and its measureless horizons: we incline to all that is bad in anthropocentrism. (35)

Teilhard's fictional reader, Richard Elster, is a "defense intellectual" involved in the management of America's war machine. He deserted the city and the Pentagon to retreat to the desert, "somewhere south of nowhere" (DeLillo 20), in search of space and geologic time. Western philosophers—notably Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari—have used the desert to deliberate about modern subjectivity's crisis ensuing from the death of God. In the twentieth-century philosophical and literary tradition, the desert has remained a place where humans escape to seek salvation and to overcome themselves. There Elster is joined by a young filmmaker, Jim Finley, determined to make one take's film about Elster's war experience.

Elster's theoretical arsenal was put into "a series of lectures . . . on what he called the dream of extinction" (DeLillo 36). "Extinction was a current theme of his" (20) and is revealed to be one of the main themes of the novel. The "rule of extinction" is folded in deep time, in the Pleistocene desert: "This is deep time, epochal time. Our lives receding into the long past. That's what's out there. The Pleistocene desert, the rule of extinction" (72). Extinction is also enfolded in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Elster thinks in terms of geologic time, war, exhaustion and extinction, evolution and involution. According to Deleuze, "the desert is an 'Idea of humanity'

before it is a geographical feature because every territory presupposes a primal intimation of the Earth as separate and alien from us, a bare surface on which our territories can be formed” (*Desert Islands* 11). The desert functions as the past (pre-human) and the future (post-human) of human species. This non-human agent reveals the future of the Earth beyond the species. For Elster and Finley, it is a “protoworld,” and at the same time, an “alien being” and “science fiction,” “both saturating and remote” (DeLillo 20). It is an archive that bares the fossilized traces of the “seas and reefs of ten million years ago” (20), but also the desert supplies the imaginative material for a future history without humanity, a place into which Jessie, Elster’s daughter, mysteriously vanishes, most likely murdered.

The vanishing point of humanity, the “Omega Point,” is the novel’s center line. In Baudrillard’s *America*, the first chapter dedicated to the American deserts, holds precisely the title “The Vanishing Point.” Baudrillard has seen the American desert as “a vanishing point of European cultural, literary and aesthetic traditions” (Tynan 124), “for the desert is simply that: an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance” (Baudrillard 5). As DeLillo himself refers to the “Point Omega” of the title in an interview, it is “the possible idea that human consciousness is reaching a point of exhaustion and that what comes next may be either a paroxysm or something enormously sublime and unenvisionable” (qtd. in Alter). The novel proposes, in effect, that the temporal dilation of Gordon’s video and the spatial and temporal dilation of the desert, can bring on that low-level awareness about the Omega Point.

Regarding the universal process in terms of consciousness, Teilhard’s Omega point finds expression in the “thinking layer [of the earth] . . . the noosphere” (182). It is teleologically conceived as the apotheosis of a cosmic or collective mind, a leap into some sort of transcendental consciousness, namely, in “God-Omega” (288). Besides, Jesus reveals himself in the *Book of Revelation* as “the Alpha and the Omega” (*Revelation* 22:13). Elster also thinks in terms of collective human conscience and asserts that “[w]e’re a crowd, a swarm. We think in groups, travel in armies” (DeLillo 52). He agrees then with Teilhard when he conceives the Omega Point as a “leap out of our biology”: “Because now comes the introversion. Father Teilhard knew this, the Omega Point. A leap out of our biology” (52).

However, Elster is skeptical about human evolution and seems to embrace a rather cyclical conception of the Omega Point. According to Harald Kleemann, the Omega Point is “the point of origin and of return in the cosmic cycle, and the ultimate point of reference for every conceivable

frame of mind” (44). Elster posits the question of the return to “inorganic matter”: “Ask yourself this question. Do we have to be human forever? Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field” (DeLillo 52–53).

Criticism recognizes in Elster’s speculations “the denial or mockery of Teilhard’s thinking,” already signaled by the inversion of the “Omega Point” in the title of the novel (Cowart 47; see also Fest 568). However, there seems to be a more complex relationship between Elster’s and Teilhard’s approaches, defined by an interlacement between immanence and transcendence concerning the Omega Point. Teilhard views evolution as a process that leads to increasing complexity. The teleological function of the noosphere and Teilhard’s mysterious upward synthesis of centers, which he has called Omega, is “Survival” (Teilhard 269)—as opposed to Elster’s “Extinction” and his backward movement to the matter (stone), to the present moment (“here and now”) and to the localized affect (the “local grief” about his daughter’s alluded murder). At the end, Finley reflects upon the grandiose philosophical conversations he had with Elster about the Omega Point and narrows it down to the “point of a knife,” as they are both deeply affected by Jessie’s mysterious disappearance:

I thought of his remarks about matter and being, those long nights on the deck half smashed, he and I, transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness. It seemed so much dead echo now. Point Omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man’s grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not. (DeLillo 98)

Nevertheless, if Elster’s Omega Point is revealed to be “human, all too human” and deeply personal, so it remains at the end, for Teilhard, the mystic convergence of the Universal and the Personal in the “hyper-personal” (Teilhard 260). In the closing phrase, before the “Epilogue,” Teilhard acknowledges that “[t]he only universe capable of containing the human person is an irreversibly ‘personalising’ universe” (290).

Between transcendence and immanence: petrification

The perception of the desert timescape incites the interplay of the two planes of existence, immanence and transcendence: the desert, with its uninterrupted spans, can suggest pure presence or continuity of animate and inanimate matter, but in its hostility to organic Life, it also indicates a

discontinuous world deserted by a vital presence that has retreated to the heavens (Tynan, "Desert Earth" 76). The religious notion of transcendence, "a specifically European disease," originates in the desert experience of the seminomadic biblical Hebrews (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 18). Baudrillard's vision of the desert includes vastness, mystery, sacrifice, transcendence, and finally disappearance, preferably the disappearance of a woman, much alike the one of Jessie in DeLillo's novel: "Death Valley is as big and mysterious as ever. Fire, heat, light: all the elements of sacrifice are here. You always have to bring something into the desert to sacrifice, and offer it to the desert as a victim. A woman. If something has to disappear, something matching the desert for beauty, why not a woman?" (66). In DeLillo's novel, the ecstatic experience is not directed toward transcendence but rather toward immanence. Elster claims the exhaustion of human consciousness: "I'm telling you, this will change. Something's coming. But isn't this what we want? Isn't this the burden of consciousness? We're all played out. Matter wants to lose its self-consciousness. We're the mind and heart that matter has become. Time to close it all down. This is what drives us now" (50).

The evolution of humanity, which does not have to "be human forever," is depicted instead as "involution": "Consciousness accumulates. It begins to reflect upon itself . . . where the mind transcends all direction inward. The omega point" (72). This point of view is lining up with the nihilists and the materialists, but also with the Old Testament: "All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return" (*Ecclesiastes* 3:20). Elster envisions human evolution as a return to "dead matter": "We want to be the dead matter we used to be. We're the last billionth of a second in the evolution of matter" (DeLillo 64). More specifically, he champions a return to inorganic matter or stone: "Think of it. We pass completely out of being. Stones. Unless stones have being. Unless there's some profoundly mystical shift that places being in a stone" (73). Remarkably, Elster briefly contemplates the "mystical" possibility that stones have "being." If for him, at the end of evolution, at the Point Omega, is the regression to stone and for Teilhard the union with God, the two approaches are not as divergent as they seem at first glance. Stones have always been objects of mystical, mythological, and aesthetic attributions; they were revealed to be suited to philosophical meditations (Caillois; Wolf). For instance, their mystical nature is exposed by the admonition of Jesus in the Apocryphal Gospels: "Split the tree, and I am in the wood; lift a stone, and I am there." The medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart similarly states: "The stone is God, but it

does not know it, and it is the not knowing that makes it a stone” (Caillois xvi). In this line of thought, the alchemists chose the Philosophers’ Stone to symbolize transmutation. According to Kleemann, the two recurrent motives of the Great Quest in the literature of Alchemy are the “Philosopher’s Stone,” which is supposed to be the mind in its totality and the “Elixir of Life” or Elan Vital, representing consciousness, which permeates and vitalizes all things (288–89).

The vital force is not only a matter of transcendence but also of immanence. Teilhard assumes “the existence in rudimentary form (in a microscopic, that is, an infinitely diffuse, state) of some sort of psyche in every corpuscle” from the genesis of the universe (301). In recent ecocritical studies, vitality is thought to be intrinsic to materiality. The “vibrant matter,” according to the political theorist Jane Bennett, is detached from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance (Bennett). Deleuze and Guattari use the term “geophilosophy” to reorient philosophy away from transcendental ideas to concepts of immanence. In his last essay, Deleuze maintains that “[a] life is everywhere, in all the moments a certain living subject passes through and that certain lived objects regulate: immanent life carrying along the events or singularities which do nothing more than actualize themselves in subjects and objects” (*Pure Immanence* 29). Interestingly enough, Teilhard in his account of cosmic evolution, considers a “universal will to live” that “actualize” in humans or is “hominised” in them: “In fact I doubt whether there is a more decisive moment for a thinking being than when the scales fall from his eyes and he discovers that he is not an isolated unit lost in the cosmic solitudes, and realizes that a universal will to live converges and is hominised in him” (36).

Elster’s speculation about the possibility of humanity turning into stone and that stones have being, enters into dialogue with Spinoza’s famous analogy in his theory of conatus between humans and falling stones as conscious of their endeavors. This analogy stems from Baruch Spinoza’s claim that all beings, including stones, contain a power of thinking corresponding to their bodies’ power to be disposed in different ways, their capacity for activity and responsiveness (286). Besides, the deep time—the geological perspective—does not discriminate between human, animal, plant, and earth history. Teilhard has already noticed that the change of perspective (microscopic or macroscopic) offers the vision of continuity between “the mineral word and the world of Life”:

The mineral world and the world of Life seem two antithetical creations when viewed by a summary glance in their extreme forms and on the intermediary scale of our human organisms; but to a deeper study, when we force our way right down to the microscopic level and beyond to the infinitesimal, or (which comes to the same thing) far back along the scale of time, they seem quite otherwise—a single mass gradually melting in on itself. At such depths all differences seem to become tenuous. (77)

Catherine Gander highlights the persistent fascination in DeLillo's work with the rock's static encoding of time (138). Elster seems to adopt the geological estimation that everything succumbs to a petrification process in time and turns into a mineral (Bakke 62). The geological term of petrification involves the very slow process of minerals saturating an organism. It is a subcategory of fossilization, which describes the conservation of traces of past Life in, or as stone. It is defined as "the process by which organic material becomes a fossil through the replacement of the original material and the filling of the original pore space with minerals" (Hüglin, Gramsch, Seppänen 2). If we can "see our ways of being as geological rather than biological *per se*," as Kathryn Yusoff proposes (781), human experience on Earth could be seen rather as "becoming-earth" (Braidotti 81). Anthropocene fossils are a specter of the human *as fossil to come*. We can envisage that in a post-human future, humans and their artifacts could form a unified stratum that names this geologic epoch defined through its trace or end (Zalasiewicz).

In the novel, there are allusions and allegories of the petrification process, such as the absorption of the self in the desert timescape: "He'd exchanged all that for space and time. These were things he seemed to absorb through his pores," or references concerning the subject's absorption "in the near static rhythm of the image" (DeLillo 19, 115). A recurring motif is the one of a human quasi-enfolded in the wall. The anonymous man in the MoMA exhibition is rendered invisible against the wall; "the man went back to his place at the wall, where he stood motionless now" during "extended periods every day," quasi fossilized. "He wanted complete immersion, whatever that means" (115). The anonymous woman in *Anonymity 2* "was a shadow unfolding from the wall" (111). At the end, the dissolution process of the anonymous man into the screen figure of Norman Bates's psycho personality-type can be seen as alluding to a petrification process performed "pore by pore": "The man separates himself from the wall and waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates" (116).

This allegorical petrification process is also envisaged for Elster through Finley's film project, summarized as "Man at the wall" (45). After his daughter's disappearance, as Finley observes, the desert "made him feel enclosed . . . hemmed in, pressed tight. We stood outside and felt the desert bearing in" (87). As the "desertification" grows, Elster is dried out as a fossil, "a man drawn down to sparest outline, weightless" (97). The geological perspective inscribes the human as always already pre-human—inorganic, fossilized, and part of a morphogenetic process whose scale far precedes and exceeds the temporary coagulation of the human. "We are walking and talking minerals," as Bennett puts it (11). At the end of the novel, Finley, while driving out of the desert, reaches at that moment a plurichronic perspective, where natural history and human history merge:

Then I drove into town to fill up the tank and soon we were out again moving through fault zones and between stands of swirled rock, the history that runs past the window, mountains forming, seas receding, Elster's history, time and wind, a shark's tooth marked on desert stone. (DeLillo 94)

That perceiving eye, combining different perspectives in the present, allows for a mode and style of writing that resembles haiku more than the linear narrative of a novel (Vermeulen 79). Peter Boxall in *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* points out contemporary fiction's commitment to outline a new temporal awareness (39) and "new measures of speed and slowness" (207). If, according to Elster, true Life takes place in "the submicroscopic moments" (DeLillo 17), the "haiku moment" introduced as a poetic attempt to capture presence is one of them (cf. Giroux; Louis). It is "human consciousness located in nature"; it bares "transient things" "to plain sight":

Haiku means nothing beyond what it is. A pond in summer, a leaf in the wind. It's human consciousness located in nature. It's the answer to everything in a set number of lines, a prescribed syllable count . . . What I wanted was a set of ideas linked to transient things. This is the soul of haiku. Bare everything to plain sight. . . . See what's there and then be prepared to watch it disappear. (DeLillo 29)

The haiku loosens the spatio-temporal boundaries of the present, even while seemingly fixing a single moment through poetic representation. Western interpretations of haiku's origins have often emphasized "that indelible instant in which all boundaries between self and the world collapse" in a zen-like ecstasy (Marshall and Simpson 119). The haiku's performance of presence is found in

“the remains”; it acts as a fossil, the evocative traces of the past are engraved into the present for each future reader (Giannachi et al. 1).

From neoliberal necropolitics to geontopower

The desert timescape offers not only an opening to the geological past and eventually to a non-anthropocentric or mineral future but also a conceptual *topos* that calls our notions of place into question. It embodies, in a sense, the erasure of the territorial differences that allow worlds and states to be formed and unformed (Tynan, *The Desert in Modern Literature* 178). According to Deleuze and Guattari, the desert and steppe are frequently used to exemplify “smooth” or “intensive space,” defined through the concept of the *nomos*, which stands in opposition to the law or the polis (*A Thousand Plateaus* 380). Smooth space, the *nomos*, is a conceptual spatium that allows us to think power beyond the state-form by which law is grounded on the division and measurement of land. Deleuze and Guattari observe that religions have so often taken root in the desert because they need an “encompassing element” to oppose to a “center”: “the entire history of the desert concerns the possibility of its becoming the encompassing element, and also of being repelled, rejected by the center, as though in an inversion of movement” (574). This double movement of the desert, offering grounding, and mainly ungrounding, could provide a basis for new values on a global scale.

The anthropologist Elizabeth A. Povinelli in *Geontologies* argues that the desert is crucial for understanding contemporary formations of power. The current conditions of late liberalism ask for a retheorization of power formations beyond Foucault’s biopower and its anthropocentric figures. The ground of biopolitics and biopower is the Western metaphysics of Life (bios) as a measure of all forms of existence. For instance, in western ontologies, which are covert biontologies, the colonized do not really have a being. They merely exist the way a rock does. Achille Mbembe defines “necropolitics” as “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and population” (19) by the power of neoliberal State politics, its industrial-scale warfare, and the various forms of violence exerted in the government of the living and even the planet itself. Biopower and necropolitics are two sides of the same coin, as Rosi Braidotti concludes (9). As the fate of carbon-based lifeforms become precariously intertwined with unsustainable capitalist demands for carbon-based fuels, and the line between Life and NonLife becomes uncertain, biopower needs to be revised through “geontopower,” the governance of Life in relation to what is not

Life. Geontological power, or “geontopower,” according to Povinelli, is intended to highlight Life, whose opposite is not Death but NonLife. NonLife is a geological concept that takes us to a time before and eventually after the Life and death of individuals and species.

The central capitalist aesthetic mode to envisage the “gap” between Life and NonLife is the “carbon imaginary.” It promotes the governance of Life by transposing birth, growth-reproduction, death, and finitude to everything we perceive; it opposes Life to the Other of Life, namely, the Barren, the Inert, or the Inanimate. The Desert is one of the three non-anthropocentric figures operating the geontopower. The maintenance of the distinction between Life and NonLife in the figure of the desert revolves around that which had Life but now is deprived of it, and which eventually could be revived through the proper technologies. It also revolves around that which never was alive in the first place, the undead, the geological. Part of these kinds of ontological questions concerns how ontological differences are stretched across forms of Life and modes of mineralization, the mobility of the border between the vital and nonvital in accounts of the matter and what territorialisations become possible as a result. In a geological perspective which encompasses the beginning and the eventual end of Life, Povinelli describes the difficulty of separating Life from NonLife, the vital as opposed to the “inert of rocky substance”:

For if we look at where and how Life began, and how and why it might end, then how can we separate Life from Nonlife? Life is not the miracle—the dynamic opposed to the inert of rocky substance. Nonlife is what holds, or should hold for us, the more radical potential. For Nonlife created what it is radically not, Life, and will in time fold this extension of itself back into itself as it has already done so often and long. It will fold its own extension back into the geological strata and rocky being, whereas Life can only fall into what already is. Life is merely a moment in the greater dynamic unfolding of Nonlife. (176)

If “Life is merely a moment in the greater dynamic unfolding of NonLife,” as Povinelli contends, Life needs to be considered beyond organic, and agency can no longer be associated only with human actants or Life (Bakke 59–60). “On close-enough inspection,” as Bennett notes,

the productive power that has engendered an effect will turn out to be a confederacy, and the human actants within it will themselves turn out to

be confederations of tools, microbes, minerals, sounds, and other “foreign” materialities. Human intentionality can emerge only by way of such a distribution. (36)

In the novel, whereas the desert timescape heightens the drama of the constant peril of Life in relation to NonLife, the philosophical substratum and interplay of transcendental and materialist thoughts about “mineral being” put into question the division between Life and NonLife. In that light, the plot implies a distribution of quasi-agencies and actants across non-human and human actants in ways that disturb the concepts of subject, object, and predicate. Subsequently, given the novel’s war-thematic, it is not surprising that it has been harshly criticized for avoiding to attribute agency, for not providing “concrete anti-Iraq war statements,” or even, for obfuscating the reader’s emotional identification with the characters (Giaino 177).

Elster believes “that the landscape unravels and reveals” (DeLillo 87); the desert is presented as a non-human agent, a source of action. The theme of agency in the novel is revealed to be mysterious (Beckman 18), and a web of forces, often imperceptible—rather than individuals—leads to events. For instance, Jessie’s sudden disappearance in the desert remains unattributed as the unexplained death of one of the individuals she cared for, who “had just died of multiple something-or-other” (DeLillo 41–42). Despite the evidence in the plot that points to the psychotic anonymous watcher in MoMA, critics have been reluctant to identify the “man” as the murderer of Jessie (Wolf 126). A set of possibilities is opened: Jessie might also have committed suicide, virtually merging into the desert, materializing Elster’s fantasies of dissolution in the landscape. The concept of extinction pushed beyond the human, the species and the extinction of Life itself, confers to the geontological a more significant part in contemporary thought and displaces the division of Life and NonLife as such.

DeLillo’s philosophical novel falls within the category of critical artistic practices that simultaneously strive to “see it whole” and investigate the various ways how such seeing is obscured or left as an open conjecture. The *Point Omega* elaborates on “the depth of things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing” (DeLillo 13). The inhuman lens provided by the novel’s desert timescape and its film/video art analogue, demonstrates that acquiring such a polychronic, geologic perspective, being aware of the different rhythms that create assemblages across the Earth might enhance our capacity to reshape self, agency, imagining alternatives to neoliberal state

violence. A geophilosophical approach would appear to situate human existence and philosophical thinking within broader and inhuman forces of the Earth (Colebrook “Geophilosophy”). Considering that things are neither born nor do they die, though they can change states, the desert is not that space in which Life does not exist but where other forms of (human) existence—like bone, soil, dust, rock, or fossil—are encountered. Rather than defining what Life is, it seems more relevant to “ask what formations we are keeping in existence or extinguishing” (Povinelli 28) in order to form a non-annihilative nor transcendental approach to the Omega Point and a new imaginary of our planetary existence.

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Going Viral: The Media Anthropology of the “Quarantine Subject” in the Context of Biopolitics and Psychopolitics

Márió Z. Nemes

*HJEAS***ABSTRACT**

This essay explores the outlines of the “quarantine subject,” a construct that has formed along the borderlines of viral, immunological, psychopolitical, and biopolitical metaphors. The focus is grounded in media archeology and media anthropology. Under media anthropology lies a basically German philosophical tradition that explores the convergence of biological and cultural dimensions. Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen have only recently been rediscovered in the English-speaking world.¹ Hans Belting, for one, has elaborated a triple image anthropology that uses the triad of picture–medium–body in the interpretation of various aesthetic paradigms. This essay maps the convergence between the three dimensions emphasized by Belting and the digital-virtual turn driven by, among other factors, the COVID–19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns. The goal is the elaboration of a speculative “quarantine subjectivity model,” one that is determined by geographical and social factors, such as Internet access and technological integration, as well as a relatively “moderate” degree of quarantine measures. (MZN)

KEYWORDS: posthumanism, postmodernism, media anthropology, biopolitics, psychopolitics

**Introduction**

Diseases have never been exclusively biological or medical phenomena, and even today this is far from the case. A predominantly techno-cultural context is bound to play a key role in the elaboration of disease, while illnesses in turn seem to contribute to the transformation of society: COVID–19 has proven inseparable from a broader shift in technocratically oriented Western capitalism, termed the Great Reset in some quarters. COVID–19 is both a product and a symptom of the crisis of technocracy in the 2020s, an era of rampant climate change.² Similarly, in the 1980s AIDS, and earlier, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, syphilis, tuberculosis, and hysteria were integrated into discourses of social degeneration, demonstrating the always already present hybridity of nature and culture (although many of these discourses privileged nature over culture). Metaphoricity and identity are two poles between which a range of transfers open up new interpretative

possibilities, in an age dominated by biological discourses. Since the mid-nineteenth century we have, for better or worse, been living in a Darwinian Age.

The virus, as a complex of organic components, demonstrates the presence of a structure that in itself is subversive of humanism. It is a liminal agent, situated between life and death, the organic and the inorganic, transgressing the borderlines between these categories, as an almost living dead entity. Similarly, the infected body can be characterized as “abhuman,” which mobilizes the Gothic as metaphor. According to Kelly Hurley’s definition, “the abhuman subject is a not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other” (3). The subversive potential of the virus is enhanced by the way it disarranges and invades the imaginary unity of the individual human body. Culture as a whole can become infected by nonhuman agents. Virality, after all, is also a metaphor from 1990s cyberculture.

Naturecultural transmigration is a key characteristic of the viral condition. Among the first reflections on this circumstance in cultural studies were Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989).³ Besides its aesthetic merits, Sontag’s work—particularly regarding the 1980s AIDS pandemic—is also important for media studies. Jussi Parikka has emphasized how Sontag, especially in her work comparing AIDS and cancer, was the first author to connect illness as a biological phenomenon with “machinic” reality, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s term. Illness is at once a media assemblage as a corporeal metamorphosis, a social relationship and a heterogeneous articulation of performative “order words” (Parikka 100).

In late January 2020, news spread that Internet users were frantically searching for Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (2011). Due to this surge in demand, *Contagion* became for a time the Top 10 most downloaded media content in UK iTunes, together with such 2019 blockbusters as *Joker* (dir. Todd Phillips, 2019) and *Parasite* (dir. Bong Joon-hu, 2019), while Google Trends also indicated an explosion of interest in the phrase “contagion.” Several commentators referred to the eerie way Soderbergh’s film seemed to “predict” the events of the COVID–19 pandemic crisis, as the film’s narrative and motifs resemble the coronavirus pandemic, which originated in the People’s Republic of China. This case is relevant because it shows how, through the phenomenon of hyperconnective, hypermediated capitalism, biological processes can fast become media spectacles. The pandemic is as much a media assemblage as a medical or biopolitical crisis.⁴ Our present

context is of special interest for media studies, because it shows in great detail how effectively hyperconnectivity results in mutually reinforcing positive feedback loops. The pandemic is much more than a medical event or emergency. Rhizomatic, nonlinear processes of infection result in a rearticulation of geographic locality through fuzzy causal chains. Complexity theory researchers have shown the necessity of how the pandemic has compelled us to rethink the way we conceptualize causality, especially the at times unpredictable relationship between government action and citizen behavior (Krakauer). Not only our concepts of geography, but also the borders between social function systems are being redrawn by the pandemic.

This mutual implication and hybridization of registers is emphasized by Fabio Gironi, who notes that the pandemic has mobilized at least fourteen different types of crisis discourse (medical, health, economic, social, psychological, technological, logistical, political, democratic, education, and defense) (119). These aspects of the crisis as a whole have led to a realization that crisis, far from being extraneous to the predominant social system, is an inherent part of its operations. As one quote, credited to Winston Churchill, would have it: “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” The contemporary technocratic reprogramming of society exploits crises in order to better facilitate digital and financial transformation, leading to a transfer of wealth almost without precedent. The hierarchization of these aspects is far from unproblematic. It would be an epistemological and ontological mistake to claim that a biological “urcrisis” is the underlying “cause” of the rest. Today we understand causality as non-linear and contingent. Instead of a one-way deterministic relationship, it can be said that various registers and systemic imbalances interactively produce the pandemic. The recontextualization of *Contagion* shows that hybrid media (re)production is always already permeated by media history and image-political activities and potentials: the pandemic mobilizes, as it were, its own image history narrative, mythology and (meta)fictional structure. Under “virality” we understand cultural representations, images and codes under whose influence the space of media starts to swarm.

Coronavirus, because of its formlessness, uncertainty, and invisibility, is capable of retroactively “infecting” the Soderbergh film. Nothing encapsulates this better than Beth Emhoff’s lifespan (played by Gwyneth Paltrow), who is reduced from Patient Zero to a dead, dehumanized abhuman corpse in a matter of minutes. The abhuman politics of the virus is emphasized by the way *Contagion* shrinks the highly recognizable figure of Paltrow, someone whom we would think is playing a leading role in the film,

to almost nothing. In a sense, the actress's preeminence remains (as Patient Zero), but our anthropocentric expectations are then confounded by the speed of her demise.

Franco Berardi, the Italian philosopher has noted that the real danger of the coronavirus lies in the way it generates psychotic reactions and systemic level societal closure. The coronavirus generates a state of system-wide panic, leading to overreactions: "The unknown stops the machine, the biological agent turns into an info-virus, and the info-virus unchains a psychotic reaction." According to Berardi, pandemics in the digital media space are in a state of permanent movement, insinuating themselves into the technological architecture, the infosphere, generating affects and reactions that further undermine sensitive, vulnerable and dependent human agents. The pandemic forces us to reconsider the borderlines between human and nonhuman, body and psyche, nature and technology. Transmedial reinfection generates psychotic loops of reinforcement, resulting also in anthropological deformations and defacements. One of the prime representatives of this phenomenon is the so-called AIDS culture, which has been interpreted as a communication or media pandemic, generating a freezing of post-1968 new intimacies in the late twentieth century, as well as the reconfiguration of libidinalities in cyberspace.⁵ The media anthropological relationship between the experience of images and corporeality has gained a fundamentally new manifestation in the figure of what I call the *biopolitics of the quarantine subject*. Below I seek to provide a psychopolitical elaboration of this concept.

The viral ontology of postmodernity

The pandemic could not function effectively as a media assemblage without the presence of an already existing postmodern "viral ontology." Thierry Bardini proposes that the metaphor of the virus/virality, from Derrida through Baudrillard to Deleuze, has functioned as the leading metaphor of postmodern thinking. Indeed, Bardini's own work can be identified with this very tradition. According to Wolfgang Iser, the modern and postmodern paradigms cannot be separated from one another. Their difference is not absolute, as the postmodern is not strictly speaking separable from the modern. The postmodern, instead of opposing the modern, seeks to emancipate the radical possibilities of modernity from the limiting structures of that very same modernity. That being said, the oppositional aspect of the postmoderns *vis a vis* all the fundamental values of modernity (universalism, progressivism, and so on) is also worth bearing in mind. If we follow Iser's lead, we can observe that the intrinsicity of

postmodernity to modernity is asymmetrical, even parasitical. Not only does the parasitical postmodern movement “reappropriate” elements of modernity, but also, through the consensual translation and transmission of values, symbols and meanings, transfers and changes the values of modernity-as-host, resulting in a broad-based cultural mutation. The metaphor of incubation comes to mind, resulting in a radical pluralism of transvaluated values. Pluralism in particular is one of the main sources of legitimacy of postmodern discourses, and informs such key concepts as the end of Grand Narratives, the end of Man, the rejection of logocentrism, and non-linear temporality (Welsch 379–98). The possibility of plurality is already present in the modern, but there it is coded as the symptom of a metaphysical-political decline or crisis of meaning. Pluralism, for the moderns, is an indication of infection by relativism and meaninglessness, while the struggle for a new Whole is viewed as a worthy progressive cause. The postmodern, on the other hand, rejects the utopian attempt to rebuild a Whole as a totalizing tendency, animated by the will to power. Why should we view the relativity of temporalities or the plurality of values in a negative light? Or, to reverse this question, could not the idea of plurality animate a new vision of good life? Unity—as a point of departure, or the object of nostalgia—is already problematized in advanced or late modernity. If unity has indeed suffered a thorough delegitimation during the course of modernity, then it stands to reason that divergent, forking paths are needed. If anything differentiates the postmodern from the premodern and modern, it is the way it relativizes its own values by envisioning a utopianism of difference.

Welsch, when comparing the philosophies of Theodor Adorno and Jean-François Lyotard, speaks of a change in the “filter of values,” according to which the desire for unity has become the negative correlate of a positive, affirmative aesthetic of difference. The modern, even in its self-critical manifestations, is condemned to conceptualize difference through the prism of unity, while the postmodern articulates a new normative utopia motivated by the enjoyment of multiplicity. Here the euphoria of virality comes to the fore.

The postmoderns, far from rejecting or protecting themselves from infection, positively embrace this metaphor. In Bardini’s view one of the first representatives of the viral aesthetic was William S. Burroughs, but we may also identify Antonin Artaud as another plausible “Patient Zero” of postmodern infection aesthetics. Artaud’s 1933 Sorbonne lecture, “The Theater and the Plague,” articulates the virtual “cruelty” of avantgarde theatre

via the “infectious” nature of ecstasy. As Artaud emphasizes, in words that remarkably foreshadow the highly mediated language of the postmoderns,

the plague takes dormant images, latent disorder and suddenly carries them to the point of the most extreme gestures. Theater also takes gestures and develops them to the limit. Just like the plague, it reforges the links between what does and does not exist, between the virtual nature of the possible and the material nature of existence. It rediscovers the idea of figures and archetypal symbols which act like sudden silences, fermate, heart stops, adrenalin cells, incendiary images surging into our abruptly woken minds. (17)

For Artaud, truly authentic art is akin to an infection of the mind, which subverts Western Euroatlantic ideas of culture as the “upbuilding” of the human. Instead of fetishizing health, Artaud prefers to highlight the openness of the sick body as a metaphor for radical art. The culture of wholeness and wellness is an immunological strategy, predicated upon the exclusion of certain images from publicity for the sake of media hygiene. There exist images that could potentially radically uproot the system of logocentric humanism. Illness is a theater and the theater is an illness, because both “media” can be conceptualized as an Image Machine, which, by transgressing body–soul or mind–body dualism, electrifies both poles of these dyads: “like the plague, theater is a powerful appeal through illustration to those powers which return the mind to the origins of its inner struggles” (19). Theater, for Artaud, breaks down the barriers of cultured, immunized subjectivity. This plague-metaphysics, despite the apparent morbidity of the plague, is grounded on the value of life. In an almost vitalist vein, Artaud sings the praises of life without law, a life illimited: “theater, like the plague, is made in the image of . . . slaughter. . . . It unravels conflicts, liberates powers, releases potential and if these and the powers are dark, this is not the fault of the plague or theater, but of life” (20). In the state of viral euphoria, Artaud holds that we should not let any plague go to waste. This apparent crisis of life is actually a subversive opportunity to release potentials previously restricted, regulated by the system of repression otherwise known as (human) culture.

Burroughs represents a profound shift in comparison with Artaud’s rather Romantic outlook. In the case of the American beat writer, the virality of language represents at once a critique of the mechanisms of “Control Society,” as well as an ironic reflection upon the always already implicated (even complicit) nature of language in social programming. Critique is

inescapably immanent and ironic in Burroughs. The *Cut-Ups* and *Nova Trilogy* (*The Soft Machine*, 1961; *The Ticket that Exploded*, 1962; *Nova Express*, 1964), as well as *The Electronic Revolution* essay, all register the symbiosis of human language as a host and the parasitical machinic structure that is evolving into a micropolitical hybrid of man and machine, image and body, sensation and computation. These hybridities are operated from “outside,” as it were, being reprogrammed and recoded, while self-identity—as the uncertain, always shifting boundary between “exteriority” and “interiority”—is exposed as nothing but the symptom of parasitical invasions. No longer is there any intact, uninfected mental space, psychosphere or bourgeois interiority; for human consciousness, indeed, life itself is viral.⁶ Similarly, language is also conceived of as a system of memes. Anybody who uses language is infected by the memetic virus of language. According to Burroughs, the antiviral war (“War Game”), as a counterinsurgency operation along the lines of the Vietnam War, is also unavoidably a process of opening up to virality. The counterinsurgency is a becoming-virus,⁷ a strategy vulnerable to recoding, subversion and diversion. The beat writer’s main (image)political instrument of war was the “cut-up” technique,⁸ the rearticulation and recombination of invasively reproductive media, a subversion of the media from “within,” which not only overcodes the message, but also extends the possibilities of media beyond their immanent limitations, making viruses compete with viruses.

The viral thought of Burroughs foreshadows posthuman biopolitical and aesthetic strategies. One of the most important representatives of a truly posthuman and digital outlook in the world of contemporary film is David Cronenberg’s *Naked Lunch* (1991). The Canadian film director’s work is particularly important, because his films represent the double aspect of viral ontology (subversion and conditioning). These works also place a special emphasis on the media anthropological consequences of the changed relationship between image experience and corporeality. Cronenberg’s reception emphasizes the presence of an anti- or posthumanist perspective. It can be said that the director organizes perception along non-anthropocentric lines, decomposing the human gaze into a Burroughsian parasitical invasion. Human agents are only part of a broader techno-medial tissue.⁹ The decentering of humanism here also entails the free constructability, reconfigurability, and transformability of corporeality. The body becomes an anonymous site or interface for bio-technocultural complexes. Cronenberg’s outlook is, of course, a disappointed, disenchanted one, in the sense that it rejects the idea that the body can be a utopian or

romantic place of escape. We are well beyond Artaud, because bodily immediacy has zero eschatological or redemptive potential left. The embodied Self is unveiled as an abject viral simulation, and corporeal symbols no longer refer to any stable sense of self. An example of this is the main protagonist of *Videodrome* (dir. David Cronenberg, 1983), Max Renn, who reaches a stage of cyborgization that makes any sense of a stable, durable identity all but impossible. Renn's body becomes a "controlled," "possessed" host for something else, dissolving in the relationality of media space. His actions can be visually followed, but they are no longer those of an authentic person. Even the body of the protagonist is nothing but a "holophrase," animated by the collective-medial hallucination known as the Videodrome.¹⁰ The nonhuman parasitical invasion reaches a level that makes the differentiation of the host body from the parasite all but impossible, for the media become viral and the virus becomes mediated. Perhaps Max Renn is infected by various images from the Videodrome, which reprogram his identity and his desires (becoming indistinguishable from the self-replicating virus), but after a while Max Renn is also envisioned as an infectious image, a medial effect, or even the product of a rampant image-epidemic. Image experience relegates corporeality to a second-class or derivative status. No longer are images considered along the lines of corporeality: instead, the images become the model of the body.

The complicity of biopolitics and psychopolitics

At this point it is worth reflecting upon the question of quarantine subjectivity, for the digital experience of quarantine has been shaped in fundamental ways by the image-anthropological shift identified by Hans Belting, according to which vitality, in the total space of media, loses its ontological integrity, becoming a form of presence that, be it "live" or "embodied," is always part and parcel of mediatization.¹¹ However, we must also remember that, in the context of total cyborgization, the experience of corporeality completely disappears in virtual immersion. Regarding this latter aspect, even posthumanist discourses are remarkably reticent. An "anarchitecture" opens before the quarantine-cyborgs who populate the post-catastrophic cyberspace of the future. Not only flesh, but the former iterations of our self-identity are evaporated and transformed into an unrecognizable form. Human identity is progressively divorced from its association with the organic body. This transposition does not mean that we are following any sort of teleology, leading from the "impure" body to the heights of "pure" spirit. Rather, this non-linear path, as Nick Land

emphasizes, is the collapse of the “self” into a machinic matrix. The “self,” in this view, is not bodiless, but irrevocably disorganized by the flows of capital.¹² It is evident that the quarantine subject dispersed in the anarchitecture of cyberspace is also influenced by power relations. Digital forms of social control and surveillance are inseparable from a seemingly emancipatory contemporary emphasis on complexity, disorganization, liquidity, and uncertainty. To an extent, the liberation from the determinism of previous scientific regimes is a genuine theoretical and practical advance, but we must also be aware of the new, decentralized configurations of power informed by the scientific paradigm known as complexity theory. Cyborgization in itself is not enough to “liberate” humans, neither in a “political,” nor in a “biological” sense. Ideologies of depoliticization and dematerialization alike feed into a neoliberal and/or transhumanist technocratic digital utopianism that already lost its optimistic appeal in the 1990s. Depoliticization in particular, whether in its economist (Nick Land) or scientific manifestations (Ray Brassier) is a dead end, according to Vincent Le. If we abandon politics altogether, we as inherently political actors (*homo politicus*) risk disarming ourselves, ceding important territory to the emerging global technocracy. The COVID quarantine situation seems to have accelerated digital transition, while also showing the limits of technocultural penetration.

Despite the infection of corporeal experience with image experience, the experience of the body as absence also becomes acute, resulting in an anxious depressive nostalgia for the body. The quarantine experience mobilizes a media anthropological “dialectic” that can be articulated in terms of a sinister “complicity” between biopolitics and psychopolitics. To understand this deep complicity, we must recognize the double dehumanization implanted into human agents in the guise of a humanist ethos, while also taking the time and effort to structurally examine the historical relationship between biopolitics and psychopolitics. Roberto Esposito has written of “immunology” and the “immunological” as constituting the key organizing metaphor of late modernity.¹³ Building on a negative dialectics that divides the world and the body politic into an inside and outside, friend and enemy, Self and Other, the modern sense of community (*communitas*) is founded upon an essentially ecophobic exclusion of what is categorized as the environment. Indeed, the progenitor of the term “ecophobia,” Hungarian-American scholar Simon C. Estok has recently written of the danger COVID-19 government interventions and restrictions pose for longer term ecological awareness. Civilization could very well find

itself attaining a new level of environmental isolation, just when the very opposite is required. *Communitas*, as a system of exclusion, always requires the drawing of boundaries, yet there is always a remainder that cannot be either excluded or included. Modernity, with its nostalgia for a supposedly lost organic unity, is especially prone to mechanisms of selective inclusion. Unity and multiplicity are widely considered mutually exclusive, yet a fundamental characteristic of biological immunity is the integration of viruses into the immune system. Our form-of-life is, in other words, highly dependent upon the controlled “immigration” of the Outside. Modernity, driven by the search for community, as well as scientific dreams of control, has become a broad-based regime of bioregulation, which regulates a society datafied into “populations” whose biological processes can be “normalized.” As for the COVID–19 pandemic, it remains to be seen whether intense government intervention along the lines of the authoritarian Chinese model (otherwise known as “zero COVID”) or the neoliberal Western regime of what Mark Horvath and Adam Lovasz have called “permissiveness” (or “herd immunity”) will prevail in the end. Immunization allows for the creation of a negative community of those excluded from viral infection, but the complicated chains of infection and reinfection have also made this prospect somewhat uncertain. The living is that which ought to be protected from viral invasion and annihilation, yet this also necessitates restrictions upon the population. Defense is therefore also an offense that transgresses the tenuous boundary between *bios* and *zoe*. The former represents the anthropomorphic aspect of life, the dimension that structures the collective and individual form-of-life of the human. The latter signifies the more-than-human aspect of life, the spontaneity of the non-anthropomorphic natural world, which we can, broadly speaking, call the “environment” of the modern social system. *Zoe* is always threatened by interventions and restrictions, for it must be rendered predictable from the perspective of the social system. The immunological machinery of humanist modernity strives to separate *bios* from *zoe* (the opposition of culture and nature, for example) by observing and maintaining borders. Conceptual exclusions and inclusions serve to construct the “normality” of human life, defending the latter from subversive, viral, and “abnormal” forms of vitality. We as rational human individuals cannot form any community with the abhuman, abnormal, or nonhuman, at least within the confines of the humanist cultural system of domination.¹⁴ Humanist immunology excludes viral life, as the latter is perceived as being incompatible with an ideal of supposed human flourishing. Decisions are made, extraordinary states of exception are introduced, restrictions are

implemented, and the population is protected. But for how long can the hysteric structure of ecophobia be maintained? Humanist immunology acts as if human essence were a given that must be protected by something we know to constitute a thoroughly incompatible presence. Either “us” (humans) or “them” (pathogens), there seems to be no middle ground. Yet human consciousness itself is always already the site of infection and metamorphosis, as Claire Colebrook, one of the most radical nonhumanist posthumanists, has pointed out (112). Do our pets need to be vaccinated against COVID-19 or, barring that, culled (science.org)? The bioethical stakes of our contemporary predicament are far from trivial.

Byung-Chul Hun, following in the footsteps of Bernard Stiegler, explains that the paradigm of humanism is no longer able to explain globalization processes. Neither is biopolitics alone sufficient to elaborate the immaterial mode of (over)production in digital capitalism, especially the many forms of voluntary self-surveillance. An immunologically organized society is arranged along the lines of a certain topology. Borders, nodes of observation, restrictions, containment zones, fences and walls, are all manifestations of biopolitics and biopower, constraining free exchange. Naturally, general mixing and hybridity, as well as the construction of Otherness, are not mutually exclusive. Hybridization, which rules not only our actual cultural theory discourses, but also characterizes the broader *Zeitgeist*, however definitely, contradicts the purifying tendencies of immunization (Han).

We can speak of a post-immunological hybrid capitalism, which is focused not so much on the protection, control, and transformation of the individual body, but rather on the transformation of the psyche into a productive system. Collective consciousness generates a variety of immaterial “objects” (information, programs) which can subsequently be “consumed” and optimized: “Now, productivity is not to be enhanced by *overcoming* physical resistance so much as by *optimizing* psychic or mental processes. Physical discipline has given way to mental optimization. And neuro-enhancement differs from the disciplinary techniques of psychiatry fundamentally” (Han 24). Psychopolitics is a technocratic strategy of “smart power” (*smart Macht*), which builds on the imperative of self-optimization. Through the digital Panopticon, we as algorithmic subjects are compelled to constantly improve ourselves, so as to avoid sub-optimal outcomes. The so-called wellness industry builds on this incessant structure of self-exploitative narcissism. Digital subjects, through their “free” self-improvement, contribute to the elaboration and proliferation of communication, exposing

their “private” interiorities to social media, integrating subjectivity into the machinic matrix.

Biopolitics and psychopolitics, to be sure, are far from mutually exclusive. One could criticize Han for creating too much of a hard border between these concepts. After all, biopolitics does not necessarily operate only with a medicalized or biologized idea of the body. And body and psyche are also far from being incompatible, although digital culture is partly characterized by a kind of Cartesian “body-forgetting” ideology, informed by the techno-utopianism of transhumanism. The total nature of immunological paradigm and hybridization are far from evident, as such pessimistic and totalizing descriptions of global capitalism as Chun’s risk reinscribing a perceived absence of heterogeneity into otherwise critical depictions of late capitalist technocracy. In reality, there is always an aspect of hybridity that escapes regularization and integration. Society is a great deal more complex; we would be mistaken to assert a fatalistic relation to transnational cultural-social-political-economic processes. We cannot understand the whole if we are not sensitive to the significant local differences between different modes of being and forms of hybridization. It is not a question of describing a universal structure, but rather, of identifying the competition of anti-hybrid and pro-hybrid tendencies, layerings and becomings.¹⁵ The contemporary pandemic situation, which was preceded by many previous scares (foot-and-mouth disease, bird flu, swine flu, SARS, MERS, and so forth), differs from the rest because of the overwhelming way it interconnects with the digitalized experience of quarantine. Our methodologies must be updated to account for the psychological aspects of the quarantine subject who, when all is said and done, must confront the age-old realization that we are all embodied beings. However, the awakening to this traumatic realization happens very differently, compared to the pre-digital or proto-digital eras. Contemporary smart power plays a hybrid game, in the sense that biopolitics is recoded through psychopolitics, and psychopolitics is optimized via biopolitical means (tracking of the infected through apps, restriction of the unvaccinated, and so on).

At this juncture, it is worth reiterating the artificial distinction between *bios* and *zoe*, while also resituating these poles in the context of the quarantine situation. We are confronted with a basic situation in which smart power, in the spirit of humanistic immunology, “declares war” upon the nonhuman virus threatening the human species. For a long time now, immunology as a discipline has been couched in a war language, a practice critiqued by Esposito over a decade ago. Unsurprisingly, military discourse

has gained an enormous presence in communication relating to COVID-19, albeit in the guise of a complete “demobilization” and injunctions to “stay at home.”¹⁶ If total mobilization is the organization of the population via authoritarian means, then total demobilization is a controlled formlessness, a spatial-corporeal atomization. The instrument of classical biopolitics, quarantine, is coupled with the state of exception, in the sense of the word used by Michel Foucault. Social distancing allows for the erection of a data grid, informed by both real time information and big data simulations of virtually enacted pandemic situations.¹⁷ “The plague as a form, at once real and imaginary, of disorder had as its medical and political correlative discipline. Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of ‘contagions,’ of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder” (Foucault 198). Immobility is never complete, and surveillance is not entirely centralized. Rather, along the lines of the psychopolitical model, control operates (at least in Western “liberal democratic” societies) through self-observation, stimulated by mediatized messages configured by a media apparatus that gives broad guidelines for the ideal form-of-life human subjects ought to follow. Despite the apparent presence of openness and closure in the quarantine situation (the term “lockdown” is evocative), psychopolitical demobilization is more of a cultural-political-communal form-of-life, a reduction to the level of a regulated *bios* that confronts the contingent, innumerable aspect of our life, the *zoe*-dimension. The latter is experienced, for the most part, as a degradation, the experience of absence, the loss of connectivity, or the transfer of social relationships to the self-observing digital plenum, a migration to the screen. Our human body must be protected from a too direct interpenetration with wild, non-anthropomorphic nature, and biopower in any case only wants what is best for us. Quarantine subjectivity is trapped between, on the one hand, regulation by biopower and a risky synergy with “corona-virality” on the other. This process results in an accelerated datafication and atomization of life, for algorithmization insinuates itself into the interstices of *bios* and *zoe*, with the consent or, at best, passive resistance of public opinion.

As I have mentioned in the introduction, in *Contagion*, Gwyneth Paltrow’s body becomes a dehumanized body-object, displaying the *zoe*-condition of the quarantine subject. From a posthumanist perspective, we are always already living in a symbiotic relationship with nonhuman ecologies and modes of being. Indeed, the cutting edge of theoretical biology today envisions viruses as playing a fundamental role in interspecies gene-transfers.

Viruses are catalyzers of organic evolution (Koonin). The state of exception results in a transformation of our relationship with *bios*, and in our embodied being, we are exposed as being vulnerable to the nonhuman dimension of *zōē*. This exposure results not in an “opening” of the category of the human, but rather an interiorization of the medical gaze. A deadly, nonhuman Other exists out there that must be excluded. We are body machines whose cogs will fall apart if the spontaneity of viral replication enters the Human Security System. Quarantine is as much a sensual experience, but one that cannot be shared or rehumanized through private intimacies. It is a cold collectivity, a form of community based upon social distancing. Nobody is in any hurry to compel employees to return to workplaces. Indeed, in the case of office workers, they themselves are intent upon maintaining remote work arrangements. This demonstrates the interiorization of our contemporary digital condition. People, at least in the most digitalized professions, are perfectly content with solitude. *Bios* has not, for all this, ceased to exist. Instead, it is rechanneled into digital space. Our social and political roles are generally no longer produced via the old medium of the body—witness the dramatic decline of personal care small businesses such as tattoo parlors in the wake of lockdowns—rather, it is our digital cyberspace masks and avatars that display our beauty and virtues. Cosmetics did not go out of fashion during the lockdown, but it is mostly focused upon the region of the face, our concentrated point of contact with the screen (barring certain panerotic cybersex possibilities). Smart power, when it asks us to “stay at home,” mobilizes a psychopolitics that relies upon the already present enjoyment of solitude. Whatever our misgivings may be, workplace surveys consistently show that employees do in fact prefer remote or hybrid work “arrangements” to purely on-site work, a testament no doubt to the sudden redundancy of many mid-level management positions (mckinsey.com). Biopolitical immunity is achieved at great social cost, for the reduction of interaction is unavoidably ruinous for social life. A more sinister result of this technological development is a saturation with and overexposure to online content, generating a transmedial virality, the long term consequences of which are far less predictable than coronavirus death rates or other, more drastic and explicit statistical probabilities. The radical mediation achieved by digital migration makes the subject far more susceptible to psychotic infovirus-infections. A certain biological optimization (isolation and vaccination save lives) is achieved at the expense of technological integration (metaverse incorporation into viral communicative loops). Quarantine subjectivity, as a construct, is situated at the intersection of biopolitics, psychopolitics, smart

power, biological, and communicative virality, regulation and chaos, in short: between *bios* and *zoe*. To concretize my admittedly speculative model, I will interpret two further film examples. These are, in a film poetical sense, reflections upon our contemporary, hyperconnected viral culture, while also illuminating the coronavirus pandemic as a media anthropological situation.

Spectral zoomification

The previous couple of decades have seen a veritable explosion in the found footage subgenre of horror film. In a film aesthetic sense, the poetics of found footage is especially pronounced within horror. The beginnings of this genre can be traced to the surprising rediscovery and retrospective success of *The Blair Witch Project* (dir. Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999), a film that, while initially a flop, became a cult classic. Found footage experienced a huge upswing during the 2000s, thanks to franchises such as *Paranormal Activity*, becoming one of the most popular directions in the horror genre as a whole (Heller-Nicholas). These horror films are related to the tradition of the mockumentary, as they are always false documentary films, shot with a handheld camera, apparently unedited, exploiting a documentary aesthetic. This metafictional frame functions as a temporal delay: the footage already existed “prior” to the film, usually having been recorded by a typically missing or deceased protagonist. Such a mode of framing results in a “reality effect” (Roland Barthes), for the found footage film suggests the presence of “raw,” “uncut,” genuine footage, sometimes obtained in some way from an archive. Technological media, such as smart phones or hand-held cameras, make possible new image experiences, resulting in the appearance of intimacy and telepresence. The explosion of interest in this film poetic strategy is related to a change in the relationship between image experience and corporeal experience in early twenty-first century digital culture.¹⁸ In the case of the found footage subgenre, we may mention in particular the producer career of Timur Bekmambetov, who was instrumental in the creation of the so-called “computer screen film” subgenre in the mid-2010s.¹⁹ The first “official” computer screen film was *Unfriended* (dir. Levan Gabriadze, 2014), although *Megan is Missing* (dir. Michael Goi, 2011) or *The Den* (dir. Basim Magdy, 2014) as close approximations of this film aesthetic. *Unfriended* is particularly relevant, because thematically it shows in stark detail the interconnection between virality and mediality. *Unfriended* is basically a new media ghost film, where a (living dead) being returns to haunt the participants of a Skype videochat. Technological media and paranormal activities have of course been previously connected in film history. One of the most successful

examples of what we may call “haunted media” is the J-Horror genre. While we cannot in the context of the present study explore the J-Horror and Japanese cyber-gothic genres as a whole, we would mention the specifically “*spectral posthumanism*” (Adam Lovasz’s expression) that results from the insertion of Gothic topics of spectrality into the context of cyberculture (Lovasz). The disappearance of the human as a trope is paradoxically the direct result of digital interconnectedness. Technology, especially in the works of Kiyoshi Kurosawa, plays a similar role to previous conceptions of a malignant, more-than-human, horrific Nature resistant to human designs, conceived of as a force that threatens to entirely subsume us in a posthuman fusion. In Kiyoshi’s *Kairo* (*Pulse*, 2001), which plays upon contemporary Japanese anxieties relating to demographic decline, technological ubiquity, and a conflicted relationship to modernity, the specters arrive in the form of a technologically mediated viral pandemic of images that abducts embodied human subjectivity, resulting in the rapid depopulation of Japan. The concept of *haunted media* (Jeffrey Sconce’s expression) allows for a generalization of spectral posthumanism that transcends the bounds of the J-Horror tradition. Spectral infection, while originating in the viral “hotspot” of Japanese culture, has become, through technological mediation (and remakes) a worldwide hauntological pandemic.²⁰

Unfriended, to an extent, preserves, in a selective way, certain moral categories, while also connecting the “original sin” of the protagonists into cyber virality by utilizing the motif of cyberbullying. The characters, of whom we learn remarkably little, are essentially nothing more than near-anonymous placeholders for the digitalized social media subject, the “user.” Through their unreflected actions, they themselves generate the infovirus that results in their mania and collective suicide. In the diegetic world of the film, there is no explicit biopolitical state of exception, yet we may still observe the operations of spectral posthumanism in action. Digital life is already atomized, broken up into low-quality screens, through a dehumanizing separation of *bios* from *zoe*. The former is exiled into cyberspace, as the protagonists connect solely through the Skype videochat function. All of their activities are now online, uploaded, available to a pervertedly ubiquitous gaze (we do not know from whose perspective we are watching the whole plot). Hyperconnected *bios* is already dysfunctional, as the ideology of community or “common life” is already virtual, an illusion. The motif of teen suicide, while exploiting contemporary anxieties about “troubled teens,” can also be read retrospectively as highlighting the solitude of the quarantine subject. Hysterical and dying bodies are radically exposed in their solitude, becoming

frighteningly vulnerable to the spectral posthumanist virality of digital ghosts, confronting us with the zombification or, better yet, Zoomification, of the social.

Rob Savages's *Host* (2020) explicitly references the COVID-19 pandemic, as the storyline is set during the lockdown period. The plot, somewhat schematically, shows the horrific results of the seance conducted via a Zoom meeting. Digital technology and spectrality are once more connected, but this time *Host* follows the basic outline already provided by *Unfriended*, while referencing the COVID-19 situation and our everyday Zoom-isolation. In this case, the *bios* space of the videocall functions as a portal for an occult infovirus, generating a positive feedback loop that mediates image experience, with the intent of transmitting horror affects to the viewer, albeit with more comical and parodistic than specifically horrific or chilling results. The choice of title nonetheless is imaginative because it allows for an association with both parasitism and cyberculture. The human body, as a vector of infection, could be a host for viruses. But the word "host" can also refer to the host-function in the Zoom software, while also functioning as a verb (as in "to host a meeting"). In a reversal of roles, the spectral virus takes control of the Zoom-conference format, transforming itself into the "host," infecting participants, collapsing the borderline between exteriority and interiority, public and private, *bios* and *zoe*, host and guest.

Conclusion

In the introduction, I referred to the methodological difficulties of theoretically processing the COVID-19 pandemic experience. These difficulties are inherently a product of the transmigratory nature of the epidemic, discussed at length in the previous sections, signaling a temporal situation that results from being locked in the event. We lack a hermeneutic position that could inform the historical perspective of the present. Several theoreticians have responded to the challenge of COVID-19 by bringing methodological decisions relating to subjectivity and fragmentation. Among these types of COVID essays, Levy R. Bryant's *A World Is Ending* is my favorite.²¹ With the title of the essay, Bryant suggests that the epidemic has opened a temporary space or wound in the fabric of our social existence, which does not mark the end of "the" world, but definitely the end of "a" certain world. In this context, the world which is ending would be the anthropocentric world of humanism that created a meaningful coherence of human existence, along the lines of binary oppositions. According to Bryant, in the transitional space of the epidemic, we may recognize that the

“wilderness,” the non-anthropocentric nature of *ζοή*, is not “there” or “out there”; instead, our human presence here is also included in the context of a life beyond us. I agree with Bryant regarding the diagnosis of transience, but at the same time, the speculative model of quarantine subjectivity that I have described derives the interplay of epidemic and power from the experience of being claustrophobically situated within this “in-betweenness”.

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Notes

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1. To cite just one example, Helmuth Plessner’s most important work, *The Levels of Organic Life and the Human: Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*, was only translated into English in 2019, with a lag of almost a century, the work having originally been published in 1931. The rise of Science and Technology Studies (STS) as an autonomous discipline has arguably played a significant role in the retrospective rise of interest in German philosophical anthropology. For an example of a contemporary researcher who applies the philosophical anthropology tradition to media studies, see K. Ludwig Pfeiffer’s work.

2. Indeed, the pandemic itself interacts with climate in several ways. Not only does air pollution weaken immune systems, but also interspecies interactions have grown to unprecedented levels. This, coupled with the phenomenon of global tourism, makes disease transmission easier.

3. Far from receiving universal acclaim, Sontag’s essay on AIDS was lambasted by certain disgruntled members of the scientific community for supposedly unscientific claims and misleading statements. In this regard, it is very important to stress that philosophy has an important role to play in the interpretation of illness, one that cannot be entirely ceded to the “natural” sciences.

4. Eugene Thacker has emphasized the connection between network thinking and virality through the Deleuzian concept of “diagrammatic thought.”

5. An interesting example from the AIDS pandemic is the way the media—even parts of the gay rights movement—constructed homosexual flight attendant Gaëtan Dugas as a highly visible “Patient Zero,” a sexually promiscuous and irresponsible “sociopathic” scapegoat. Speculations relating to the identity of Patient Zero turned out to be baseless and without merit. Today the predominant consensus is that the North American AIDS pandemic actually started in the early 1960s, mostly in low-status communities, but escaped detection and diagnosis until 1981. The media played an essential role in constructing the 1980s as “the” decade of AIDS.

6. Recently, biologists have speculated that viruses, because of the ubiquitous role they play in the evolution of life and their facilitation of the interspecies transmission of genetic

material, can be viewed as the functional equivalent of Henri Bergson's "life force" (*élan vital*). We can speak of an "*élan virale*" connecting different life forms into a continuum of infectivity (see Lovasz, *Updating Bergson* 157).

7. Regarding the concept of "becoming-virus" in relation to COVID-19, see Timofeva.

8. Andrew C. Wenaus has identified a similar aesthetic strategy at work in the earlier Dadaist movement as well. Dadaism on this view is a precursor of cybernetic and postmodern literature.

9. For a posthumanist interpretation of Cronenberg, see: Nemes Z.'s *Képalkotó elevenség* [Vitality in imaging].

10. Regarding the concept of "holophrase," see Iser (302).

11. See also: Auslander.

12. Land's contrarian Deleuze-inspired affirmation of capitalism as the inhuman organon of the end of human history strikes me as rather totalizing in its ascription of a near-cosmic importance to the creatively destructive process of capital accumulation. When all is said and done, capital accumulation is a fundamentally economic and terrestrial phenomenon restricted to Earth.

13. I refer here to Esposito's highly influential trilogy.

14. These exclusions of course are also interrelated with various intrahuman forms of exclusion. As Val Plumwood maintains, human oppression and the oppression of nonhuman nature cannot be separated. This also means that the elimination of one aspect of social injustice does not automatically entail the liberation of nature from human domination. Ecofeminism holds that the rationalist and modernist "mastery" over nature is in itself the fundamental source of all other systemic injustices.

15. Postcolonial literature is especially intensely focused upon questions of cultural hybridity. See Bhabha, Papastergiadis, and Kraidy.

16. As Peter Sloterdijk stated in an interview given to *Die Zeit*: "Emmanuel Macron has introduced a war situation. This rhetorical figure has infected political action. France is in an extreme form of house arrest . . . War rhetoric is misleading, because the best defense against the virus is inaction, demobilization. 'We must stay at home, because there is a war!' This reminds me of a 1968 slogan: 'Imagine There Is a War and No One Turns Up!' America has been marching to the tune of war language for a while now. But today there is acute need for demobilization, the most un-American thing imaginable" (Sloterdijk).

17. We may refer here, for instance, to the famous "Event 201" virtual pandemic simulation conducted in October 2019, two months prior to the outbreak of the real coronavirus pandemic. The simulation enumerated a grand total of 65 million dead globally in the event of a coronavirus pandemic, over a course of 18 months. The virtual virus, called CAPS (Coronavirus Associated Pulmonary Syndrome) was transmitted from pigs to humans in Brazil. As officials from the Johns Hopkins University pointed out, the inputs in the case of the simulated coronavirus were different than in the case of the "real" coronavirus, and stringently denied that the simulation had been a prediction of the global pandemic that struck two months later.

18. From the mid-2000s, found footage films were produced that reference almost every previous genre of horror, from slasher films (*Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* [Scott Glosserman, 2006] and *Creep* [Patrick Brice, 2014]), through demonic possession (*The Last Exorcism* [Daniel Stamm, 2010]), *The Taking* [Adam Robitel, 2014]) to zombie- and

pandemic films (*REC* [Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007]), *Quarantine* [John Eric Dowdle, 2008], *Afflicted* [Derek Lee and Cliff Prowse, 2013]).

19. Bekmambetov also describes his own concept as “screenlife” referring to the mediatization of everyday life; see Jen Yamato’s work.

20. For the connection of J-Horror and technology, see Balmain and Wada-Marciano, regarding the concept of haunted media, see Sconce.

21. See Bryant, Levi R.: “A World Is Ending.” *Identities. Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture* 17.1 (2020): 50–55.

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The Nonidentical Twin: The Possible Worlds of Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* and *Look at the Harlequins!*

Brigitta Gyimesi

*HJEAS***ABSTRACT**

The article examines how Vladimir Nabokov probes the boundaries between autobiography and fiction in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, and his last finished novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* Both autobiographies and first-person novels project possible worlds, that is, alternative perspectives on empirical reality. The Nabokov of *Speak, Memory* and V.V. in *Look at the Harlequins!* are both focalizers in possible worlds derived from the historical Nabokov's empirical reality. The common origin that binds them together opens up a multi-directional channel between the worlds, allowing the reader to gain a deeper understanding of Nabokov's life story than either of the texts could offer on its own. Nabokov's two texts highlight the fundamental similarities between the nonfictional genre of the autobiography and the fictional genre of the novel by exploring the transitory zone between fiction and reality. (BGY)

KEYWORDS: Nabokov, autobiography, possible worlds theory, ontology, reality, fiction



Vladimir Nabokov's works constantly probe the boundaries between two confronting-complementary spheres, described by Zoran Kuzmanovich in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* (2005) in terms of "paradise and exile, this world and a beneficent traffic-directing otherworld, or average reality and true reality, . . . fiction and autobiography, Russian 'human document' realism and glittery but exhausted European modernism, or Sirin's English and Nabokov's Russian" (20). Here I propose taking a new look at how Nabokov probes the boundaries between fiction and autobiography in his *Speak, Memory* (1967; henceforth *SM*), a curious blend of verifiable facts, semi-fictionalized contexts, and artistic techniques, and his last finished novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974; henceforth *LATH*), a self-contained work of art also functioning as a miniaturized recapitulation of Nabokov's previous novels, narrated by protagonist V.V. in an autobiographical form. As Galya Diment has noted, in *SM* Nabokov seems to be "skillfully designing a very special creative space for himself which lies between the 'invented facts' of fiction and the 'real facts' of one's personal life, and which he himself called the 'imagined facts'" ("Nabokov's Biographical Impulse" 172), a *modus scribendi*

which, in my view, also characterizes Nabokov's last finished novel. I will argue that both autobiographies and first-person novels project possible worlds, that is, alternative perspectives on empirical reality. The Nabokov of *Speak, Memory* and V.V. in *Look at the Harlequins!* are both focalizers in possible worlds derived from Nabokov's empirical reality. The common origin that binds them together opens up a multi-directional channel between the worlds, allowing readers to gain a deeper understanding of Nabokov's life story than either of the texts could offer on its own. Nabokov's two texts highlight the fundamental similarities between the nonfictional genre of the autobiography and the fictional genre of the novel by exploring the transitory zone between fiction and reality. Given that the framework of possible worlds theory can be applied to fictional and nonfictional texts alike, its use provides a theoretical background for including texts into an analysis that would otherwise have been excluded on ontological grounds.

The constant blurring of the boundary between fiction and life that characterizes Nabokov's works finds its equivalent in the debate whether autobiographies should be considered a literary or a historical genre. They seem to occupy a transitory zone between the two. In his influential study, Philippe Lejeune (1989) defines autobiography as a "[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). But around the same time, other critics already recognized that fiction plays a much larger role in autobiography writing than what Lejeune's definition would allow us to infer. In his 1990 book, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, Timothy Dow Adams claims that no autobiographical texts should be taken at face value because they are mainly written to appease their authors' desire for a coherent and purposeful life, and to achieve this effect, the authors do not refrain from lying, either through factual distortion or omission. As Arnaud Schmitt (2017) notes, from this time onwards, a tug-of-war between factuality and fictionality has dominated the field of autobiography studies, and more often than not "the panfictional view has prevailed. In other words, many critics have decided to live with the formerly counterintuitive idea that facts can go hand in hand with fiction as far as life writing is concerned. We are a long way from Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact" (31).

Thus, even in cases when an author sincerely strives to give an objective account of his or her life, fictionality inevitably creeps in through the back door. Analyzing Philip Roth's autobiography, Mark Freeman (1997) notices that Roth inevitably failed in the "task he has set for himself to leave

behind his own natural inclination to step into his usual role as fiction writer” since “the ‘fictive’—the making of sense and meaning—is indeed part and parcel of both historical understanding and of interpretation more generally” (112). Following the ideas of Hayden White and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Freeman claims that the pre-selection of material and their subsequent interpretation renders all autobiographical texts at least partly fictional, notwithstanding any authorial statement to the contrary. In the initial stages of writing, “the very determination of what is to count as a fact derives from the questions (and the hypotheses) one brings to the task of inquiring. In selecting for inclusion in his story the facts he has rather than some others, he has already determined what sort of story he wants to tell” (118–19). Furthermore, this entails that “virtually all interpretations are fictions: to make sense of a text, whether it is the text of one’s past or some other one, is precisely a process of creating a framework, an interpretive context, within which the relevant information may be placed; it is . . . an attempt to confer a measure of order and coherence upon it” (Freeman 30). The fictionality inherent in autobiographical enterprises has thus practically reached axiomatic status, and Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir echoes an already established sentiment in 2003 when she announces “fictionality to be a necessary part of the autobiographical process itself and not something external to it, or incompatible with it . . . [which is] especially apparent in any autobiographical text where the autobiographer deals actively with the problematics of the writing process itself” (4–5).

The heavy reliance on memory in the process of writing an autobiography is also responsible for its inherent fictionality, no matter how faithful to the events of their past autobiographers strive to remain. The unreliability of memory has been the subject of many studies of which Robyn Fivush’s 1995 article “Language, Narrative, and Autobiography” gives a comprehensive overview. Faced with the frequent problem of subjects “recalling” events that have never happened to them, Fivush recognizes that the crux of the matter is the way in which language and narrativization are used to organize and store memories. She argues that

we make sense of our experiences by placing them in an explanatory and evaluative narrative context. Narratives provide cohesion and meaning to event memories, and memories that conform to canonical narratives will be stable and resistant to suggestion. However, many event memories are not narratively organized upon experience, but may become so through reminiscing with others. In this process, misinformation may come to be

incorporated into the evolving narrative, such that the stable memory that emerges includes false information. (102)

The problematic nature of remembering has become one of the main areas of enquiry in contemporary autobiography studies. Galya Diment noted that “[f]ew common wisdoms of the nature of autobiography ever go to the essence of the process of writing the autobiography, and what this process inevitably does to ‘facts’ that long ago ceased being immediate or even ‘real’” (40–41); “facts” entailing both historically verifiable data and the subjective, “imagined” facts that Fivush analyzed. Freeman also points out that the reminiscing author “reads” their past as if it were a text to be deciphered, a text that constantly hovers between reality and fiction since its “sentences,” the memories, may not always refer to actual events (146).

Gudmundsdóttir explicitly identifies memory and fiction as “two strands in autobiographical writing that constantly negotiate the space of writing” (54) and suggests that both writing and remembering “duplicate” and “rework the past” (53). She further calls attention to the act of forgetting which creates gaps in the past-narrative, resulting in “[t]he admission that things might have happened differently from what the autobiographers remember, or might even have happened to someone else, [which] highlights the complex workings of memory and the impossibility of rendering it straight into words” (53). A consequence of the present evocation of the past is that “[w]hen the memoirist deals with his or her feelings or other inner responses, it is not always clear whether these are, indeed, memories of the responses or projections of the attitudes at the time of the composition: the voices of the protagonist and the narrator may merge” (Toker 27–28). This caveat has been noted with respect to Nabokov and *SM* as well: “it is never entirely clear how much of what is being recalled is in fact a construct of [his] imagination” (Ksiezopolska and Wisniewski 10).

Uncertainty thus becomes the pervasive mode of autobiographies: a text based on memories can never faithfully reproduce the past reality that it attempts to recreate. Instead of an objective historical account, autobiographical texts construct a *possible world*, as described by Lubomir Doležel, Ruth Ronen, and others. The concept of possible worlds originates from modal logic but has been adopted and adapted by a number of disciplines, literary theory included, to examine issues ranging from the contingency of true/false propositions through counterfactual and hypothetical scenarios to fictional world creation. In the present context, a possible world is understood as an imaginary (fictional) state of affairs, “based

on a logic of ramification determining the range of possibilities that emerge from an actual state of affairs” (Ronen 8); that is, what *could have* happened, or what one *wishes* to happen, or what one *fears* or *believes* will happen. Although the elements of such a possible world are not on the same level of existence as those of empirical reality, they are not nonexistent either; they occupy an in-between ontological status, that of “nonactualized possibles” (Doležel 16). This description is applicable to the worlds projected by autobiographies, as their factuality can be called into question as a result of the unreliable nature of the process of remembering and forgetting, the author’s desire to forge a coherent, meaningful narrative, and, consequently, the deliberate inclusions and omissions, which lend a teleological layer to the text that empirical reality lacks. Autobiographical texts are, in short, fictionalized versions of their authors’ past, as Nabokov himself pointed out: “It [SM] is a literary approach to my own past. There is some precedent for it in the novel, in Proust say, but not in the memoir” (qtd. in Alexandrov 20–21). For this reason, as Alexandrov notes, “[w]hen Nabokov was asked if he was worried by the unavoidable distortion of detail inherent in remembering, he answered ‘not at all’. The reason is that ‘the distortion of a remembered image may not only enhance its beauty with an added refraction but provide informative links with earlier or later patches of the past’” (44).

Possible worlds theory provides a suitable framework for treating *SM* and *LATH* as alternative autobiographies. As Marie-Laure Ryan, a major advocate for possible worlds theory in literary and narrative studies, phrases it, “[t]he foundation of PW theory is the idea that reality—now conceived as the sum of the imaginable rather than as the sum of what exists—is a universe composed of a plurality of distinct worlds.” Ryan uses the solar system as a structural metaphor: what we habitually refer to as the “actual world” occupies the position of the Sun, orbited by a multitude of “possible worlds.” By analogy, in fictional texts there is a central “textual actual world” where, similarly to the actual world, truth conditions apply,¹ and this textual actual world is orbited by the possible worlds of the characters’ mental constructs. Reading (and writing) a text entails a process she calls “recentering,” when the reader mentally leaves their actual world and adopts the worlds projected by the text *as* actual. The smoothness of this “gesture of imaginative recentering” is governed by “accessibility relations,” that is, how closely the textual actual world resembles the actual world: Ryan’s example for a close world is one where her (Ryan’s) counterpart “only differ[s] from my actual self in the number of hairs on [her] head,” while a remote world is where “I am embodied as a giant insect while retaining my basic identity” (Ryan 644–

46). The core of the difference between any two worlds can be located in the different application of modal operative systems as devised by Lubomír Doležel (114 f). Doležel differentiates four categories of constraints that serve as the building blocks of all fictional possible worlds: alethic (governing possibility, impossibility, and necessity), deontic (governing what is permitted, prohibited, and obligatory), axiological (governing values and disvalues), and epistemic (governing what is known, unknown, and believed). All the constraints operate on both a global and an individual level, with the occasional clashes between the parameters set for the textual actual world (for instance, demureness is expected from women) and the parameters of a given individual character (for example, a woman character rebels against this expectation) driving the plot forward.

The framework of possible worlds theory can be applied to Nabokov's fiction, which, as Emma W. Hamilton has observed, often showcases "the fallacy of simple, symmetrical reflection" and often relies on the "refracted image," which "contains the elements of its original, but it skews and redesigns them in a way that multiplies and intensifies possibilities and perspectives instead of merely recreating them" (16). *LATH* may arguably be such a "refracted image," an alternative autobiography that complements *SM*, which is obliquely acknowledged by V.V. when he mentions that one of his books, *The Invisible Lath* (conspicuously missing from V.V.'s list of publications in the preface of *LATH*, and obliquely pointing to the fact that it corresponds to *Speak, Memory*) is "a book rather similar to that in the reader's hands" (*LATH* 131).

Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory* proves these points perfectly given that Nabokov admittedly worked with "imagined facts," while pretending to play the role of the infallible memoirist. Nabokov's last finished novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*—one of his most neglected works, which received a fraction of the exposure that *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* or *Ada* have been given, and which is usually dismissed as a playful synthesis of Nabokov's earlier works and, as such, not really a novel addition to the canon—is a less obvious candidate to do so. It is my contention, however, that *Look at the Harlequins!* bears a striking resemblance, perhaps the strongest among his non-Russian novels, to *Speak, Memory*. *LATH* is the autobiography of an aging novelist with uncertain memories, V.V., whose life events and recollections closely parallel those of Nabokov in *SM*. A non-exhaustive list of the more obvious similarities includes basic biographical data: Nabokov shares his name, date of birth, country of origin, trilingual education and occupation with V.V. (V.V. is shorthand for Vadim Vadimovich, which in

turn is shorthand for Vladimir Vladimirovich). Furthermore, he is identified with Nabokov's pseudonym, V. Sirin, when he reveals he has been using the pen name of V. Irisin (a doctor writing a study on his illness also pairs him with another patient named "Mr. V. S.," *LATH* 13). Both men are forced to leave Russia and live in exile, in the same set of countries (England, Germany, France, and later the US, and Switzerland). Their career paths coincide as well, with Nabokov and V.V. both attending university in Cambridge, being well-known figures in the Russian émigré literary circles of Berlin and Paris, and holding lectureships in the US while teaching the same courses. Another common point is the otherwise recurrent theme of the mistaken murder of a loved one: Nabokov's father in his case and V.V.'s first wife, Iris, in *LATH*. They both pursue love on the French Riviera, admire the same authors, and hate Freud with the same intensity. Although the traits enumerated so far are allocated to other Nabokov characters as well, more intriguing is the fact that V.V.'s novels echo those of Nabokov's, and the career-facilitating financial breakthrough comes with the publication of *Lolita* and its fictional counterpart, *A Kingdom by the Sea*. Finally, *LATH*, similarly to *SM*, is addressed to an anonymous "you" which in both cases is implied to be the author's wife.² Based on these parallels, I argue that since both the writing of historical autobiographies and of first-person autobiographical fictions involve the creation of possible worlds, Nabokov in *SM* and V.V. in *LATH* can be treated as interrelated selves, and thus *LATH* may be regarded as both an inversion and an extension of *SM*, depending on whether the given period and topic is included in *SM* or not. In fact, it has been proposed that *LATH* was written *instead of* a planned second autobiography (Springer 370–71). Thus, *SM* and *LATH* open up two different but not mutually exclusive perspectives on Nabokov's life.

Although *SM* was, on one level, written by Nabokov as a proof of his existence (as the title of the original edition, *Conclusive Evidence* suggests), his quest for veracity is counterpointed by an awareness of the inherent fictionality of memories. The artistic quality of the memories presented also highlights the ambiguous status of autobiographical texts. As Zsuzsa Hetényi has claimed, in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov "consciously breaks" Lejeune's autobiographical pact by "exploit[ing] all his literary skills and routines" (25, my translation). The last chapter of *SM* reinforces one's feeling of reading a work of art as here the author subjects his autobiography to a scrupulous analysis as if it were a literary text in need of interpretation. Thus, notwithstanding its professed genre, Nabokov chooses to employ his full novelistic repertoire to present to the reader the picture of a perfect, idyllic

childhood and a sensitive adolescence. Precisely chosen metaphors and allusions coupled with his linguistic virtuosity elevate otherwise common scenes to poetic heights. His abundant use of theatrical and cinematographic expressions and techniques suggests life's similarity to plays or films, further emphasizing the fact that the memories of one's past are continually and artistically recreated. Hetényi notes that for Nabokov, conformity to reality was secondary: he chooses "artistic selection and the reversal of proportions" instead of "true-to-life" writing methods, with the episodes selected for inclusion in the text being "either inconsequential details disproportionately enlarged or, vice versa, significant events only passingly referred to" (Hetényi 29, my translation). His strong characterization and evocative descriptive passages also lend a dim fictional aura to his recollections. Interestingly, some of the most vividly detailed episodes are the most evidently imaginary, but Nabokov's narrative and stylistic techniques give them the illusion of reality and make them blend seamlessly into the autobiographical texture. One such imagined scene is Mademoiselle's arrival in St. Petersburg (*SM* 68–70), which, although Nabokov did not witness it, conforms to his and our conception of Mademoiselle's character and thus lends the description strong plausibility. St. Petersburg's depiction, in general, seems especially affected by parched nostalgia's colorful panes of glass, assuming a kind of mythical aura—which Nabokov later comments on sarcastically during his exile: "those hardly palpable people [his fellow émigrés] who imitated in foreign cities a dead civilization, the remote, almost legendary, almost Sumerian mirages of St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900–1916 (which, even then, in the twenties and thirties, sounded like 1916–1900 BC)" (*SM* 215).

Scenes witnessed by Nabokov himself are not exempt from this artistic quality either. Especially the parts on the Yalta period, after the Bolshevik revolution forced the Nabokov family to flee St. Petersburg but before they left Russian soil for Western Europe, appear as if taken from a dreamy novel. The passages are saturated with literary references and allusions right from the opening scene describing Nabokov's lucky escape into his train from a deserted platform: "A sturdy proletarian arm conformed to the rules of sentimental fiction (rather than to those of Marxism) by helping me to swarm up" (*SM* 185). "Sentimental fiction" is the dominant texture in the Yalta months, where society lives in carefree decadence and where the region is explicitly compared to a dreamland:

I looked at the abrupt Yayla Mountains, covered up to their rocky brows with the karakul of the dark Tauric pine; at the maquis-like stretch of

evergreen vegetation between mountain and sea; at the translucent pink sky, where a self-conscious crescent shone, with a single humid star near it; and the whole artificial scene struck me as something in a prettily illustrated, albeit sadly abridged, edition of *The Arabian Nights*. (*SM* 185)

This quotation proves that, in contrast to the majority of autobiography writers who aspire to uphold the illusion of the unadulterated factuality of their text, Nabokov calls attention to the fact that his autobiography is actively shaped by his imagination. Thus, the text of *SM* constructs a possible world: the present depiction of a past reality, plausible as it may be, is unavoidably affected by the unreliability of memories and the narrative context. Although when read at face value, he seems to take considerable pride in his own remembering abilities (especially with regard to his earliest memories which “belong to the harmonious world of a perfect childhood and, as such, possess a naturally plastic form in one’s memory, which can be set down with hardly any effort” [*SM* 9]), he is well aware of their unreliability. In the last chapter of *SM*, which is an analytical review of the preceding material in the third person, he reflects on the issue of memory in ironic terms:

Obviously Nabokov’s method would lose all sense unless the material were as true an account of personal experience as memory could possibly make it. The selective apparatus pertains to art; but the parts selected belong to unadulterated life. Nabokov’s memory, especially in regard to the first twenty years of his life, is almost abnormally strong, and probably he had less difficulty than most memoirists would have had in following the plan he set himself: to stick to the truth through thick and thin and not be tempted to fill gaps with logical verisimilitudes posing as preciously preserved recollections. (*SM* 238)

He pushed the irony to its extreme by exaggerating the infallibility of his memories even in the face of contradictory evidence:

Now and then he disagreed with the Department’s findings and then some amusing exchanges occurred. One of them had to do with the funnel of the Atlantic liner *Champlain*. Nabokov distinctly remembered it as white. A *New Yorker* checker talked to the French Line; the Line said, the *Champlain* had not been camouflaged in 1940 and had at the time its usual red-and-black French line funnel. Nabokov replied that he could omit the epithet altogether but that nothing could induce him to change a color he so clearly remembered. He wondered if perhaps the military authorities at St. Nazaire

had repainted the thing without notifying the French Line office in New York. (*SM* 249)

These ironic passages corroborate what we have established earlier about the inherent unreliability of the remembering process. At times Nabokov leaves the ironic mode and explicitly calls attention to being tricked by memory, dutifully warning the reader to tread with precaution: “It seldom happens that I do not quite know whether a recollection is my own or has come to me second-hand, but in this case I do waver. . . . And now comes that bicycle act—or at least my version of it” (*SM* 116 and 157). At other times he implicitly acknowledges the fact that he may have unwittingly “colored” his recollections. Talking about the colorful panes of glass in the window of a childhood pavilion and how he liked to peer out through each of them and compare the various effects of the hues on what he saw, he laments that

when, after such richness, one turned to a small square of normal, savorless glass, with its lone mosquito or lame daddy longlegs, it was like taking a draught of water when one is not thirsty, and one saw a matter-of-fact white bench under familiar trees. But of all the windows this is the pane through which in later years parched nostalgia longed to peer. (*SM* 75)

In rare cases he drops the mask of the over-confident memoirist and admits to *forgetting*: “when, nowadays, I attempt to follow in memory the winding paths from one given point to another, I notice with alarm that there are many gaps, due to oblivion or ignorance, akin to the terra-incognita blanks map makers of old used to call ‘sleeping beauties’” (*SM* 100).

Nabokov treats *SM* in the same manner as he treats his fictional works, highlighting how he actively shapes its structure and texture. As he claims, the hunt for “thematic designs through one’s life” is “the true purpose of autobiography” (12), and in the name of this *ars poetica* he regularly ignores spatial and temporal considerations and “fold[s his] magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another” (102–03). Thus, Nabokov recounts in a childhood story how he chased a butterfly which he finally captured “after a forty-year race, on an immigrant dandelion under an endemic aspen near Boulder” (87), and how he found himself in the America of the 1940s after crossing a marshland in the Russia of the 1910s (102). As Vladimir E. Alexandrov (1991) observes, Nabokov believed in “memory’s ability to retrieve patterns from human lives

extending over long stretches of the past, and to fix them in language. In his view the two activities of recollecting the past and fashioning a work of art are inevitably linked because of the inherently artistic nature of memory” (44).

If *SM* deals with the uncertainty of remembering in a subtle manner, *LATH* pushes the issue to the foreground and emphasizes the fictional quality of memories. In the first few pages, V.V. recalls an aunt he visited when he was a child who advised him to “look at the harlequins” and to “invent reality,” but, as it turns out at the end of the passage, this aunt in fact never existed: “I invented my grand-aunt in honor of my first daydreams” (*LATH* 7). “Daydreams” is a rather euphemistic expression for what the narrator himself terms “the secrets of a confirmed madman” a couple of lines earlier, and V.V. is quick to leave another signal for the reader: “Glancing through my oldest notes in pocket diaries, with telephone numbers and names elbowing their way among reports on events, factual or more or less fictional, I notice that dreams and other distortions of ‘reality’ are written down in a special left-slanted hand—at least in the earlier entries, before I gave up following accepted distinctions” (*LATH* 16–17). V.V.’s gesture seems to acknowledge that no matter how scrupulous an author strives to be when writing their autobiography, there is always the possibility of flaws, distortions, even deliberate lies, ensuring that the world projected by the autobiographical text will never equal empirical reality. Although *SM* and *LATH* differ in their intentions (one written as an autobiography and the other as a novel), the bias oscillates within both texts between these two intentions of “memory seem[ing] merely a springboard for the supreme freedom of art . . . where the exactness of remembered experience far surpasses the vague gropings of imagination” (Foster 111). This highlights Nabokov’s “deeper ambivalence” towards remembering, which he resolves with the realization that “only authorial invention can restore the erasures of time” (111). In other words, “Nabokov ultimately rejects any notion of truth in memory and shows how . . . we keep on wandering in the hall of mirrors and reproductions, taking copies for the originals and our phantasies for true recollections, incapable of recovering anything substantial” (Lipszyc 166), which opens up the possibility of reading *LATH* as an autobiography.

Since the narrators of *SM* and *LATH* are quasi-identical in terms of both their life events and their names, they can be said to inhabit possible worlds which are easily accessible in relation to each other. They resemble each other to such an extent that V.V. frequently feels as if he were an alter ego of an ontologically superior being, and although he tries to dismiss these feelings, the echoes between Nabokov and V.V. do not subside but continue

to disturb V.V.'s peace of mind. The two worlds, in fact, are so close that they seem to overlap several times: two characters in *LATH*, the émigré publisher Oksman, and the Soviet activist Orlov, appear to act as Nabokov's conspirators, and possess information that could only be obtained from an extratextual source. Oksman is constantly mixing the titles of V.V.'s books with those of Nabokov's and believes Nabokov's father to be V.V.'s, much to V.V.'s irritation who says that Oksman "used to welcome me with a knowing twinkle as if we shared some very private and rather naughty secret" (*LATH* 77–79). Orlov, disgusted that a writer of V.V.'s caliber does not work in the service of the Soviet Union, mistakes the plot of *A Kingdom by the Sea* for that of *Lolita*, prompting V.V. to correct him (185).

Although V.V. apparently dismisses the importance of such lapses on the part of others, he ultimately concludes that "even *Ardis* [that is, *Ada*], my most private book, soaked in reality, saturated with sun flecks, might be an unconscious imitation of another's unearthly art" (*LATH* 198), with the word "unearthly" also conjuring up Antiterra, the alternative universe where the plot of *Ada* takes place. Deep down V.V. is tormented by the thought that he may not be an autonomous being, that his existence is forever tied to another man's. His visit to Oksman comes as a final confirmation:

There might be nothing particularly upsetting about a well-meaning, essentially absurd and muddled old duffer mistaking me for some other writer. . . . But that a fool's slip of the tongue or error of memory should establish a sudden connection with another world, so soon after my imagining with especial dread that I might be permanently impersonating somebody living as a real being beyond the constellation of my tears and asterisks—that was unendurable, *that* dared not happen! . . . Should I ignore the coincidence and its implications? Should I, on the contrary, repattern my entire life? Should I abandon my art, choose another line of achievement, take up chess seriously, or become, say, a lepidopterist, or spend a dozen years as an obscure scholar making a Russian translation of *Paradise Lost* that would cause hacks to shy and asses to kick? (80–81)

Chess, lepidoptery, and translations of classics are heavily associated with Nabokov himself, reinforcing the idea that V.V. inhabits another possible world where he pursues these activities. He remains to be haunted by a "dream feeling that my life was the nonidentical twin, a parody, an inferior variant of another man's life, somewhere on this or another earth. A demon, I felt, was forcing me to impersonate that other man, that other writer" (*LATH* 74). His conviction becomes even stronger after he regains

his sense of reality following his hospitalization: “I definitely felt my family name began with an *N* and bore an odious resemblance to the surname or pseudonym of a presumably notorious (Notorov? No) Bulgarian, or Babylonian, or, maybe, Betelgeusian writer with whom scatterbrained *émigrés* from some other galaxy constantly confused me . . . poor Vadim Vadimovich was but a figment of somebody’s—not even my own—imagination” (210–11). Here, on the last pages of *LATH*, we receive the firmest hint yet that V.V. is indeed a possible world version of Nabokov: he feels he is “permanently impersonating somebody living as a real being” from “another world,” from “another earth,” from “some other galaxy,” of whose life he is merely “the nonidentical twin, a parody, an inferior variant”; he believes to be living in a “dream,” in a “nightmare” as “a figment of somebody’s—not even my own—imagination.” Out of Doležel’s four modal systems, the epistemic operator can be applied here as an explanation for the differences between the two possible worlds. Whereas Nabokov is aware of the presence of alternative worlds, V.V.’s included, V.V. is at first ignorant about these possible worlds, but by the end of *LATH* he starts to believe in the presence of another world that he, under the persona of Nabokov, also inhabits. Although the potential is there for V.V. to acquire more knowledge, he never progresses beyond the “he believes” parameter since that would erase the epistemic boundaries between him and Nabokov.

Changing the parameters of a constraint can lead to counterfactual scenarios, with the result that *LATH* can both be conceived of as an inversion of *SM* (presenting counterfactual versions of scenes found in *SM*), and also an extension by presenting episodes and explanations that concern topics omitted from *SM*. In this sense, *LATH* acts as a complementary or extended autobiography: whereas the majority of *SM* deals with Nabokov’s childhood and youth and only a few chapters are devoted to his *émigré* life in Europe (and nothing whatsoever after his leaving for the US), *LATH* is mainly focused on Europe and the American and Swiss years missing from *SM*. On the whole, there is no truthfulness competition between *SM* and *LATH* simply because, for the most part, they do not concentrate on the same events in their author’s life. Even in the case of overlaps (the period in Berlin and Paris), a shift in emphasis towards inner struggles and doubts ensures that the reader treats these scenes in *LATH* as illuminating and not falsifying. The descriptions of *émigré* literary circles and of the “backstage secrets” of being a writer evoke passages from *SM* but, by providing more insight into the workings of this community, seem to convey supplementary information and fill the gaps in the autobiography. The descriptions of V.V.’s

successes and failures, feelings and thoughts are possibly rooted in what Nabokov himself experienced in this period. Thus, when V.V. remarks that “I regarded Paris, with its gray-toned days and charcoal nights, merely as the chance setting for the most authentic and faithful joys of my life: the colored phrase in my mind under the drizzle, the white page under the desk lamp awaiting me in my humble home” (*LATH* 66), the reader cannot help but recall Nabokov’s unfavorable opinion of the French city in *SM* (209–10).

Another problematic issue of this period in Nabokov’s life is his supposed anxiety over switching from Russian to English text composition. Nabokov only hints at such hardships in *SM*, and by delegating the full articulation of his experience onto V.V., he achieves the double purpose of expressing his insecurities in writing without the danger of exposing his privacy too much in his autobiography: “[T]he question confronting me in Paris, in the late Thirties, was precisely could I fight off the formula and rip up the ready-made, and switch from my glorious self-developed Russian, not to the dead leaden English of the high seas with dummies in sailor suits, but an English I alone would be responsible for, in all its new ripples and changing light?” (*LATH* 104).

As for counterfactuality, a complex parallel can be drawn between Nabokov and V.V.’s experiences of illness. V.V. suffers from a psychological malady related to changing directions that he summarizes in the following terms:

In actual, physical life I can turn as simply and swiftly as anyone. But mentally, with my eyes closed and my body immobile, I am unable to switch from one direction to the other. Some swivel cell in my brain does not work. I can cheat, of course, by setting aside the mental snapshot of one vista and leisurely selecting the opposite view for my walk back to my starting point. But if I do not cheat, some kind of atrocious obstacle, which would drive me mad if I persevered, prevents me from imagining the twist which transforms one direction into another, directly opposite. (*LATH* 35)

Most characters in the novel downplay the gravity of the situation and think that V.V. is only being melodramatic, but this peculiar mental illness, which is to have physical consequences for V.V., can be regarded as an amalgam of some of Nabokov’s experiences. The basic idea of opposing directions is evoked in *SM* in two separate passages. In one, Nabokov recalls a night of stargazing:

Overhead, between the formless trees bordering my dissolving path, the night sky was pale with stars. In those years, that marvelous mess of constellations, nebulae, interstellar gaps and all the rest of the awesome show provoked in me an indescribable sense of nausea, of utter panic, as if I were hanging from earth upside down on the brink of infinite space, with terrestrial gravity still holding me by the heels but about to release me any moment. (*SM* 171–72)

In the other, he remembers the dawn of his son's birth:

In the purity and vacuity of the less familiar hour, the shadows were on the wrong side of the street, investing it with a sense of not inelegant inversion, as when one sees reflected in the mirror of a barbershop the window toward which the melancholy barber, while stropping his razor, turns his gaze (as they all do at such times), and, framed in that reflected window, a stretch of sidewalk shunting a procession of unconcerned pedestrians in the wrong direction, into an abstract world that all at once stops being droll and loosens a torrent of terror. (*SM* 225)

Both descriptions suggest that for Nabokov there was something sinister and dizzying in reversion, in the flip of the usual order of things. Such distrust of course does not constitute a pathological case in itself, but the problem inherent in such a situation may have been expanded into a full-fledged disorder due to the influence of a serious illness Nabokov went through in his early childhood. He describes his sickness in *SM* as involving dangerously high fever that resulted in deliriums (19) and there is intimation that V.V. suffered from a very similar illness in his childhood when he recalls a “kindly but cold-fingered (and cold-earlobed) doctor who treated the ‘inflammation of the lungs’ I had in the winter of 1907” (*LATH* 91). Although Nabokov recovered with minor consequences, it must have lingered on in his mind that things could have gone the other way and his life-threatening illness could well have had serious, even fatal, complications regarding his physical and mental well-being. Nabokov claims to have lost a remarkable mathematical aptitude because of his illness (*SM* 19), which in *LATH* manifests itself in a doctor's diagnosis of V.V.'s disorder as “numerical nimbus” (*LATH* 13). In a sense, V.V.'s psychological disorder is a thought experiment based on the hypothetical premise that the feverish stage of delirium left a permanent mark on his mental stability.

The psychologically disabled V.V. may be considered a manifestation of one of Nabokov's so-called “feared selves.” Feared selves, along with

desired selves and expected selves, for instance, belong to the overarching category of “possible selves,” which “represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation” (Markus and Nurius 954). Although possible selves inhabit the possible worlds projected by the individual’s wishes, desires, fears, and expectations, and are thus not part of the individual’s actual persona, they bear a strong influence on actuality by “interven[ing] in self-evaluation and self-perception, and act[ing] as powerful behavior guidelines determining approach or withdrawal strategies regarding the desired or the feared self” (Martínez 118). For a notoriously precise author like Nabokov, not being able to think clearly and rationally must have been a terrifying prospect, but by creating a possible world and changing what Doležel called the “alethic operator,” he could allow this feared self, under the alias of V.V., to become actual in the textual actual world of *LATH*, establishing the grounds for a creative alternative autobiography. V.V.’s predilection for hallucinations is therefore expected in the “intermediate world” of *LATH*, shaped by the “alethic contrast between the natural and supernatural” (Doležel 117).

The autobiographer undertakes a similar crossing of ontological boundaries when they, as Nabokov did, transfer their memories into the world projected by their written text. Relocating fleeting events from one’s life into art, however, has its price, as Nabokov laments: “I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it . . . [and] it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self, where it had seemed to be so safe from the intrusion of the artist” (*SM* 66). Yet, Nabokov regards the events and ingredients of his life as the exclusive domain of his art, unchangeable by an independent “reality”; accordingly, when he hears of developments in other people’s lives that do not fit his ideas and predictions, he “experienced a queer shock; it was as if life had impinged upon my creative rights by wriggling on beyond the subjective limits so elegantly and economically set by childhood memories that I thought I had signed and sealed” (*SM* 65). This realization, pushed to its logical and ontological extremes, plays a crucial role in the plot of *LATH* as well, but here this ontological border crossing ultimately proves to be V.V.’s undoing as his psychological disease does not allow him to mentally reverse directions. Hamilton analyzes V.V.’s predicament in detail, claiming that the root problem is the “merely reflective quality of his fiction”:

In Part Six, Vadim's problem shifts from conceptual to actual—when taking a walk, he physically cannot make an about face and return to his love, whom he calls, not coincidentally, "Reality." Vadim has borrowed too much from his life for his works of fiction, using directly incidents and people from his life as episodes and characters in his work. . . . Vadim himself, after a lifetime of too much borrowing—for there cannot be enough poignant, crucial details in his very eventful life to illuminate both a life and an entire body of prose—confounds his life and his art, and physically takes on a formerly imagined problem. (7–8)

As a retribution for fleshing out his fiction with his real-world experiences, V.V.'s mental disability evolves into a physical one, resulting in his becoming paralyzed when trying to turn back at the end of his walk. By this time, he has already smothered nearly all of his relationships, most notably the strong bond with his daughter, Bel (which, as a parodic nod to *Lolita*, verges on the incestuous), because he

cannot sustain both the writing of a rich text and a romantic relationship—especially the relationship that inspired the writing. Instead of writing *to* Bel, he writes *about* Bel. Though his writing and his life have conflicted before, *A Kingdom by the Sea* represents the novel that is drawn most from his personal experience and by choosing to write it, he must allow his relationship to fizzle out. (Hamilton 21)

V.V. finally arrives at the same realization as Nabokov in his self-professed autobiography, that transforming his life into fiction is dangerous: "Reality would be only adulterated if I now started to narrate what you know, what I know, what nobody else knows, what shall never, never be ferreted out by a matter-of-fact, father-of-muck, mucking biograffitist" (*LATH* 192). Accordingly, to prevent the relationship with his last and potentially true love from being damaged, he chooses the same tactic that Nabokov does in the case of his wife, Véra: exclusion. Apart from a few perfunctory statements and their roles as the "you" addressee of the memoirs, the texts reveal nothing substantial about Véra or "Reality," but both women serve as a means of salvaging something from empirical reality since their fictionalization, as Nabokov and V.V. experienced in other instances, would have risked their eventual loss as well.

From this perspective, *LATH* can be termed what Samuel Clark calls an autobiography of "self-investigation," that is, when writing represents the autobiographer's inner journey towards understanding themselves.

According to Hetényi, *SM* falls into this category (24), although others warn that *SM* “should not be read as one of Russian gentry pseudo-autobiographies, with their myth of the perfect childhood as the golden age” (Toker 23).

The other main strand of autobiographies, according to Clark, concern themselves with “self-presentation,” that is, “an engagement with the social world” where the author “aims to make and display a record or account of [him]self, or a mask, avatar, or persona for [him]self, aimed outward rather than inward” (53–54). Clark notes that these two alternatives are not mutually exclusive, it is in fact more common to find both aspects represented in the same text. *LATH*, much more so than *SM*, exhibits this self-presenting tendency—what is more, *LATH* seems to have been written as a predominantly public piece. *LATH* focuses on sensational topics such as espionage and murder, V.V.’s marital and extramarital affairs, the composition and reception of his publications, or his numerous bouts of mental illness, whereas *SM* treats these topics only perfunctorily, if at all.

By exaggerating the news-worthy aspects in life, *LATH* acquires a parodic overtone directed at the public’s hunger for sensationalism. Nabokov detached his private life from his professional one, taking extra care not to release too much information about himself, so when a biography was published on his life without his authorization,³ he took offense (Hetényi 804). The creative response was *LATH*, a parodic autobiography in which “the stereotypical traits which his critics, biographers and the media attached to [Nabokov’s name] are projected onto a separate character” (Hetényi 806, my translation). V.V. thus may be viewed as Nabokov’s “public possible self,” perhaps not entirely disjunct from the “feared possible self” alluded to earlier.

The public possible self of a writer inevitably includes traits extracted from their fictional characters. The character traits of V.V. and the plot of *LATH* exploit the fact that the public often confuses authors with their novels (many vulgar readings of *Lolita* still conclude that Nabokov liked underage girls) by playfully incorporating Nabokovian characters and story lines into *LATH*. Certain aspects of, notably, *Lolita* and *Ada*, Nabokov’s two most controversial books, are incorporated into *LATH*’s textual reality: V.V.’s daughter, Bel, and his lover, Dolly von Borg, are both distorted and exaggerated versions of *Lolita*, and V.V. re-enacts some of the more (in)famous scenes in the book with them; as for *Ada*, the siblings Ivor and Iris Black (the former V.V.’s friend and the latter his first wife) are modeled on *Ada*’s incestuous brother and sister, Van and Ada Veen. *LATH* in fact begins with a list of V.V.’s publications, all of which are oblique

transliterations of Nabokov's own books with similar but parodically altered plots, which gives Nabokov the opportunity to mock the misguided perceptions of both his critics and the public (Hamilton 20).

Nabokov's playful and (self-)mocking treatment of his life's work shows that irony and parody need to be taken into account when reading and interpreting *LATH*, but, as we have seen, the same cautious attitude is required in the case of *SM*. By playing with contingency and "exploiting the (parodically distorted) facts of his own life and oeuvre, Nabokov challenges our notions of autobiography" (Hetényi 811, my translation). *SM* and *LATH* project possible worlds with easy accessibility to one another, which in turn implies that V.V. and Nabokov are possible selves of each other, with Nabokov inhabiting the actual world. But, if certain modal constraints are switched to produce the possible world of *Look at the Harlequins!*, we arrive at a counterfactual version of *Speak, Memory*. Given the uncertainties about whether autobiographies can ever be entirely factual, a first-person novel that bears such a great resemblance to autobiographies might as well be read as one.

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Notes

1. Truth conditions in a fictional world are governed by the so-called "authentication function" For more on how the authentication function differentiates between what is true and false in a narrative, see chapter 6 in *Heterocosmica* by Lubomír Doležel.

2. See the chapter on *Look at the Harlequins!* in Brian Boyd's *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton UP, 1993) for more on this connection.

3. See Field, Andrew. *Nabokov: His Life in Art*. Little, Brown and Co., 1967.

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Fiction As a Conversation: Unreliable Narrators, Pop Culture, and Violence in David Foster Wallace’s “Girl With Curious Hair” and Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*

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ABSTRACT

David Foster Wallace and Bret Easton Ellis are known for their contributions to postmodern literature; however, they also developed a contentious relationship outside of their literary works. But what caused this conflict between the two writers? Although they were often in competition with one another as literary contemporaries who both explored postmodernism, the real issue between the two writers is the difference in how they envisioned and portrayed a postmodern world. While both Wallace and Ellis utilize irony, examine collectivist identities, and critique equality in the West, they do so with a different endgame in mind—namely, Wallace’s idea that the postmodern world encourages a deeper look into notions of selfhood that extend beyond Ellis’s cynical emphasis on surface and superficiality. A comparative approach of “Girl With Curious Hair” (1989) and *American Psycho* (1991) offers fresh perspectives on how Wallace and Ellis utilized similar themes to contrast their different points of view regarding the postmodern world. (SSL)

KEYWORDS: Postmodernism, Bret Easton Ellis, David Foster Wallace, *American Psycho*, *Girl With Curious Hair*



Introduction

In September 2012, four years after David Foster Wallace’s suicide, Bret Easton Ellis attacked the deceased writer after reading D. T. Max’s *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*. This biography incited Ellis to claim that Wallace was a “fraud . . . and the most tedious, overrated, tortured, pretentious writer of my generation” (Flood 1). Ellis further argued that Wallace was “the best example of a contemporary male writer lusting for a kind of awful greatness that he simply wasn’t able to achieve” (1). A few years passed and, with the release of Jason Ponsoldt’s *The End of the Tour*, a film about Wallace’s time with journalist David Lipsky, Ellis returned with additional thoughts on Wallace’s relevance. This time, Ellis published a piece in *The Talkhouse* about the film, although his critique seemed directed solely at Wallace’s work and life, rather than the film’s strengths and weaknesses. Ellis explains that he refused to worship at the shrine of “Saint David,” adding that while attempting to read *Infinite Jest*, one of Wallace’s polemical works, he was

ultimately unable to finish it. He ends his commentary on the film by accusing it of hero worship because it only presents one version of Wallace. Joanna di Mattia argues that Ellis's response to *The End of the Tour* is a "tainted one" that, at best, functions as a "kamikaze film review" (1). Rather than simply representing impromptu book and film reviews, Ellis's statements about Wallace are indicative of a troubling relationship between the two authors, dating back to the publication of Wallace's first novel *The Broom of the System* (1987).

While Ellis critiqued Wallace's writing and legacy, Wallace similarly mentioned Ellis, albeit not as often or with as much vitriol. In *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, for example, Wallace discussed the influence of television on 1980s culture and the desperate attempt of young writers to please their audience while hating them at the same time. In addition to this, Wallace argued that one sees this kind of hostility toward the reader in the following ways:

bludgeoning the reader with data. Or devoting a lot of energy to creating expectations and then taking pleasure in disappointing them. You can see this clearly in something like Ellis's *American Psycho*: it panders shamelessly to the audience's sadism for a while, but by the end, it's clear that the sadism's real object is the reader herself. (McCaffery 25)

Wallace targeted Ellis's cynicism, arguing that "[i]f readers simply believe the world is stupid and shallow and mean, then Ellis can write a mean shallow stupid novel that becomes a mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything" (26).

But what caused the conflict between the two well-recognized authors? According to Gerald Howard, an editor who worked with both Wallace and Ellis, personality differences (mainly Ellis's) partly contributed to the conflict. Howard states that Wallace and Ellis were two young writers "of about the same age, wildly different in style and temperament, inhabiting the same crowded literary space and clearly getting on each other's nerves" (1). By the early 2000s, Wallace's style had become "dominant and that is what drives Bret Ellis nuts" (1). Because Wallace and Ellis were a part of the same generational cohort and had gained literary success at an early age, it became easy to compare the two despite obvious differences in their literary intent. Over time, Wallace became the writer championed by critics and readers, enough to overshadow Ellis, a fact that the latter remained acutely aware of both before and after Wallace's death.

The real issue between the two writers is the differences in how they envision a postmodern world. While both Wallace and Ellis utilize irony, examine collectivist identities, and critique equality in the West, they do so with a different endgame in mind—namely, Wallace’s idea that the postmodern world encourages a deeper look into notions of selfhood that extend beyond Ellis’s cynical emphasis on surface and superficiality. Even though Wallace and Ellis are grouped together as postmodernists, who clearly had a banter between each other off the page, scholars have not made a direct comparison between the two authors’ works, particularly Wallace’s “Girl With Curious Hair” (1989), the story from the same-titled collection, and Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991). While scholars such as Paul Giles, Wilson Kaiser, and Carla Freccero have analyzed sentimental post-humanism, other elements of postmodernism, and serial killer fiction in Wallace and Ellis, respectively, a direct comparison of “Girl With Curious Hair” and *American Psycho* has remained largely untouched, even though the two texts evidence many plot-related similarities, such as the use of unreliable narrators and commentary on pop culture. Marshall Boswell argues that “Girl With Curious Hair” foreshadows *American Psycho* (46); however, he does not provide a deep analysis explaining what he means by this. A comparative approach offers fresh perspectives on how Wallace and Ellis utilized similar themes to contrast their different points of view regarding the postmodern world.

Unreliable narrators in “Girl With Curious Hair” and *American Psycho*

When Gerald Howard first received David Foster Wallace’s manuscript for *The Broom of the System* in 1986, he was reminded of what he refers to as the “Great White Postmodernists” like Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon. He was also reminded of Bret Easton Ellis’s work, in particular *Less Than Zero* (1985), which he had read for reprint on Simon and Schuster’s behalf. After moving to W. W. Norton in 1988, Howard took *Girl With Curious Hair* with him (1). This time, he told Wallace that the short story from the collection with the same name struck him as an “obvious and expert parody of Bret Ellis’s affectless tone and subject matter” (1). According to Howard, Wallace denied ever having read Ellis’s work, a claim that Howard himself doubted. Although Wallace did not want to admit the truth about Howard’s observation in 1988, now the similarities between “Girl With Curious Hair” and *American Psycho* can be openly acknowledged and examined.

“Girl With Curious Hair” begins at a Keith Jarrett concert attended by Sick Puppy, a corporate liability troubleshooter, and his punk rock friends Gimlet, Big, Mr. Wonderful, and Cheese. Throughout the concert, the punk rockers, high on LSD, become fixated on a young girl in the audience accompanied by her father. The story culminates in Cheese’s preoccupation with Sick Puppy’s state of mind, in particular his happiness, and the assumed violence directed at the young girl and her father leaving the concert hall at the story’s conclusion. The plot hinges upon the emotional disconnectedness the characters feel in response to others around them, their environment, and the trauma from their past.

To understand both Wallace’s and Ellis’s works, it is important to note the themes the two writers examine, such as anti-realism, collectivism, and criticism of the West. Stephen R. C. Hicks explains that postmodernism can best be understood through its rejection of the tenets of modernism, mainly that “perception and reason are the human means of knowing nature” (6). Instead of reason or a fixed idea of what reality means, postmodernism substitutes these concepts with a “social-linguistic, constructionist account of reality” (5). Reason, for the postmodernist, cannot be the pathway to acquiring objective knowledge (5). Postmodernism similarly rejects elements of the Enlightenment, mainly by attacking its essential philosophical themes, such as reality, reason, individual identity, and autonomy (14). Questions of honesty or integrity in postmodern thought are viewed as being a part of an “aesthetic autonomy that has been discredited as theoretically naive” (Bewes 421), mainly because of the anti-realism and anti-philosophical nature of the postmodern condition. Hicks also explains that postmodernism criticizes the West, drawing attention to the fact that the law has been a cover for the “assertion of white male interests. The only antidote to that poison is the equally forceful assertion of the subjective interests of historically oppressed groups” (17). For this reason, postmodernism examines whether the West is progressive on liberty, equalities, and opportunities for everyone—or whether it is sexist, racist, and class-bound (Hicks 18). Despite the critique of the West, postmodernism examines the low-brow, evidencing what Fredric Jameson calls a “new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” (9). Jameson’s notion of flatness or superficiality also lends itself to the use of cynicism in postmodern thought.

To explore these themes, Wallace utilizes irony. In his analysis of Wallace’s use of postmodern irony, Wilson Kaiser suggests that Wallace sought to “reimagine the boundaries of postmodern fiction, dispensing with the sense of superior detachment he saw as the major problem with ironic

distance” (32). To achieve this, Wallace uses irony as it relates to Sick Puppy’s superficiality and lack of emotional depth. While Sick Puppy remains acutely aware of details like the taste of Gimlet’s nails, the shape of her hair, and the quality of the sports jacket that the little girl’s father wears, he cannot form an emotional attachment to the people themselves. When paying for the jazz concert tickets, for example, he states that “I paid the face behind the window” (Wallace 57), thus dehumanizing the person working at the Irvine Concert Hall. In a flashback about joyriding, Sick Puppy explains that “he [Big] laughed so heartily that he wet his pants and could have damaged some of the leather interior of my new Porsche, and I have to admit that I got peeved” (58). Despite the fondness he claims to have for his punk rocker friends, at the same time, he values the superficiality of the material world more. Later, during his philosophical conversation with Cheese, Sick Puppy exclaims that “I did not know that Negroes had sub consciousnesses” (66). He eventually applies the same comment to Keith Jarrett when he suggests that Jarrett (as an African American) might not have a subconscious mind either (66). In all these examples, Sick Puppy’s racist claims are delivered in an affectless way that either go unnoticed by the other characters or takes them off-guard. At the same time, his comments are punctuated by grammatical errors that, from the reader’s perspective, dismantle Sick Puppy’s white, patriarchal superiority—a clear jab at the values embraced by the West. All of Sick Puppy’s character flaws contradict what one would expect from an upper-class lawyer: his poor grammar, his close-minded attitude toward race and ethnicity, and his complete disregard for human beings. While each characteristic functions as postmodern—the lack of emotion or depth, the critique of the West—at the same time, Wallace’s use of irony allows him to show readers what a postmodern world looks like and what is at stake within it: the human condition and notions of selfhood.

Wallace expands upon the problems associated with the human condition or notions of selfhood in the postmodern world when he contextualizes Sick Puppy’s psychology through solely negative ways. When a concert attendee complains about Gimlet’s hair blocking the stage, Gimlet argues with the woman, which pleases Sick Puppy as an observer: “Gimlet told the woman to Fuck You, but good old Cheese was concerned at the situation and politely traded to Gimlet’s outside seat so as to solve the vision problems of the woman” (59). During a recount of Sick Puppy’s first contact with the punk rockers, he states that he was happy after setting fire to a young man’s beard who criticized Sick Puppy’s military family. When Cheese asks Sick Puppy if he loves Gimlet, he avoids directly answering the question,

choosing instead to focus on the pleasurable sexual relationship he has with her. Throughout the story, Sick Puppy repeatedly returns to his gold lighter, linking it to his own sexual gratification: “but Gimlet let me burn one of Big’s nipples with my gold lighter at a rest stop, so I became happy” (58), and later: “I was there with Ms. Paisley Campbell-Greet, a fine gal whom I was trying to convince to fellate me and subsequently let me burn her” (61). David P. Rando argues that Wallace’s work is “peculiarly invested in diagnosing male lovelessness as a form of hideousness” (579), evident in both Sick Puppy’s detachment and sexual sadism. Although Wallace explains the moral symbolism of the gold lighter later in the story, at this point, he uses its presence as an introduction to Sick Puppy’s troubled identity. Sick Puppy remains incapable of connecting to the people around him, and when he believes that he does, it is only through sadistic acts. Yet these sadistic acts merely dehumanize others rather than establishing a bond of understanding between them. The irony of Sick Puppy’s sadism suggests that collectively, the characters in the story cannot feel, and when they do, it is only through pain, which they, in turn, conceptualize as happiness. The human condition, one of wide-spread cynicism and emotional lassitude in the text, cannot be explained through reason. The human condition and any conceptualization of selfhood is thus an absurdity filled with contradictions in the story.

In keeping with the human condition as divorced from reason, Sick Puppy’s emotional detachment contributes to the erosion of his ability to interpret reality—oftentimes in ironic ways. Once the group enters the Irvine Concert Hall, for example, Sick Puppy claims that “[t]he other crowds coming to see Keith Jarrett’s concert were in approval of our bunch’s happy go luckiness and gave us a generous amount of room and privacy in the Concert Hall’s spacious lobby” (57). In contrast to Sick Puppy’s interpretation, the other concert attendees view the group with wariness or outright fear. In his analysis of minimalist writers, Arthur M. Saltzman suggests that what matters is “the intensity of perception” when it comes to extracting narrative potential (425). In Sick Puppy’s case, the intensity of his perception creates the reality or the dominant narrative of the story. Yet, his version of reality is problematic throughout the text because he represents the opposite of what is real. For example, while describing his occupation, Sick Puppy states that

when a consumer gets a wild hair about being injured and attempts to litigate against one of my firm’s clients, I am called in to trouble shoot. . . . I am especially pleased and challenged in my career when it really happens that a

manufacturer's product has a bug and has injured a consumer, because then it is even more challenging to try to convince a jury or a jurist that what really happened didn't really happen. (64–65)

His whole occupation centers upon altering the appearance of things to make the truth about them irrelevant. This same altering of reality extends to Sick Puppy's and Cheese's belief systems. When Cheese describes the punk rockers' ideology, he explains that they

all felt as if they had nothing and would always have nothing therefore they made the nothing into everything. However Cheese stated that I was a Sick Puppy who already had everything, thus he wished to inquire as to why I traded my big everything for a big nothing. (67–68)

On the one hand, the punk rockers convert nothingness into everything, thus reversing their real-world circumstances, at least in thought. On the other hand, Sick Puppy chooses to do the opposite—exchange everything for nothing—which reverses how others, like Cheese, perceive him. Reality, in all these instances, depends upon the characters' definition of it, thus demonstrating the postmodern belief that truth and reality cannot be defined. Claire Fabre suggests that Wallace's characters know how to survive in a world dominated by perversion (107), clearly apparent in these belief systems that pervert or, at least, distort reality. Paul Giles posits that Wallace's intellectual “agenda takes its bearings from alternative sources, being concerned as it is primarily to resituate the affective and emotional life of American romanticism in an apparently alien social and historical milieu” (34). In this case, that milieu is a reality with a superficial, privileged surface hiding a hideous underbelly of discontent. When Sick Puppy avoids reality, he avoids the lovelessness and hideousness of men, as mentioned by Rando. Yet, from the reader's perspective, it becomes obvious that Sick Puppy cannot interpret reality and that his inability to do so is an example of the postmodern condition—one that makes metaphysical issues contradictory or meaningless.

Like Wallace, Bret Easton Ellis utilizes an emotionally detached narrator who finds happiness through sadism to set the tone in his postmodern novel, *American Psycho*. Patrick Bateman, a Wall Street broker, spends most of his time working out, attending the newest, hippest restaurants and clubs, while commenting on the clothing ensembles of his friends and associates. On the side, he allegedly commits horrible acts of

violence and murder. Before Bateman's violent side emerges, however, the readers follow him through a series of love relationships without love and friendships without care.

Like Wallace, Ellis uses irony when describing his characters' emotional detachment from the world around them, the only difference between the two texts being that this detachment appears from the opening line. The novel begins with the graffiti "Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here," thus setting the hopeless tone of *American Psycho* and connecting it to Dante's *Inferno*. Later on, at a dinner party at his girlfriend Evelyn's apartment, Bateman lists a host of suggestions for improving society: "We have to encourage a return to traditional moral values and curb graphic sex and violence on TV, in movies, in popular music, everywhere. Most importantly we have to promote general social concern and less materialism in young people" (16). The dinner party responds to Bateman with total silence, suggesting that they remain unaffected by his commentary on social issues. Bateman's tone throughout his speech sounds like the beginning of a conservative article, not a component of a legitimate conversation. At another get-together, Bateman tells Courtney's friend, Anne, that she looks "exactly like Garfield but run over and skinned" (95). Anne responds with: "Exactly. Oh Courtney, where *did* you find Patrick?" (95). In these examples, most of which are repeated throughout the novel with slight modifications, Bateman and the other characters make speeches about problems in their society without truly engaging with the content that they bring up. They merely issue empty commentary without listening to the import of their own words or those of the other characters. Hicks argues that in the postmodern world, individuals "are not in control of their feelings: their identities are a product of their group memberships, whether economic, sexual, or racial" (82). Hicks's claims can be seen repeatedly throughout *American Psycho* as the characters are seemingly united by economic privilege in ways that Sick Puppy and the punk rockers are not. Ellis makes ironic the collective nature of the characters formed by the same social status, yet unable to emotionally bond despite the close proximity of sameness.

When Bateman has to confront unavoidable emotional situations like his break-up with Evelyn in "At Another New Restaurant," he either relies on his violent imaginary persona or finds other ways to distance himself from reality. According to Fredric Jameson, "concepts such as anxiety and alienation . . . are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern" (14). Yet, *American Psycho* is filled with examples of Bateman's emotional anxiety,

thus demonstrating another use of irony in Ellis's novel. When initially breaking up with Evelyn, for example, Bateman explains that "My . . . my *need* to engage in . . . homicidal behavior on a massive scale cannot be, um, corrected. . . . But I . . . have no other way to express my blocked . . . needs" (338). Evelyn completely disregards his confession, like most of the other characters do when he either insults them or divulges his murderous fantasies, arguing that "your friends are my friends. My friends are your friends. I don't think it would work" (339). Bateman further describes their relationship, in his mind, as "blacked out, bombed, footage from the film in my head" (343). Later, he admits that "[i]t's an isolation ward that serves only to expose my own severely impaired capacity to feel. . . . If I were an actual automaton, what difference would there really be?" (343). Previously, when Luis confesses to being in love with Bateman, the latter tries to avoid him and thus escape an uncomfortable emotional moment; however, Luis follows him and "roughly grabs my shoulder, spinning me around so I'm facing him: Luis blotting out reality" (294). When Bethany, his college girlfriend, asks about the facets of his personality that she once knew, including being his lover, Bateman responds with: "My eyes fall on her coldly, untouched" (241). Like Sick Puppy, Bateman cannot emotionally engage with the world or with people around him, no matter the context—from past relationships or unrequited crushes like Luis's to his current break-up with Evelyn. Jameson argues that liberation from the older anomie of the centered subject also leads to a liberation "from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling" (15). He adds that this liberation is not utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that these emotions are now "free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria" (16). Bateman's lack of self, best characterized by his impersonal approach to others, results in a euphoria consisting of an alter persona, one that can only feel via imaginary acts of violence.

Bateman's detachment, like Sick Puppy's, makes it difficult for him to interpret reality, thus illuminating periods of anti-realism in the novel. It is not until "Dry Cleaners" that the degree of Bateman's inability to understand reality begins to emerge. After arguing with the dry cleaning employee, for example, he mistakes a pretty college student outside for a homeless girl. For a brief moment, he says that his nastiness vanishes and "wanting to offer something kind, something simple, I lean in, still staring, eyes radiating sympathy into her blank, grave face" (86). Only by misinterpreting reality can he forge a semblance of sympathy for another human being, but especially a

homeless person, a group of people he hassles and terrorizes throughout the novel. In “Harry’s,” while discussing a preference for dating women for their personalities rather than their looks, Bateman uses a quote that he attributes to the serial killer, Ed Gein when it is Ted Bundy who actually says it. In “Concert,” Bateman believes that he has a connection with U2’s lead singer, Bono: “I hear it, can actually feel, can even make out the letters of the message hovering above Bono’s head in orange wavy letters” (146). The message convinces Bateman that Bono is the devil. Although small instances in the novel, at the same time, position Bateman as an unreliable narrator who cannot properly interpret reality. In contrast to Sick Puppy, however, this is not always clear, particularly when it comes to his alleged crime sprees throughout New York City. These earlier cues help clarify that the later graphic displays of violence function as mere fantasies for a protagonist who needs them to develop a sense of self.

Both Wallace and Ellis utilize irony to comment upon the postmodern condition, especially when describing the characters’ definition of reality or emotional depth. The degree that individualism dissolves, however, separates Wallace’s perspective from Ellis’s. Wallace always argued that “rule-breaking has got to be for the *sake* of something. When rule-breaking, the mere *form* of renegade avant-gardism, becomes an end in itself, you end up with bad language poetry and *American Psycho*’s nipple-shocks” (McCaffery 27–28). Wallace also looked for purity and authenticity in his works (Lipsky 175). Hicks argues that “[f]or part of the process of the dissolution of particular beings into a state of undifferentiation is the dissolution of one’s own sense of being a unique, individual being” (63). Hicks further explains that this dissolution slips into a state of nothingness that can be distressing to the individual (63). Unlike Ellis, Wallace breaks with the postmodern condition by providing an individual context for Sick Puppy’s emotional detachment, thus separating him from collectivist identity. Sick Puppy, as a result, never reaches the dissolution of self mentioned by Hicks, even if he does not overtly connect the origin of his sadism with his present sense of self. Patrick Bateman, on the other hand, experiences nothing but the dissolution of self because he never truly detaches from the collective group except via fantasies of murder and violence.

Furthermore, this difference lends itself to differing degrees of cynicism in both works. While Wallace ends “Girl With Curious Hair” with assumed violence, he also allows Sick Puppy one small gesture to comfort the little girl before her life changes forever: “I slowly assumed a happy and

comforting and reassuring expression at the young blond girl” (74). Although this passage illustrates the same type of irony as Sick Puppy’s occupation, at the same time, it is more than that. For a brief moment, Sick Puppy and the little girl engage in ways that they did not before the concert’s intermission, even though Sick Puppy’s expression is an empty attempt at reassurance. Bateman, on the other hand, begins and ends the novel performing the same meaningless activities with his friends, despite numerous opportunities to emotionally engage with Bethany, his mother, and, most importantly, Jean. Instead, when pressed to respond to Jean’s love confession, for example, he resorts to the same meaningless babble that he used with Evelyn when he describes the man writing “Kill All Yuppies” in a bathroom stall (Ellis 274). He admits that “it did not occur to me, ever, that people were good or that a man was capable of change or that the world could be a better place through one’s taking pleasure in a feeling or a look or a gesture, of receiving another person’s love or kindness” (375). This cynicism embodies the dissolution of self into nothingness mentioned by Hicks. Yet, it does not provide Bateman with any type of liberation or revelation regarding the point of existing. As a result, this dissolution of self merely destroys any chance Bateman has at greater understanding or an emotional attachment to the world, no matter who offers him the chance for it.

In addition to this, the structure of the two works evidences the authors’ rejection or acceptance of the same type of cynicism. Wallace’s story is metanarrative. While Keith Jarrett plays improvisation, for example, Sick Puppy’s surroundings cue his revelations to Cheese. Through the improv structure of the story, Wallace provides Sick Puppy’s moral framework for the reader, as if the reader is a psychoanalyst listening to a mentally-ill patient. As a result, the structure creates Sick Puppy’s arc as a character, thus allowing him to separate from collectivist identity. Ellis’s novel, in contrast, utilizes a circular structure in which the last words, “[t]his is not an exit” (Ellis 399) mirror the bleakness of the graffiti in the novel’s opening line. The circular nature of the novel illustrates the deep cynicism embedded in Bateman’s world, or what Martin Weinreich calls an “operationally closed system,” (76) in which nothing changes.

Wallace and Ellis create emotion and structure differently in their works, mainly because of how they view the act of writing itself. In a 1993 interview, Wallace explains:

Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look

banal or melodramatic or naive or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something. (qtd in. Giles 332)

As Marshall Boswell suggests, *Girl With Curious Hair* is a book that challenges postmodernism and the “bleak and emaciated world of Ellis” (39). In contrast to a willingness to embrace emotion and critique postmodernism, Ellis does quite the opposite when he states that

I haven't tried to write that novel that's going to give critical acclaim or a prize or two—which I've never won. And I seem to be continually controversial and rub people the wrong way. . . . I mean the big joke is: cancel me. Come on, cancel me if you can't stand it so much. (qtd. in Leith 1)

Even with his suggestion to cancel himself, Ellis lauds the dissolution of self and cynicism rejected by Wallace, but without a higher revelation or purpose.

The superficial world of pop culture in “*Girl With Curious Hair*” and *American Psycho*

In describing the role of television's influence on the postmodern condition, Wallace states that “the fact is that for at least ten years now, television has been ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very same cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative” (qtd. in McLaughlin 64). In other words, TV no longer champions American values, but “cynically mocks, deflates, and debunks these values” (McLaughlin 64). For Wallace, TV played a powerful role in shaping viewers' perspectives as well as the communities that they imagined inhabiting. It was what he called the “texture of the world I live in” (Miller 60). He even suggested in interviews that “it's seldom acknowledged that viewers' relationship with TV is, albeit debased, intricate and profound” (McCaffery 21).

In “*Girl With Curious Hair*,” the superficial world of popular culture that so influenced Wallace, also helps shape Sick Puppy's identity formation. For Wallace, pop culture functions as “our new mythos, the source of our contemporary archetypes” (Boswell 39). As a result, Wallace engages with the postmodern debate about consumerism versus improving longevity and wealth across generations. According to Hicks, postmodern cultural themes range from group identities to debating the reality of progressivism in the United States (18). Hicks argues that one postmodern debate examines “whether life in the West, and especially America, is improving with average

longevity and wealth increasing in each generation” (19). The other side of the argument examines the West as having “abandoned its urban underclass and fostered a bland consumerist culture of shopping malls and suburban sprawl” (19). Although the action of the story largely takes place in the urban setting of Los Angeles where Sick Puppy socializes with his punk rocker friends, his past represents upper-class culture. Because of his privilege, Sick Puppy actively engages and embraces the superficiality of bland consumerism. From the opening paragraph, for example, Sick Puppy describes an English Leather Cologne commercial, sounding like a commercial himself when he says that “I wear English Leather Cologne which keeps me smelling very attractive at all times” (55). Yet, the commercial is more than a subscription to the superficial world of television and the products represented there; rather, elements of the commercial are directly linked to Sick Puppy’s sexuality when he masturbates while watching the woman from the ad. The fact that Wallace links a common TV ad with something as important as Sick Puppy’s sexuality demonstrates that life in the West has not fostered progressivism, but the life of shopping malls and suburban sprawl mentioned by Hicks. Later, Sick Puppy describes his new suit which he purchased on Rodeo Drive, and his hair cut from Julio’s Unisex Fashion Cut Center that he modeled after a picture from a magazine. He repeatedly returns to his hair, explaining that “I have finely styled hair without any of dandruff’s unsightly itching and flaking” (65). Not only does Sick Puppy attach sexual importance to television commercials, but he also uses additional elements of popular culture like the magazine clipping to shape what he appears like to others. His language is similarly shaped by the rhetoric of commercials. Paul Giles argues that these objects “have become commodified and commercially overdetermined as if refracted through the prism of television advertising” (334). Sick Puppy exhibits Giles’s claims when he places great importance on his appearance, stating that “people naturally like me out of instinct, because of my appearance” (65). Being liked even helps him within his occupation: “The average layman would be surprised to know how much juries are impressed by appearances” (65). Although characters like Sick Puppy cannot emotionally engage with one other, they can, as the story’s protagonist demonstrates, both connect to and represent the superficial world of popular culture.

Pop culture has such a hold on Sick Puppy that he links notions of happiness to it—thus demonstrating how pop culture and consumerism

shape identities in the postmodern world. When Cheese asks him why he is so happy, for example, Sick Puppy responds with:

I patiently explained to Cheese once more about my great amount of income and clothing and fine home entertainment products, however Cheese shook his predominantly bald head and claimed that he meant a different word by the word happy which he had groped for. (70)

Ironically, Cheese struggles to define what he means by happiness even though he fixates on its meaning in his question. Sick Puppy then demonstrates his allegiance to the superficial world of popular culture with his response. Jaroslav Kusnir calls the “commercialization of people’s lives and language, the (in)ability of language to communicate truth about outer experience, the relationship between language, philosophy and science, psychology of human beings, frustration of living in various kinds of partnership, and various kinds of violence” (321) as themes that Wallace repeatedly incorporates throughout his work. Kusnir further states that “thus the alternative world the narrator creates represents a replacement of physical reality by a constructed combination of the stimuli from various sources (reality, popular fiction, film)” (324). In “Girl With Curious Hair,” Wallace examines these themes to illustrate how one’s identity has been replaced by meaningless objects, most of which have been garnered from popular culture.

Like Wallace, Ellis explores his characters’ relationships with popular culture in a postmodern world. Bateman’s character in *American Psycho* repeatedly defines himself through brand names, the clothing that he and his friends wear, and the weight and appearance of their business card paper. Martin Weinreich explains that *American Psycho* “portrays the city after this shift from production to consumption” (66) and that “in the New York yuppie cosmos of the 1980s, the commodity seems to have become the only referential authority to the world” (66). Ellis illustrates these claims when he fills the novel with paragraphs listing commodities such as name-brand clothes, the trendiest food, and where *Zagat* recommends dining. Florian Niedlich suggests that Bateman’s apathy and “the monotony of his life are reminiscent of a machine” (228). The repetition of lists lends itself to this monotony. During one of Bateman’s observations littered with name brands, for example, he states, “Evelyn stands by a blond wood counter wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt and the same pair of silk-satin d’Orsay pumps Courtney has on” (9). As this passage suggests, the material items listed by Bateman describe an opulent lifestyle, one that

presumably sets the characters above the homeless people flooding the streets, crying and begging for money. They become “all one sees” (Weinreich 66). Yet, most of the time, the characters mix each other up, as if they are all the same or somehow replaceable because they dress alike. Daniel Cojocaru states that “[s]ince everybody imitates the same yuppie-ideal script, it becomes increasingly difficult to be truly different from others, as Bateman recognizes” (188). Bateman recounts how “Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam (even though Marcus is dating Cecilia Wagner) but for some reason it really doesn’t matter” (Ellis 89). Weinreich posits that “[a]s everyone dresses according to exchangeable fashion-models, all individuals become virtually exchangeable” (70). Berthold Schoene similarly argues that the characters only “look like themselves, but even appearances cannot save them from anonymous obliteration as they continue to confuse—and be confused with—each other” (383). Like Wallace, characters like Bateman define themselves through pop culture, especially through the commercialization of it. In contrast to Wallace, however, Ellis engages more with collective identities formed by pop culture.

While Wallace links pop culture’s influence to Sick Puppy’s sexuality, Ellis utilizes it to help Bateman deal with troubling emotional encounters. When Luis mistakes Bateman’s actions for a sexual advance, for example, a flustered Bateman returns to his table, ending the “Yale Club” chapter with tie-holder etiquette. While renting *Body Double* and allegedly explaining how much he likes the violence in it, he has to take a breath before admitting that “*I have to see her [the checkout girl’s] shoes*” (Ellis 113). Weinreich argues that these objects “only supply an immaculate surface” (67), or the superficial world of consumerism that Bateman understands. Niedlich posits that “[g]enuine communication has become an impossibility in Bateman’s circles” (227). Without real emotional connections or the ability to communicate emotion, the characters turn to the tangible world of pop culture to remain moored.

In contrast to Wallace who links pop culture to happiness, albeit a superficial version of it, the characters in Ellis’s novel never feign happiness over the items that they possess. Rather, it becomes mere etiquette to dress the same, vacation in certain spots together, or have dinner at trendy restaurants, demonstrating their allegiance to a specific group identity cultivated by class privilege. Cojocaru claims that Ellis’s novel is a “critique of consumerism but is paradoxically brought forth by and is part of its emptiness” (187). At the same time that Ellis critiques consumerism, he also

demonstrates that Bateman's relationship with pop culture, especially music, has two purposes in the novel: to act as stabilizing items in his life and to further illustrate his unreliability as a narrator.

This is most evident in the three chapters that function as impromptu music reviews: "Genesis," "Whitney Houston," and "Huey Lewis and the News." In each music review chapter, Bateman misinterprets lyrics or mixes up facts about the artists or bands. In "Genesis," for example, he claims that "Turn It On Again" is about "the negative effects of television" (133) when, in fact, the lyrics describe an obsessed fan who feels an unreal connection with a TV star. In his reaction to "Illegal Alien," he finds the lyrics humorous when they attempt to draw attention to the serious social issues surrounding the undocumented. In the "Whitney Houston" chapter, he refers to "You Give Good Love" as a song with "lush jazz arrangements" (253) when the song is R&B. He claims that "The Greatest Love of All" is about self-preservation and dignity (254). Although dignity is one component of it, the song largely focuses on self-respect and children needing respectable role models. In "Huey Lewis and the News," Bateman compares the band to the Beach Boys, stating that Huey Lewis and the News posed with a surfboard on their first album (named after the band) just like the Beach Boys once did. In actuality, their first album cover features the band jamming out, without a surfboard in the photo. In his analysis of "I Want a New Drug," he states that "not only is it the greatest antidrug song ever written, it's also a personal statement about how the band has grown up, shucked off their bad-boy image and learned to become more adult" (355). In reality, the song is a love song, with no references to being an adult or shredding the band's bad-boy image.

Much like Sick Puppy in Wallace's story, Bateman determines his own reality even when referencing music. While Bateman gives great importance to these musicians that he mentions throughout the novel, he cannot interpret their work properly. He gets what he wants out of them, in particular love songs which seem to "reflect all that he is longing for" (Niedlich 23). Given the characters' dependence on the superficial world of pop culture, it is no wonder that Bateman cannot truly engage with the music on its terms. Rather, it becomes a placeholder for him. In each case, the chapters preceding the music reviews evidence some type of graphic violence. Just like he uses fashion etiquette to deal with anxiety-ridden situations, he uses the music review chapters as a brief reprieve from the imagination that causes him so much anxiety.

Both Wallace and Ellis recognize that popular culture has informed their generation—not always in positive ways. Wallace once said that “if there’s something that’s distinctive about our generation, it’s that we’ve been steeped in media and marketing since the time we were very, very small” (Paulson 130). Writers like Wallace use popular culture in ways that previous generations of authors did not—generations that, as Wallace stated, viewed pop culture as “vapid and trivial” (Goldfarb 141). For both Sick Puppy and Patrick Bateman, the world of pop culture provides them with either superficial happiness or the ability to emotionally stabilize.

Neither author attempts to describe a solution to dependence on the superficial, a characteristic dominating 1980s culture; however, Wallace does try to provide more context for this problem to better understand the failures and the hypocrisy of the West. *Girl With Curious Hair* is a book that “demonstrates how history is primarily a text, a constructed narrative that is less about truth than about the will to power” (Boswell 39). Claims like Boswell’s appear in Wallace’s interview with Larry McCaffery, who asks Wallace if he believes that writers of his generation are not only responsible for describing issues, but also for the solutions to them. Wallace responds:

Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctly hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction’s job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now. Or can be. (26)

He later said that writers themselves were “really sort of working on how to be a human being” (Kennedy and Polk 14). According to Robert C. Clark, Wallace “argued that writers should not shy away from tackling pertinent ethical issues and expressing possible solutions” (408). When Wallace creates a character like Sick Puppy, he exposes emotional detachment and the elements of pop culture that contribute to this condition—all of which make it possible for him to critique the failures of the West. At the same time, Wallace does not redeem Sick Puppy or make excuses for him. Instead, he speaks to the reader and “make[s] people feel less lonely” (16) or he “get[s] some empathy with the reader” (Crain 124). He simply creates another community, this time outside of the ones forged by television, for readers to examine how the failures of the West—the lack of equality across classes and

dependence on the superficial world of pop culture—impact members of society.

Like Wallace, Ellis does not provide consequences, more or less solutions for the ills that plague his characters like Bateman. Weinreich argues that there is “neither cause nor consequence” to Bateman’s actions (75). Yet, Ellis’s style evidences a deeper cynicism than Wallace’s. While he may describe in great detail the effects of popular culture—namely, gross materialism, emotional detachment, and interchangeable identities within a group—it ultimately does not matter as Bateman repeatedly suggests throughout the novel. This cynical worldview simply shows that the postmodern world is all surface, evident in the experiences of Ellis’s characters.

Violence in “Girl With Curious Hair” and *American Psycho*

When the superficial world of pop culture fails to make the characters feel anything, they turn to violence in “Girl With Curious Hair.” Violence plays an important role in the postmodern world. Hicks contends that “Postmodern accounts of human nature also consistently emphasize relations of conflict . . . and given the de-emphasized or eliminated role of reason, post-modern accounts hold that those conflicts are resolved primarily by the use of force, whether masked or naked; the use of force in turn leads to relations of dominance, submission, and oppression” (6). The conflict mentioned by Hicks emerges because of dissension within different collectivist groups. The dissension can relate to differences in sex, race, or ethnicity. In “Girl With Curious Hair,” Wallace focuses on class-based dissension, specifically as it relates to Sick Puppy’s inability to belong to his own social class. In the conversation about happiness between Cheese and Sick Puppy, for example, the latter at first gives a list of superficial reasons for the origins of his happiness. Eventually, Sick Puppy expands upon his answer to include the two occasions in which he felt “down in the dumps” (71), thus allowing Sick Puppy’s moral framework to emerge through his inability to belong to an upper-class family. In the first instance, he explains:

I went to proudly enlist in the United States Marine Corps R.O.T.C. program to continue to follow in the footsteps of my father and brother who serve with honor in the military and the Recruiting Colonel made us take a dumb personality test and I flunked and later when I went back to politely complain they gave me another dumb test and said I flunked it. (71)

The psychological problems identified in the text prevent Sick Puppy from following in his family's prestigious footsteps. Even though his family has great standing in society, especially his brother who carries the black box of nuclear codes, there is a great difference between his family members and Sick Puppy.

As his narrative moves even further back in time from college to childhood, the origin of the gold lighter fetish emerges. After being turned on by pornographic magazines, Sick Puppy rapes his sister. Once his father discovers what Sick Puppy has done, he burns his son's genitals with a gold lighter. It becomes clear to the reader that Sick Puppy later fails the personality test at Brown University because of the trauma he carries with him since childhood. In all these instances, he speaks using an "inimical, zombie-like style" (Boswell 47), thus emphasizing his emotional detachment as he reveals to Cheese what has made him this way. An understanding of his moral framework at first elicits sympathy for him on the part of the reader, especially when contrasted with the differences between his father's generational culture and his own. As the story progresses, however, readers begin to understand that Sick Puppy's emotional detachment and his relationship with pop culture are effects rather than causes. According to Hicks, to get to the metaphysical center of Being, "[o]ne must absolutely not . . . give into one's overpowering sense of distress and run away from dread and back to the safety of one's petty, day-to-day life" (64). In other words, Sick Puppy does the exact opposite by embracing the petty, superficial elements of his life, rather than face the dread and trauma of his past and his subsequent inability to represent the values of his socio-economic class.

Once Wallace establishes the origins of Sick Puppy's moral framework, the story culminates in a violent ending where dissension works across different class groups. Throughout the concert, for example, the punk rockers and Sick Puppy have focused on a little girl and her father who sit in the audience. During the intermission, after Sick Puppy finishes his conversation with Cheese, the punk rockers follow the girl and her father out of the auditorium. Sick Puppy observes that

Gimlet's eyes continued to be all dark black pupil rather than white and color and pupil and she was running slowly in her leather and plastic and reaching out with her hand for the curious hair of the girl with the curious hair who was asleep in the protective arms of the distinguished older man running slowly past me. (74)

Sick Puppy watches the events unfold, ending the story with: “And here’s what I did” (74). This ending encapsulates what Wallace calls “uneasy” reading (McCaffery 33), or that which makes the reader work harder to put all the story’s characteristics together. There can be no doubt that the punk rockers hurt either the girl or her father or both, and that Sick Puppy helps in some way, given the build-up to this very moment throughout the story. Yet this violent ending also describes the use of force mentioned by Hicks. Because Sick Puppy cannot belong to his own collectivist group, the one that he adopts, that of the punk rockers, brings its own relationships of conflict that emerge at the story’s violent end.

Ellis provides many examples of Bateman’s violent tendencies in *American Psycho*. The intent behind the violence in both “Girl With Curious Hair” and *American Psycho* is the same: to show relations of conflict in the postmodern world. Bateman routinely makes confessions to those around him about his murderous rampage or his desire to commit homicide—all of which are ignored within his social circle or those connected to it. While receiving a massage, for example, he tells Helga that he would like to kill a girl and a dog. She responds with, “Shhh, Mr. Bateman. . . . Relax” (116). Later, when speaking with Evelyn, he informs her that she cannot come over because “your neighbor’s head was in my freezer. . . . Listen. Dinner? Where? Can you hear me?” (119). Just like Helga, Evelyn completely ignores his confession, focusing instead on the practical part of the conversation. Like the repeated listing of brand names, his ignored confessions culminate in Bateman’s final attempt to be heard: his confession on an answering machine. Berthold Shoene states that “[h]is formerly secure first-person identity has come unstuck and succumbed to postmodernity’s third-person flux, which Patrick can only experience as self-erosion” (383). It is at this point of the novel that Patrick refers to himself in third-person, as Shoene indicates. At the end of his answering machine message, Patrick states that he is a “pretty sick guy” (Ellis 352). Shoene further argues that Bateman’s violence is a case study for the “predicament of a particular type of man within a specific socio-historical context” (381). According to Shoene, Patrick’s insecurity exists because of a “massive epistemological paradigm shift” (381), one in which the previous gender-specific hegemony has collapsed. In other words, masculinity for Bateman no longer carries the same weight in the 1980s that it did in previous eras, thus causing a gender-based conflict within his social circle. As a result, Bateman unleashes “hyperbolic acts of violence, both real and imagined” (381)—to metaphorically suppress these social changes. While

it seems entirely plausible that Bateman's confessions are uttered and then ignored, at the same time, the violent acts themselves represent a fantasy—one in which Bateman can silence and oppress others, or force them into the submissive situations that he finds himself experiencing. Ironically, these fantasies separate him from the replicated identity of the other characters.

The descriptions of the violent acts work as a “parody of the slasher genre” (Cojocarú 187), thus indicating that the purpose of them is pure fantasy or entertainment, rather than realness. Ellis, in fact, has posited that Bateman “may in fact only be fantasizing about being a serial killer” (qtd. in Schoene 392). When he lures Bethany to his apartment, for example, he allegedly tortures and murders her. Yet, Bethany, a woman with a Black American Express card and significant ties to the community, is never reported missing. The chapter ends with Bateman returning to the comfortable stability of materialism when he screams at her: “And another thing . . . It's not Garrick Anderson either. The suit is by *Armani!* *Giorgio Armani!*” (247). He does the same thing later when he describes her decomposing body in his apartment—a building also inhabited by Tom Cruise—before moving on to his unreliable music review of Whitney Houston. After he allegedly murders Paul Owen of the infamous Fisher account, another high-standing member of society, the next chapter weaves together gross materialism—expensive ties as birthday presents—with an inability to emotionally handle or avoid Luis's sexual advances. Weinreich argues that Bateman murders to “discover something authentic, something remotely meaningful” (72). Weinreich further states that Bateman's “narration makes no stylistic distinction between endless lists of commodities and atrocious mutilation” (74). In contrast to Weinreich, Schoene suggests that it does not matter if Bateman “has only dreamt about murder” (389). Cojocarú posits that Bateman “tried to be acknowledged by society as a serial killer” (192) and that to read Bateman's murders as pure fantasy risks losing the most disturbing irony of the book: no one is interested in stopping people like Ellis's protagonist (194). It seems plausible that the answer rests between Weinreich, Schoene, and Cojocarú's arguments: the reality of the murders only matters in that it continues an established trend in the novel in which Bateman is an unreliable narrator who believes in nothing, but who cannot escape the exterior conflict arising from social change. Florian Niedlich argues, “Violence, for Bateman, is a way to sublimate his repressed feelings, needs, and drives” (230). Rather, fantasizing about murder gives him a sense

of control, while separating him from the other herd-like characters that are indistinguishable from one another.

The absence of a moral framework, or the psychological background that has created an alleged serial killer like Patrick Bateman, suggests that Bateman does not need one because his life as a serial killer is pure fantasy. If the murders are real, multiple opportunities exist in the novel to present a moral framework like Wallace does with Sick Puppy, namely in the “Sandstone” and “Birthday, Brothers” chapters. In “Sandstone,” for example, Bateman visits his mother but does not express any resentment or troubling emotions in response to her—a direct contrast to Sick Puppy’s childhood experiences with his father. In “Birthday, Brothers,” Sean’s success, evident in his managing to get a reservation at Dorsia, makes Bateman feel small and inconsequential: “if I were to disappear into that crack . . . No . . . one . . . would . . . care” (Ellis 226). Although Bateman resents his brother’s “coolness,” the chapter does not do anything more than describe sibling rivalry. Sonia Baelo Allué argues that “[i]nstead of blaming one isolated person Bateman becomes the reflection of the selfish eighties US society, a decade that saw the increase of the gap between social classes due to the cuttings in the federal budget” (21). Ellis does provide a context for Bateman’s emotional distance in other ways, however, by making him a representative of 1980s culture, when he states that

I was writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing. Everything was surface—food, clothes—that is what defined people. So I wrote a book that is all surface action; no narrative, no characters to latch onto, flat, endlessly repetitive. (qtd. in Freccero 51)

Trapped on the surface of things, Bateman repeats the same actions over and over again, never able to dissolve his identity and prepare for what Hicks calls the “ultimate revelation” (64), or the acceptance of Being and Nothing.

Both Wallace and Ellis create characters that either commit violent acts or dream about doing so. This difference between the two is characterized by the presence or absence of a moral framework. Fabre argues that Wallace lacks interest in psychological motivations (108); however, the fact that Wallace provides a moral framework for Sick Puppy’s behavior (his childhood) suggests otherwise. At the same time, in a 1993 interview with Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, Wallace explains that *Girl With Curious Hair* is “a very traditionally moral book. This is a generation that has an inheritance of absolutely nothing as far as meaningful moral values, and it’s

our job to make them up, and we're not doing it" (18). In contrast, Ellis has been taken to task by critics for not providing a moral framework for Bateman (Freccero 51), when in fact it is not necessary because the sole purpose of the novel is an examination of the superficial.

Again, the root of this difference centers upon the purpose of the texts for both Wallace and Ellis. Wallace wanted to write about the human condition, while Ellis focused on the surface of the human condition. In Ellis's novel, "pain becomes synonymous with meaning" (Niedlich 231) while everything else is surface. This tends to be a consistent trend in postmodern discussions of masculinity. In contrast to this emphasis in Ellis's novel, Wallace's willingness to be vulnerable seemingly irked Ellis, simply because of how that vulnerability contrasted with Ellis's cynicism. After all, Wallace had criticized Ellis in the past for lacking courage in his books (McCaffery 51). At the same time, *Sick Puppy's* toneless tale of depravity seems to be based on Ellis as a "flat, inhuman WASP personified" (Boswell 47). As Wallace once said, "I don't think there's a [writer] alive who doesn't make their books somewhat out of other books, and particularly ones they really like. The trick is to do this enough, and have enough of kind of your own stuff going on that when you're using things you're transfiguring it and making it your own" (Thompson 11). For Wallace, "fiction is a conversation" (Miller 62), one between reader and writer—a trait lacking in Ellis's fixation on the superficiality of the postmodern world.

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Film Genres after #MeToo: *Promising Young Woman* as a Rape-Revenge Film and a Rom-Com

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ABSTRACT

From 2017 on, the #MeToo movement has resulted in a set of new perspectives and narratives in cinema; narratives, which, so far, have only ever been presented from and for the point of view of the male gaze. A special case in this process is Emerald Fennell's 2020 directorial debut, *Promising Young Woman*. This essay argues that the film not only capitalizes on rape-revenge genre clichés, but it also relies on the tropes of romantic comedy traditions to give a sharp critique of the cultural climate that tolerates, denies, and normalizes rape. The subversion of the male gaze, the centrality of morality in revenge, and the avoidance of the spectacle of female suffering align *Promising Young Woman* with the rape-revenge genre. At the same time, the film's take on the Hollywood myth of the likeable and harmless "good guy" highlights the role of classical romantic comedy conventions in perpetuating rape culture. (ZSOR)

KEYWORDS: #MeToo, rape-revenge, romantic comedy, rape



15 October, 2017. American actress Alyssa Milano retweeted a friend's status: "Suggested by a friend: if all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem." Milano's tweet started a landslide with millions of women stepping forward, often after decades of silence, to talk about the humiliation and harassment they endured, which they had often perceived as a necessary condition of womanhood. As a result, film and other industries have been exposed as systematically overlooking such abuses of power, such as those of Harvey Weinstein's, and overall revealed a toxic work culture in all Hollywood. As Cobb and Horeck contend, "the post-Weinstein reckoning reverberates far and wide: there are key lessons to be learned regarding how other industries—in other countries—work to contest inequity and advance meaningful structural change" (Cobb and Horeck).¹ The #MeToo movement, however, not only reflected on the situation of women within the film industry, but it also functioned as an incentive to revisit how stories about women and by women are being told in film. As a result, in line with the zeitgeist, new perspectives are shown and new narratives are told in cinema; narratives, which, so far, have only ever been presented from and for

the point of view of the male gaze. These new stories, however, have to navigate in a culture that is based on the repetition of previous cultural patterns—in Fredric Jameson’s terms, a culture dominated by pastiche. The portrayal of party rape and the grey area of women being barely able to give consent is one such example of untold narratives, especially as it appears in the now half-century-old rape-revenge film genre. A special case in the history of the genre is Emerald Fennell’s 2020 directorial debut, *Promising Young Woman*, which, despite facilitating considerable discussion in online film journalism and inspiring a great number of opinion pieces in the media, has received very little academic attention so far.² Although the film, to a certain extent at least, fits what Claire Henry calls “revisionist rape-revenge” (2014), this article argues that *Promising Young Woman* uses and reuses the genre conventions of both rape-revenge and romantic comedy, while it also draws on the logics of pop culture as it appears in popular music and music videos to give a sharp critique of the cultural climate that tolerates, denies, and normalizes rape. In order to support that claim, I shall provide a close reading of *Promising Young Woman* in the light of both genres’ conventions, exploring how the film relies on its intertexts and, in general, how new narratives are being told in contemporary pastiche culture.

The title *Promising Young Woman* is clearly a reversal of a typical rape trial trope: “Why ruin the career of this promising young man over a stupid mistake?”—goes the line that leaves the perpetrator acquitted by peers, family, decision-makers, and media, altogether granting forgiveness at a societal scale.³ The plot of the film sets off ten years after a similarly typical case, a campus party, where a woman is drugged so much that she cannot give her consent and is therefore raped, but this time the story is told from a woman’s point of view. The once “promising young woman,” Nina Fisher is now dead; she committed suicide shortly after the case. The protagonist of the film is Cassie (Carey Mulligan), Nina’s best friend, who left university after the tragedy and now works in a café, and is unable to move on with her life. She lives with her parents and on her free nights she visits various bars, pretending to be completely drunk, waiting for a chivalrous man to “save” her. Invariably, the “good guy” tries to have sex with the semi-unconscious woman. At this point Cassie would reveal to the man that she is in fact very much sober and challenge him. This is when Ryan (Bo Burnham)—Cassie’s former university classmate, now a successful pediatrician—enters her life. While they slowly get closer to each other, Ryan’s stories about their university classmates wake something in Cassie, and she manufactures a more specific way to revenge her friend now that Nina herself is unable to do so.

She calls into account her former friend, who never supported Nina after the case, the dean who did not want to “ruin a young man’s life” (00.46.26) over a “he said, she said-situation” (00.45.28), and the lawyer who won the man’s case by digging up all the embarrassing details from Nina’s social media accounts to profile her as a frivolous, inebriate girl, whose alleged behavior was used by the jury to acquit the rapist. Finally, Cassie realizes that the perpetrator, Al Munroe (Chris Lowell), is now preparing to get married, and Cassie goes to the bachelor party where Al, in despair, suffocates her with a pillow. The rapist is arrested with murder charges at his own wedding.

***Promising Young Woman* as revisionist rape-revenge**

At first glance, the plot fits in with the rape-revenge genre conventions. The genre, navigating through the ripples of second-wave feminism, introduced the pop culture stock character of the violated woman who returns as an avenging angel (McCaughey 2001, 1).⁴ Rape-revenge was however framed as a low-prestige product marketed for an uneducated young male demographic. Contemporary reception is well illustrated by Roger Ebert’s review of the now-cult classic *I Spit On Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978):

It is a movie so sick, reprehensible and contemptible that I can hardly believe it’s playing in respectable theaters . . . This movie is an expression of the most diseased and perverted darker human natures. Because it is made artlessly, it flaunts its motives: There is no reason to see this movie except to be entertained by the sight of sadism and suffering.

The main reason behind Ebert’s disdainful opinion might be that the genre can be understood as an extreme realization of Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze. According to Mulvey, mainstream cinema operates with what she calls narcissistic scopophilia (17), that is, the double pleasure of seeing one’s likeness and enjoying the sight of the female shape. She identifies a gendered division between the active and passive roles of men and women respectively (19), contending that “the male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action” (20). In Mulvey’s understanding, (male) spectators necessarily identify with the perspective of the active male protagonist and indulge in the pleasure of watching the female one. Rape-revenge tradition is fundamentally interested in turning the vulnerable female body into a spectacle, which is still true even if the protagonist is female and the second half of the said films capitalizes on the joy of watching violent female revenge. In *I Spit On Your*

Grave the notorious group rape scene takes up to 34 minutes altogether, urging the spectator to identify with the perspective of the rapists, while the fragile female body remains a spectacle in the second, “revenge” part of the film.

According to Claire Henry, the rape-revenge genre has well-identifiable markers: a young white woman, who is turned from a half-naked victim to a revengeful femme fatale wearing fetish clothes and red lipstick; a two-part structure concluding on the transformative power of violence (rape and revenge), gang rape, castration (4), and a Christian iconography. These features are not only present in “classic” rape-revenge films but are also well identifiable in what Henry calls “revisionist rape revenge films.” These latter pieces are often directed by female directors to display the feminine point of view; they experiment with turning around the appropriating and sexualizing male gaze, and contemplate the morality of revenge inasmuch as it provokes a “cycle of vengeance” (Henry 6). *Promising Young Woman* does play with these genre markers, which is clearly visible in the trailers and the one-liner of the movie posters: “Take her home and take your chances.” Similarly, reception has been quick to use rape-revenge as a frame of understanding the film. *The Guardian’s* review, for example, concludes that “[t]he film has been billed as a thrilling revision of the tired rape revenge drama, a #MeToo romp that relishes comeuppance for self-justifying bad men” (Horton).

The opening scene situates the film in the paradigm of reverse male gaze, which is characteristic of the revisionist rape-revenge genre. The film opens with a montage composed to Charlie XCX’s song, “Boys,” starting with the medium close up of middle aged, sweating, paunchy men, first concentrating on their crotch area, then moving on to a metonymic display of the men having fun: hands holding beer, fragments of male faces licking their lips, stained shirts lolling out of the belt. Already at this point, the montage looks comical as it uses the toolkit that is generally used to depict attractive female bodies, similarly to the music video of the very same song, presenting “boys” lifting puppies, posing with water-guns, and pillow-fighting, without any image of the singer herself. After a cut, the music is muted by the general mumble of in-pub conversations, with a full-shot contextualizing the previous images: on the stage of what is presumably a bar, a group of heavily intoxicated office workers are dancing. It is not only the reversal of the oversexualized heterosexual male gaze that is subverted here, but also a foreshadowing of a hunter’s sober and sarcastic glance, as Cassie would evaluate her future preys.

In the rest of the scene the viewer encounters several white-collar workers, visibly less inebriated than the previous gang, who suddenly notice Cassandra, sitting-lying in a semi-crucified position, in an obviously heavily drunk state. One of them, Jerry (Adam Brody) goes to her “to see if she’s ok” (00.02.53), offers to call her a cab, but they magically end up in his apartment. Although he presumes the woman to be semi-unconscious, he offers her a huge glass of alcohol, while only spilling a sip to himself, then tries to have sex with the woman, who is lying with her arms spread, again evoking religious associations. With a menacing music in the background, the camera looks down at Cassie to show her eyes popping open, very clear, with an ironic half-smile on her face, asking: “I said what are you doing?” (00.07.36–00.07.40). The scene ends with a jump cut, omitting the exact action she took after revealing her sobriety.

The title appears with sparkling pink letters against a black background with glittery hearts: *Promising Young Woman*. The letters, evoking both ice cream and blood associations, start to run down, nodding to both genre traditions in question: the shiny rom-com world and the pulpy rape-revenge genre. Meanwhile, an adaptation of “It’s Raining Men” is on, which, similarly to “Boys” and almost all the theme songs of the film, focuses on this novel heroine of both popular culture and male fantasies: a strong woman, who is very much aware of her own sexual desires. Also, it should be noted that this specific adaptation is just as evocative of Geri Halliwell’s 2001 take on the song as the original version by The Weather Girls. In this sense it is similar to many soundtracks from the film, referencing the noughties—coinciding with the time when Nina and Cassie attended university; way before considerations of fourth wave feminism or #MeToo in general were present in public discourses. (See, for example, Munro.)

Behind the title Cassie appears on her walk home, in daylight, presumably the morning after. The film still maintains the equivocality of revenge, already giving a glimpse into the image of the femme fatale, which is key to the finale of the film. The camera tilts to look at Cassie from her naked feet through her high heels in her hand, her shirt lolling out of her skirt, up to the blood-like red substance running down her arm, resting on a close shot of her face, while she is munching on a hot dog with visible pleasure. The scene plays spectacularly with viewers’ expectations, which are obviously shaped by the realization that, based on the introductory scene, *Promising Young Woman* belongs to the rape-revenge genre. The playfulness of the symbolism—the ketchup on her arm looking like blood and the obvious phallic connotations of the hot dog sausage—underline the same idea. The

camera zooms out into a full shot of Cassie walking, and the film continues with an episode that happens quite frequently to urban women. A group of construction site workers start to catcall her: “Walk of shame! Good time last night, sweetheart?” (00.08.42–00.08.46). Cassie however does not react the way most women would: she does not try to cast her head down and flee the area, attempting to become unnoticed and invisible, as a person in actual shame would. Instead, she stops and returns the gaze. The workers still attempt to urge her to smile, but slowly they start to feel awkward, then threatened, and casting their heads down, they walk away. Besides a very explicit turning over of the male gaze, this scene also depicts Cassandra as a powerful, destructive force, which is also underlined by the moving magnet crane collecting metal junk, which appears in the long shot framing Cassie.

In addition to scrutinizing the mechanics of the male gaze, a frequent trope in revisionist rape-revenge—taken over from classic rape-revenge pieces—is that rape is usually committed by a gang or a group of male friends, and the rapists are habitually depicted as repulsive, their portrayal building on race and class-based stereotypes (Lehman 107). This is where the explicit impact of the #MeToo movement can be best traced in *Promising Young Woman*; while the rape itself was committed by one single man, the revenge is by definition targeted against many. In addition to “good guys” like Jerry, Cassie takes revenge on actual actors in Nina’s case: Madison (Alison Brie), their female friend, who still maintains her view that if someone acts like that, it is no wonder something bad happens to her; Dean Walker (Connie Britton), who took Munroe’s side; the lawyer who represented the man (Alfred Molina), and the perpetrator himself. It is important to remember that two of the four people are heterosexual women,⁵ which already supports one of the main claims of the film: as opposed to classic rape-revenge, rape is not a gang crime here, but a societal one. It accuses not only the actual perpetrator but the entire rape culture, the society that endures, excuses, understates, and normalizes rape.

The revenge of the rom-com

Buchwald et al. define rape culture as follows:

A complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to

rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm (Buchwald et al. viii; qtd. in Rentschler 66).

Promising Young Woman suggests that the entire society is complicit in letting such crimes happen: the ones who, with their decisions, allow for these to be committed, but also the ones who tolerate them, who are willing to look the other way. The film's main perpetrators, contrary to classic rape-revenge narratives, cannot be excluded from the social normality, or framed as abject. These are not the rednecks in dirty pants from *I Spit on Your Grave*, shown from a distinctly urban perspective. This time it is the "good guys"—white, urban, well-groomed, educated people, reliable-looking enough for anyone to ask for their help. Casting also underlines the idea that these "good guys," who invariably expose their impure intentions, were cast from "likeable beta-comedy darlings," as a Twitter user puts it (qtd in Bradley). Adam Brody (*The O. C.*), Max Greenfield (*New Girl*), Christopher Mintz-Plasse (*Superbad*), Sam Richardson (*Veep*), Chris Lowell (*Glow*), and Bo Burnham (*Eighth Grade*) tend to play nice, funny, attractive male protagonists in a selection of romantic comedies that the target audience is probably familiar with (Wittmer).⁶

The film's chilling realization—and probably greatest strength—is that it is not only the rape-revenge genre that reflects on rape culture, but rom-com traditions also belong to (and represent) the very same twisted social order. The casting of the male protagonists and the narrative arch of the film equally support this idea. Regarding its structure, *Promising Young Woman* does not follow rape-revenge logics. The genre, by definition, employs a two-part structure with a central, cathartic turning point: the first half deals with the rape itself, while the second half is about the victim or someone standing for her (her husband, or father) feeding on the traumatic memory to revenge the perpetrator. This structure, therefore, makes it unavoidable to frame violent action against the female body as cathartic and transformative, and result in the fantasy of the strong, seductive, avenging angel and the pleasure of vengeance as a spectacle. In *Promising Young Woman*, none of that happens; in line with Amanda Spallacci's observation, there is a considerable shift from the representation of rape scenes to that of rape traumas. Here the violence took place years before the story begins; it is by no means portrayed as liberating, but as clearly traumatic, as it breaks the lives of both Nina and Cassie into two. The lack of the two-part structure makes the film more comparable to those of romantic comedies than rape-revenge films.

Tamar Jeffers McDonald defines romantic comedies as films driven by the desire to find love, whose pursuit is presented in a light tone, almost always with a happy ending (9). In spite of the new academic interest in the genre in the last decades (see Mortimer, Kaklamanidou, Deleyto, Filippo, Henry, and Guilluy), the genre is still treated with slight contempt: “saying you like romantic comedies is essentially an admission of mild stupidity” (Kaling, qtd. in Kaklamanidou 1). The revulsion might be explained by the viewers’ overt familiarity with the genre’s panels: such is the urban environment, the “meet cute”—a funny first encounter of the lovers to be, the “masquerade” in which one (or both) of the couple pretends to be something other than themselves, a public humiliation of one of the lovers to confess their feelings, a love montage composed for a popular song, breaking up and making up, a failed wedding, and of course the happy end that unites the lovers (Jeffers McDonald 118). However, as Betty Kaklamanidou emphasizes, all this works only “in a sociopolitical environment which does not seem to cause any serious problems to their evolving and/or already formed relationship” (8).

As Maria San Filippo and others point out, more recent examples of the genre from the 2010s seem to break with the original formula and the ideological disposition that it entails, rendering it more diverse and suited for contemporary audiences (Filippo 22). The 1990s and 2000s, however, witnessed a flourishing of neo-traditional rom-coms (36); and this is the genre variation that *Promising Young Woman* uses. Just like in the soundtracks, the 2000s is evoked as a point of reference. In *Promising Young Woman*, variations on all the rom-com tropes mentioned appear; the first encounter of Cassie and Ryan, for instance, is a classic meet cute. Cassie works in a café, and Ryan, her former classmate recognizes her. With an unfortunate phrase he implies that selling coffee is inferior to healing. As an apology, he offers that she can spit in his coffee, which she does. Ryan, while maintaining eye contact, drinks the liquid. The theme song of the scene, “Nothing’s Gonna Hurt You Baby” by Cigarettes After Sex also underline the (false) sense of safety provided by handsome romantic comedy heroes: “Nothing’s gonna hurt you baby/As long as you’re with me you’ll be just fine.”⁷ These lines uncomfortably resonate with what Jerry tells Cassie at the beginning while trying to have sex with the (to his knowledge) almost unconscious woman: “It’s ok, you’re safe.”

The reason why viewers do not primarily understand *Promising Young Woman* as a rom-com can be identified by Kaklamanidou’s warning about the scale of obstacles. A happy end for Cassie is not possible because she herself

as a traumatized subject is not ready for that, but it is also inconceivable because rape culture frames their love story. According to rape-revenge clichés, the female protagonist, most often than not, leaves behind her usual urban milieu and experiences the traumatizing rape scenario(s) in a rural area that is foreign and hostile to her (Clover 160–65). *Promising Young Woman*, however, with the exception of the ending, takes place in a city—as it would be expected from a romantic comedy. This is a significant shift, because in the rape-revenge genre the *lex talionis*, that is, the eye for an eye principle is used in a city-countryside axis, which helps to fix the order of the world (Young 46): once revenge is taken, the woman can safely return to civilization where she is once again safe. The fact that the film does not maintain this protective dichotomy between city and country results in the realization that the refined, cultured urban spaces will lose their innocence too. Similarly to casting considerations, the use of rom-com panels is more successful in destabilizing any false sense of safety in the viewer than openly violence-focused rape-revenge films.

Masquerades, as known from romantic comedies, that is, scenarios where one of the lovers pretends to be something other than herself or himself, also appear in *Promising Young Woman*, but with a twist. A prerequisite of Cassie's night-time hunting trips is that she is not simply dressed up pretty or even in a “provoking” fashion, but that each time she goes out; she embodies a certain character. These are maybe girls and women she knows to have gone through the same ordeal, or just ideal types who might as well find themselves in a situation when a “good guy” runs to their rescue: the office worker, the hippie, the Lolita, and the hot disco babe equally get their turns in a sort of menacing danse macabre. Cassie's day-time and night-time appearance is visibly different: her nocturnal characters, although very diverse, invariably wear dark and monochrome tones, while day-time Cassie usually wears girly-romantic clothes with pastel colors and floral patterns. Parallel to that, her usual spaces—her parents' house and the café—along with her nail polish also echo the candy color aesthetics, what Fennell herself calls a kind of “feminine uncanny”: “a world that feels familiar and safe and feminine until it isn't” (Bastién), a world that gives a false sense of safety until it reveals its inherent hostility.

When Ryan runs into the seemingly completely inebriated, barely walking Cassie in a bar, supported by a random man, their encounter is followed by yet another rom-com trope: an honest apology (although no explanation) and then making up. As director Fennell points out, “day-time Cassie” is just as much of a mask as her night-time version, but the latter is

supposed to suggest: “I’m functioning. I’m sweet and easy-going and I’m happy and you don’t need to ask me any questions” (Mitchell). At the same time, by the end of the film it also becomes apparent that Ryan is also wearing a mask. Cassie realizes after watching the video of Nina’s rape that Ryan was there, laughing with the rest of the people at the party. When she finds it out, it is also followed by a tearful apology and a confession of his feelings. Cassie, however, contrary to rom-com heroines, does not fall into his arms and has no intention to forgive.

The power of kitsch and the logic of repetition

Romantic comedies tend to illustrate mutually acknowledged, budding romance with love montages appealing to the viewers’ genre memory, and this is what *Promising Young Woman* also capitalizes on. The montage starts off with Ryan and Cassie’s first trip to the pharmacy. The camera loiters over a postcard with two crowned Persian cats against a pink background, saying “I Love You.” Meanwhile, the viewer hears Ryan remarking on the significance of the two of them visiting such an everyday place together. The pharmacist’s radio plays Paris Hilton’s “Stars Are Blind,” another early 2000s hit; first Ryan starts lip-syncing and dancing, and Cassie later joins in with the shocked shop assistants and customers looking on. As the music moves from the diegetic to the extradiegetic level, the montage also features the new couple eating pizza with Cassie’s boss Gail (Laverne Cox), then, presumably, in Ryan’s bed, suggesting that their relationship now includes sex. As in most other cases in the film, popular music is used in an allegorical role. Even the choice of the song is telling: Paris Hilton’s only hit, contrary to the rest of the songs that were selected for the film, is not about a woman embracing her sexuality, but a feminine desire for a monogamous, romantic relationship.

However, the music video that was created for the song gives a very different perspective on the meaning of the lyrics, especially in the context of the film. In the video, Hilton plays a photo model starting a liaison with her photographer. The first half of the music video focuses on the romance that is budding in a paradisiac setting, on a white sand beach. The singer, while photographed, maintains eye contact with the man and hence with the viewer too, unambiguously positioning the audience as heterosexual and male. In the last minute of the video the model gets hold of the photographer’s camera, taking pictures of the lying man and kneeling above him, as a clear reversal of the iconic Verushka-scene in Antonioni’s *Blowup* (1966). Unarming the man as such, she steals his car keys from his back pockets, and, at the

conclusion of the video she happily drives away in his car, alone. Based on the logic of the music video, therefore, both the gaze and the agency are possessed by the female subject who acquires both by offering herself as the object of the gaze—quite similarly to how Cassie “hunts” at the beginning of the film. The music video, as a possible context in which to understand the film, foreshadows that the romantic plotline cannot be maintained in a convincing fashion. Like the cat postcard, it is framed as kitschy, empty, and, to a certain extent, insincere.

The way the song from the pharmacist’s radio moves to a non-diegetic level through lip-syncing and becomes a theme song for the montage reveals how the film believes popular culture works. Both the postcard and the music build on empty, deictic phrases, that is, the instability of the freely substitutable nature of first and second person singular personal pronouns. This empty deixis in turn makes it possible to imagine an interpersonal relationship; the postcard, for instance, offers the position of “I” from “I Love You” to anyone who is willing to purchase it. In popular music, the viewer/listener can take either the position of the “I” or the “you.” The very same idea is manifested in music videos by popular female artists, where the singer, looking at the camera, takes the first person singular position of the lyrics and unmistakably allocates the position of the “you” to a heterosexual male viewer. The lip-syncing scene of Cassie and Ryan underlines the logic of kitsch in operation in popular culture. Based on that, the participants of a romantic relationship can be substituted by anyone; the lure of popular culture is that everyone can find love, that it can happen to *you, too*. *Promising Young Woman* seems to re-read and twist that statement in the light of the #MeToo movement: it is not only love, but also rape victimhood, that can happen to anyone. This way, the temptation of the rom-com genre is transformed into the barely veiled threat of rape culture; bodies are freely substituted with each other, which is not only the appeal, but also the dark side of popular culture.

Revenge and repetition

This interchangeability of bodies, in fact, results in a kind of narrative repetition that echoes the obsessive repetition of memories in a traumatized person. *Promising Young Woman* does not use the iconic language of trauma that relies on “flashbacks, dreams, and other intrusive repetitions” (Leys 93; referring to Caruth) to present Cassie as a character suffering from post-traumatic symptoms. Broadly speaking, the film is not interested in the representation of individual traumas. Instead, it does present how the means

of the vengeance Cassie undertakes seem to habitually repeat the deed itself, but this time changing the actors. Her hunting trips that maniacally follow the same pattern also support this idea. Her first act of revenge, for example, against Madison, her former schoolmate, replays the original events. As they get together and Madison gets jovially day-drunk (Cassie pretends to drink champagne with her but in fact she sticks with ginger), Cassie commissions a man to take her to a hotel room and pretend to have had sex with her—very much like how Nina could have felt. Dean Walker is revenged by pretending to kidnap her daughter and telling her that the girl is in the room of a group of very reliable, promising young men, probably offered some alcohol—also similarly to Nina’s tragedy. Traumatic repetition is by definition unreflected, leaving the victim unable to interpret or integrate it into her own narrative about herself. Here this is not the case: Cassie’s decisions and her acts of revenge are very much the products of a sober and rational mind. “I cannot begin to tell you how much I’ve thought about this” (01.21.01–01.21.04) she tells Ryan at one point. The cycle of traumatic repetition is transformed into the cycle of violence that is so often criticized in rape-revenge films.

The film’s final act of revenge at the bachelor party, where Cassie confronts the rapist himself, also starts off with a similar premise of interchangeable bodies: striptease. This time, Cassandra is admittedly in a costume, wearing a fetish nurse dress as a bitter reference to her failed medical career and quite in line with rape-revenge narratives, pretending to be the stripper one of them paid for. After showing up in the cabin, she drugs the participants, then reveals her identity to Al Munroe, already handcuffed to a bed. As she attempts to use a scalpel to carve the name Nina Fisher all over the man’s body, the terrified Al frees one of his hands and chokes Cassie to death with a pillow. At this point the film visibly reverts the voyeuristic position offered by the rape-revenge genre, which forces the audience into an alleged enjoyment of the sight of violence against women. It consistently avoids any visible and overly sexualized provocation of the male gaze: for instance, when Cassie watches the video about Nina’s rape, the camera only shows her reaction, excluding any possibility of sexual fantasies and only allowing for empathy from the viewers. In the choking scene, however, Cassie’s agony is shown for more than three minutes, but the representation completely lacks erotic overtones. Her face is not visible because of the pillow pushed against her head, it is only her whimpering that is heard. The only movement that grabs the eye is her hand and feet gradually losing strength to resist. The focus of the camera is not on Cassie, but on Al Munroe, who, in a milieu suggesting extreme masculinity, with the embroidered “Yee-Haw”

on the wall, is crying and moaning, with one hand still tied to the bed, waiting for Cassie to die. This image gives no space to sadistic power fantasies and by no means does it encourage the spectator to identify with his perspective. Joe (Max Greenfield), Al's best friend, when faced with the situation, at first tries to joke it away: "You killed the stripper at your bachelor party? What is it, the '90s?" (1.37.50–1.37.52), evoking yet another genre, the 1990s teen comedy.

Joe offers to help Al get rid of the body. This act is presented in a minute-long sequence that seems to satirize public discourses acquitting rapists. After Joe hugging and consoling the still handcuffed Al in the cabin, reassuring him that "You did nothing wrong. This is not your fault" (01.39.35–01.39.37), the audience is presented an aerial/establishing shot of a valley in the forest, with the sun shining against the camera in warm, golden tones over a trail of smoke. At the same time, "Something Wonderful" from the 1956 musical *The King and I* starts to play—a song that is very different from the other musical choices of the film. On the one hand it is decades older than the rest of the soundtrack, on the other hand, more importantly, this is the only theme song of the film that, although sung by a woman, does not speak from a strong and self-conscious female position; it does not even have a grammatical first-person singular speaker. While images of Al and Joe standing over Cassie's pyre are played, with Joe watching over the scene stoically and Al struggling with guilt and nausea, the lyrics go as follows: "This is a man who thinks with his heart / His heart is not always wise / This is a man who stumbles and falls / But this is a man who tries // This is a man you'll forgive and forgive / And help protect, as long as you live / He will not always say / What you would have him say / But now and then he'll say / Something wonderful" (1.39.48–1.40.54). The lines that originally referred to King Mongkut of Siam, now recontextualized as a theme song for destroying Cassie's body as evidence, can be understood as an ironic take on how society seems to unconditionally forgive "promising young men," even if they are right in the act of burning a body.

The finale of the film, once again, is better understood from the genre of romantic comedies than from that of rape-revenge. A failed wedding in a romantic comedy means the preventing of a somehow flawed unity, eventually resulting in the true lovers finding each other. In *Promising Young Woman*, however, the wedding takes place after Ryan and Cassie break up, what is more, after Cassie's death. Al and Anastasia say their marriage vows, but during the reception, Ryan receives a pre-scheduled text message from Cassie: "You didn't think this was the end, did you?" while Juice Newton's

“Angel of the Morning” starts to play.⁸ As the police arrests Al Munroe for murdering Cassandra Thomas, her messages keep arriving: “Now it is. Enjoy the wedding! Love, Cassie&Nina :-).” The wink emoji that closes Cassie’s lines right before the final credits can be understood as a playful take on the frequent closing image of rape-revenge films with the avenging female protagonist looking into the camera in a defiant fashion. Still, it seems that Cassie’s message rather rereads rom-com wedding conventions: triumphant music together with the “Cassie&Nina” signature suggests that the desired revenge and unity, from the perspective of Cassie, did actually happen.

This unity is once again rooted in the concept of interchangeable bodies, but at a different level. As already pointed out, Cassie takes revenge in Nina’s stead. She literally takes her place, which is also strengthened by the half of the heart-shaped medal worn by Cassie, reading “Nina.” When her body is finally incinerated, the only thing that is left is the medal, identifying Cassie as Nina. Considering their special relationship, the one faded childhood photo of the two of them—two indistinguishable, smiling blond girls—together, and the repeated claims of both Nina’s and Cassie’s parents that the girls were “like daughters” to them, Nina and Cassie can easily be regarded as two sides of the same person, at the very least, at a symbolic level. After the rape and the humiliation, part of her really did die, as Nina did, but part of her tried to move on, to no avail, before she finally sought revenge. The much-discussed and controversial ending of the film is of course utterly dissatisfying if one expects “a moment of triumph” (Bastién), which is invariably provided by rape-revenge films. But if one considers it as a twisted take on the wedding trope of romantic comedies, it can be turned into a statement about how traumas can never be fully resolved: working through a traumatic experience is a painful and, in most cases, unfinishable process.

Empty spaces in popular culture

The fact that the #MeToo-movement was born in the all-permeating culture of pastiche means that it has to search for its own novel means of expression in the empty spaces that are created and opened up by existing pop culture. This sense of pastiche culture permeates *Promising Young Woman*—Cassie can only avenge Nina by taking specific ready-made roles, echoing well-known scenarios; pop music in the film works with the interchangeability of kitsch, and the radical question the film raises comes hand in hand with the recycling and re-weaving of the traditional web of

genres. *Promising Young Woman* visibly capitalizes on the tropes of both rape-revenge and romantic comedy traditions. One can certainly argue for it being a special case of revisionist rape-revenge—the spectacular subversion of the male gaze, the centrality of morality in revenge, and avoidance of the spectacle of female suffering all seem to support this case. However, the integrity of urban, civilized, modern life is way more threatened by the way Fennell frames the ever-present, but often silenced or ignored phenomenon of rape with the genre of romantic comedy. The Hollywood myth of the likeable and harmless “good guy,” the regularity and normality of funny romance stories based on mutual deception, a popular culture soaking in a sexualized vision of violence all contribute to many promising young women posting a status update: “Me too.” Their tales are as old as time, but they were muted before the 2010s.

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Notes

In 2022, a considerably shorter version of the present paper was published in Hungarian; see O. Réti.

1. At the same time, there is a newfound academic interest in the impact of the movement pertaining to the film industry (Verhoeven, Coate, and Zemaityte; Cobb and Horeck)

2. At the time of submitting this paper, the only research paper dealing with the film is York's 2021 study.

3. Probably the most well-known example is Brock Turner's 2016 case, who was habitually referred to by the media as the “Stanford swimmer” even after he was proven guilty and sentenced. See: LaChance 2016.

4. Claire Henry gives a convincing case of rape-revenge films considered as a genre. See Henry 2014.

5. In both cases, the film clearly emphasizes the fact that they are mothers.

6. In addition, in the case of Burham, his image of a “good guy” mostly originates from his satirical stand-up comedies from the early 2010s on.

7. The very same theme song is quite frequently used in contemporary film and television (including *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Shameless*, and *Big Little Lies*), regularly suggesting a sort of longing for less complicated times.

8. The lyrics of the 1981 song depict a then taboo extramarital relationship from the perspective of the woman. The words in this context might be read as an admission of deliberate death: “There is no need to take a stand / For it was I who chose to start / I see no need to take me home / I'm old enough to face the dawn.” At the same time, the angel symbolism of the lyrics might also evoke the figure of the avenging angel.

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“Nobody Can Be Vulgar All Alone”: The Power of Shame in *Broadchurch*

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ABSTRACT

Through positing shame as inherent in women’s sexual development, this article explores the screen representations of sexually abused female survivors/victims by focusing especially on the articulation of their selfhood. It interrogates the representation of rape narratives in the television series *Broadchurch* (Amazon 2017) by focusing primarily on the visual culture and visual texts as social texts. Using an intersectional perspective informed by such disciplines as feminism, film and television studies, body politics, trauma studies, and psychology, it also intends to prepare women to be media critical and question the effects of the heavy penetration of popular culture into their lives. The notion of selfhood developed in this article emphasizes embodiment, agency, conscience, and the inextricable relationship between self and other. (AF)

KEYWORDS: Shame, rape, TV series, the Other, guilt, the female body, being-looked-at



Introduction

Broadchurch (2017) is a British crime-drama series produced and directed by Chris Chibnall and James Strong. The third season of the series centers on the sexual abuse investigation of Trish Winterman, a 49-year-old woman who was raped while being intoxicated. After publicly releasing details of Trish’s case, DI Alec Hardy and DS Ellie Miller discover that two other women in the small town of Broadchurch have also been assaulted by the same man over the last few years. One woman is eager to help and make a formal statement, whereas the other refuses to do so. Eight episodes follow step by step the work of the detectives and disclose the difficulties of being in an environment where everyone is a suspect, and shame and humiliation alternate interchangeably. This article grapples with the filmic investigation of female shame, and explores how it is manifested, performed, and experienced across different bodies, contexts, and images. It suggests a re-articulation of feminist theories of shame and regards the series as an attempt to restore female dignity through image making by offering a loving and accepting view of the self for the female subjects. I focus my analysis on the social complexities of honor culture, the dichotomous relationship between

shame and the Other,¹ and the differences between shame (as an intense sensation related to one's morals) and other social emotions, including embarrassment, humiliation, guilt, and so forth, as well as their role in preserving the social order.

Although other TV series such as *Orange is the New Black* or *Sex Education* focus on body positivity by bringing to the forefront stories that women's bodies carry, few producers identify shame, self-blame, and the recurring experience of social isolation that follow sexual abuse as predominant themes in visual culture. On the verge of activism promoted by #metoo, which re-visions women's perception of themselves and encourages them to "scream" for social justice instead of adopting the victim mentality. Strong and Chibnall render the abuse on screen in such a way that viewers are spared the traumatic images. The camera serves as an instrument which explores sexual violence in its full complexity, thus framing women's subjectivities instead of their naked bodies and the abuse they undergo. In the series, our understanding of the survivors' suffering is based solely on bits and pieces of personal memories by traveling back and forth with characters. Strong and Chibnall address female survivors as dominant narrative makers instead of ameliorating rape as a mere cinematic plot device. They intently portray female characters as three-dimensional humans by focusing on their faces at a close range and bringing their despair intimately close to viewers, rather than rendering them as villainous sexual manipulators.

Both filmmakers depend on the characters' faces for the alteration of the meaning of shame, "because the face is the seat of one's identity, and one wishes to conceal oneself during shame," writes Michael Lewis (37). This reliance on facial blushing as a symbolic manifestation and metaphor for shame comes from the message shame entails. As Sara Ahmed notes, the word *shame* signifies covering, which is why it is associated with words such as *hide*, *but*, or *house* (104). The impulse to cover oneself is intrinsically connected with the failure of the subject to provide concealment for oneself. Initially, Trish shames herself for being the "imperfect victim" and for failing to fulfill her "moral" obligations as a survivor. During her medical examination, she hides from the Other's gaze by turning her whole body away from the camera. She endeavors in some manner to hide by averting her gaze and dropping her head in a sensation more acute and intense than embarrassment. The very physicality of shame forces Trish to reform her body and the social space taken by it, as her body refuses to confront the gaze of the Other witnessing her pain.

Although shame is a personal and isolated emotion, it evokes a lot of relationality. In *Broadchurch* it is recognized as a channeled experience which determines and controls simultaneously the lives of the abused women and everyone else around them. In the series, it is discerned as the “dirt” which contaminates the entire English town: “[a]n act like this, it sullies everything. It sullies us all,” as Arthur Tamworth, the owner of the house Trish got raped in, remarks. The dichotomous relationship between shame and the Other gives meaning and significance to shame. The Other symbolizes a powerful and idealized subject because it is admired by the self. In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre, the acclaimed philosopher of emotions, reveals the limitations of shame-before-the-other through the example of the voyeur. He argues that shame makes one realize an intimate relationship to oneself, “discover an aspect of [one’s] being” (221).

When the Other describes my character, I do not “recognize” myself and yet I know that “it is me.” . . . This Me, which is not to be compared to the Me which I have to be, is still Me but metamorphosed by a new setting and adapted to that setting; it is a being, my being but with entirely new dimensions of being and new modalities. (274)

The Other conditions the feeling of self-negation, of the subject “being against itself,” which simultaneously communicates its own failure experienced before another. When an individual feels shame, one confers on the Other an indubitable, immense presence that supports and embraces shame on every side (Sartre 269). This hypothetical presence of the Other’s existence becomes probable because we believe that we are constantly looked at without this actually being the case.

After the assault, Trish locks herself in the house, hoping to avoid the burning presence of the outside world’s look. Since the rapist remains unidentified by the police, every man around her is viewed as a potential intruder, who could have caused the unspeakable shame. Dealing with an anonymous crime offender means that the dense presence of shame incited by the Other’s look cannot be reciprocal. Consequently, Trish chooses solitude and seclusion as the best way of trying to cope with the burden of shame.

The social complexities of shame

In his *Essays on Sexuality* (1896), Sigmund Freud observes the connection between erotogenic zones in one’s body and repressive forces

such as disgust, shame, and morality (xi). He refers to these forces as mental dams which try to determine the development of individuals' sexual instincts (28). Since shame is inherent in humans' sexual journeys (Jacoby 47), each individual has a unique developmental history of shame. In particular, mapping it in women's lives is challenging because violence and pleasure have proved interchangeable when accompanying their sexual journeys. Shame has been continuously used to justify violence, approach discomfort with less talk, and keep women's sexuality at bay.

Women's attachment to others' opinions intensifies their vulnerabilities toward shame. The only way for the shamed subject to liberate herself from the Other's critical look and from seeking constant validation is by recreating the self and reconstructing the inward gaze. As Aristotle points out in his *Rhetoric*:

We feel no shame before those upon whose opinions we quite look down as untrustworthy (no one feels shame before small children or animals); nor are we ashamed of the same things before intimates as before strangers, but before the former of what seem genuine faults, before the latter of what seem conventional ones. (Barnes 4728)

Since the Other represents the spectatorship, it is the Other who assesses and evaluates the shamed individual (Zahavi 216). People care what opinion is held of them because the people before whom they feel ashamed are those whose opinions matter to them.² Additionally, Sara Ahmed explains the ambivalence of shame as a response elicited by a scene that engages our interest, a particular interest in the one witnessing our shame as "someone who has already elicited desire or even love" (105). Thus, despite being a self-reflective emotion, shame emerges from internalizing peripheral social standards and rules.

Sartre affirms that nobody can be vulgar all alone (222). When conjugating shame with vulgarity, he describes non-verbal vulgarity as a shared experience because, as he says, "my vulgarity and my awkwardness surpass the body and refer to a witness capable of understanding them and the totality of my human reality" (222). Sartre's encircling use of gestural vulgarity as an all-encompassing experience is in fact a benevolent representation of this morally crude, lewdly, and "unregenerate" state of being.³ He reformulates vulgarism as an occurring incident, stimulated by systems of domination, which instantaneously associates vulgarity with immorality. Instead of confining one particular individual as socially degraded

and coarse, Sartre calls attention to the “banality of power” and communal decadence of the masses who “join in madness and clothe themselves in the flashy rags of power” (Mbembe 29). Through his critique, the existentialist philosopher exposes the constraints and limitations of systems of oppression which, by adopting a position of moral superiority, shame “one of their own.”

Some researchers focus on projecting shame as an important motivation in living a moral life, “a bonding mechanism that enables groups to withstand social difficulties” (Billig 23), rather than an obstacle. Additionally, Dolezal equates shame with belonging since it helps humans maintain the social connections necessary for their survival (422), and constitute “a shared understanding of circumstances similarly felt” (Fischer 838). Furthermore, Billig explains that the anticipation of “milder” emotions such as embarrassment ensures that one’s self-presentation recovers because it provides a means of repair when social interaction is threatened (25–28).

Due to the conflicting duality attached to the concept of shame, feminist writers have tried consistently to investigate and foster an understanding between the emotion itself and the way it culturally constructs and deconstructs the female body. Dianne Taylor differentiates gendered relations of power in two mutually exclusive modes of recognition, those of inferior women and dominant men. The role of shame is therefore to secure heteronormativity (Healicon 30). In *Sexual Violence and Humiliation*, Taylor explores women’s sexual humiliation as an indicator of women’s sub-humanity. By situating rape within the context of gendered power, she reflects on “the internalization of a broader view of oneself as subhuman” (48).

In her essay that appeared in *Talking Visions*, bell hooks construes the life journey of women based on a history of shame “written on the body we cannot erase” (65). Although she acknowledges the importance of the naked body as a powerful weapon of resistance against repression, hooks warns that the shameful and contrasting meanings attributed to nakedness are marked by gender and systems of social inequality, which force women to hide the femininity of their bodies, deny their existence, invent gestures of disregard, and live in a state of lonely abandonment (66). Likewise, Jessica Valenti affirms that starting from primitive culture, people believed that women’s bodies were in need of restrictions (97), and concludes that “shame inhibits identification” (84). By refusing to see themselves as people who are socially, morally, and legally stigmatized by the presence of others, other characters in *Broadchurch* easily disconnect and detach from Trish’s shame, and instead

“purify” their personal identities. Their fear of identification further isolates and restrains them by deepening feelings of alienation.

Although systems of social inequality provoke the invisibility of women’s bodies, some researchers argue that shame can be mediated because certain power-dressing manuals can command the social meanings attributed to their looks. From this privileged, “control room” position, women can garner more authority, sovereignty, and dominance on matters that concern their bodies. These manuals attempt to guide women on how to avoid potentially career-damaging wardrobe errors that construct their appearances as either too feminine and unprofessional, or too masculine and threatening in the eyes of their male colleagues (Edwards 573). This ongoing dichotomy between invisibility and shameful visibility drives women to mimic reductive masculine dress codes (the pantsuit),⁴ and encourages them to judge other women on account of what they wear. Admitting the necessity for power-dressing manuals remains problematic and precarious, because it constitutes women’s powerlessness and exposes their bodies to the risk of being a potential source of shame, as it is the Other who has most control over its meanings.

Contagious shame

Considering the everyday reality of neoliberal and conservative societies, it is not by coincidence that the female characters of *Broadchurch* are depicted as the shame-bearers, stuck in dysfunctional marriages with men who openly disrespect them and other systems of oppression that sustain their power imbalances. This part of the study focuses on the “contagious” effect of shame that bystanders (female and male) feel when witnessing the shameful behavior of those closest to them. *Broadchurch* foreshadows not only the emotional cost shame brings to all those involved, but also its irreparable damage to friendships and relationships.

The boundaries of shame and the definition of what is dignified vary widely from one individual to the other. So is the case with one of the most intriguing female characters of the third season, Lindsay Lucas, the downtrodden wife of the taxi driver Clive. Seemingly timid, Lindsay confesses to detectives Hardy and Miller that she married Clive sixteen years ago, when she was only nineteen, and that for the last ten years he has been unfaithful to her. Hanging in a loveless marriage for the sake of her son, Lindsay epitomizes the reality of many perplexed women in abusive relationships who abandon their identity and voice for the sake of a conventional family life. The internalized power imbalance between her and Clive, along with her

being excluded from any sexual fulfillment, alienates her from exercising her own sexuality and femininity, and instead leads her to no longer viewing herself as desiring and desirable. Leaving Lindsay's house, Hardy says: "You know what is bothering me about this case? It makes me ashamed to be a man" (Episode 3, 39:14–39:19).

Cath Atwood, Trish's best friend, has a bold personality and is much more forthcoming than Lindsay, yet she is also stuck in an unhappy, emotionally barren marriage with Jim, her cheating husband. She is ashamed of her husband's "weakness," as she refers to his disloyalty in Episode 5, yet is unable to abandon him. Cath was shattered when she found out about Jim having sex with Trish, her best friend, on the morning of her birthday. Her disappointment with Trish's deceitfulness and betrayal leads her to shame her friend. When referring to the sexual encounter between Trish and her husband, Cath says: "Christ, his standards have slipped. . . . Jesus, I never knew the smell of mildew turned him on" (Episode 5, 17:32–17:47). Cath and Trish, both in their fifties, belong to the generation of women who have gone through the process of degrading "one of their own," since this kind of rejection of other women would often grant an "entry ticket" for women aspiring to be male's favorites. Cath's anger and disturbance derive their intensity not only from Trish's hypocrisy and Jim choosing Trish over her, but from being deceived by them both.

Vengeance to Cath meant dishonoring Trish's aging body relentlessly by giving Trish looks of disgust and saying: "Here is what I do not understand. Of all the women at that party . . . why would somebody rape you? Does not make sense" (Episode 5, 19:32–19:46). She casts out her friend as unsuitable to be desired/raped and brings to light the complex issue of equating sexual abuse with sex and desire. Cath further justifies her reaction as morally appropriate and motivated by a demand for purity and freedom from the contamination shame brings. Thus, part of Cath's "healing journey" is projecting her own shame onto Trish, and the adoption of punishing practices of insult and scorn. This way, she imposes meanings on the desired body which fit into popular patriarchal discourses of aging, and filters out women like Trish who are just a "spur-of-the-moment," "a stupid mistake," and with whom men sleep out of pity. The controversy arises from the fact that Trish's aging body threatens Cath's self-confidence because it embodies the fear of how she might be perceived by the male audience. Cath's insecurities come to light when she converses with Ed Burnett after learning that Jim had sex with Trish. In this scene, a very vulnerable Cath asks for external validation:

Cath: Am I attractive, Ed?
 Ed: What?
 Cath: Come on. It is a simple enough question.
 Ed: Right, well, erm. . . I have to be careful, because as your boss, you know, sexual harassment laws. . .
 Cath: All right, look. If you did not know me, would you want to. . . to have sex with me?
 Ed: Well, yeah, probably,
 Cath: God, probably? Well, thanks for the ringing endorsement.
 Ed: All right, definitely! What sort of question is that, anyway?
 Cath: I do not know. I just. . . want to know if I am past it.” (Episode 5, 35:20–36:00)

Cath’s reliance on shame as a public motive encourages gendered social hierarchies. Based on narrowly defined and unattainable beauty standards, she marginalizes Trish’s body since she fails to be a prevalent representation of femininity. In their work about gender and aging, Deborah Jermyn and Su Holmes state that “in a youth-obsessed culture, the everyday lives and appearances of older people remain ‘Other’” (2). Thus, Cath masquerades and distances herself from her own shame by making Trish feel of a lesser worth, unfit of attention, and not “shame proper.”

Broadchurch has been praised for defying traditional representations of rape, though it does not resist dominant images of masculine norms. At first, Trish seems in control of her life. She is more determined regarding her marriage; once things stop working between her and her husband, she is brave enough to separate from him. Yet, the abuse disrupts that control and instead questions the moral life of the men living in the community surrounding Trish, since after the attack the police have to interrogate at least fifty men who attended the party. One of the characters who falls prey to the culture of shame is her husband, Ian. When the detectives ask him about his relationship with Trish, Ian states that

It is not very nice seeing the woman you used to be married to drunk and cavorting with a lot of strange men. I mean, by all accounts, she has slept with half a dozen blokes in the last few months. God knows how many of them were at the party. It is embarrassing. Technically, we are still married. (Episode 2, 23:23–23:50)

Through his monologue, Ian expresses his discontent regarding Trish's lifestyle. He admits to feeling humiliated and tries to encourage "age-appropriate" behavior for women. His conservative views on aging and Trish's life choices translate into sex being considered as a "need" primarily for men. By acting carelessly, Trish denigrates being his wife, which incites further anger and shame in Ian. Further in the series, Ian confesses installing a spyware on Trish's computer, claiming that through the camera he wanted to check on her because since their separation he has missed her. As an active participant of honor culture, he establishes important expectations of behavior toward Trish, and unconsciously confirms that it is her behavior which governs and "threatens" his masculine honor.

General discussions of sexual desire, according to the editors of *Gender and Aging*, marginalize men and women as "opposites," and reinforce conversations which regard male sexuality as active, whereas female sexuality is labeled as passive (Arber 69). In other words, the male sexual "urge" is seen as a natural force over which men could exert little control. Trish confounds the stereotype of the passive middle-aged woman by actively exercising and asserting her sexual desires. She reiterates misogynistic discourses which try to reshape and reform her sexuality based on the accepted social norms. By celebrating her life and sexuality, she defies her aging body.

The rhetoric of honor culture operates at such an abstract level that it manages to masterfully hide ambiguities, states Gilbert (258). In a study related to masculine honor, the author analyzes manhood as dependent on the perception of others, which needs to be continuously proven through public behaviors, otherwise it risks being lost (Chalman 2). Being a fundamentally social status, masculine honor cannot occur in a vacuum; it is "a man's claim on the world, the ultimate explanation for a man's choice" (Gilbert 277). The notion of honor is celebrated in Ian's behavior through it being intrinsically connected with his public reputation and public esteem: "if a man has lost his reputation, then he has lost his value in the eyes of all the members of the group, and this includes himself" (Gabriele Taylor 55).

Ian is not the only man in *Broadchurch* who jeopardizes Trish's privacy. Ed Burnett, the owner of the local farm shop where Trish worked, was stalking Trish for almost a decade. Detectives Hardy and Miller find on his phone 5,219 photos dating back ten years. When confronted about his unhealthy obsession, he professes his love for Trish and states that "I have told you how I feel about her. It is not against the law." Ed is clearly convinced that the pictures he possesses are romantic and that the detectives

are trying to manipulate the truth, deceive him, and turn the situation into something it is not.

The stereotypical image of manhood that Ed and Ian represent constructs a damaged, hierarchical, and dominant masculinity, which subjugates women to certain codes of behavior, and simultaneously widens the gap of gendered power inequalities in the show. Their acts not only foreshadow their insecurities about themselves, but also resemble Michel Foucault's metaphor of the Panopticon. Using the camera as a tool of exercising their power, Ian and Ed appear as "inspectors" from a privileged central location; their main intention is to monitor and "discipline" Trish. In this system of control, Trish resembles a powerless "prisoner," who is being observed without her consent.

Detective Hardy, on the other hand, represents a different side of the spectrum. Several times in the show, when witnessing different men abusing their power over their wives, their children, and the surrounding community, he states: "I am ashamed of being a man." He introduces a compassionate version of masculinity in the show,⁵ which tries to install healthier ideas about fatherhood and provide support for women. Yet, his generic statements about manhood can easily be misunderstood since, unconsciously, he glorifies and romanticizes himself by criticizing the behavior of other men. "The male ideal is so deeply seated within us that we buy it for our daughters," states Buchwald in her essay when referring to the ways adult culture is educating the young generation (198). We take the worst cultural stereotypes and replace them with role models for a more egalitarian world. Sympathizing with Hardy and what he represents does not justify shaming and demonizing Jim Atwood, Ian Winterman, Ed Burnett, and Clive Lucas, who do not conform to his standards of manhood. If we, as viewers, narrowly categorize men into two binary categories, then we are being too astigmatic. Thus, despite Hardy's persona as an avant-garde man with unquestionable respect for female characters in the show, it is not indicative of categorizing manhood in rhetorical and reductive classifications, such as "good versus bad" men. This would only provide myopic views of masculinity, but would also prevent everyone from analyzing the causes of shame these men from the community of Broadchurch mirror to these women. In turn, disregarding such binary categorizations would help us understand men's individualistic standpoints, and identify more broadly what incites women's shame while searching for solutions.

Shame of the deviant

Throughout history, the boundaries of what constitutes shame in women's lives are built upon women's bodies as bearers of a nation's identity. In a text written more than a century ago, Sigmund Freud condemns individuals who disobey the power of the community (*Civilization* 49), because community power constitutes civilization, and the cultural development of the individual is always interlocked with the cultural development of the group (107). The essence of sexual abuse lies in the fact that the abused individuals "fail" to refrain themselves from outside "contamination," and, as a result, end up with corrupted ethical values and morals.

Public trials against sexually abused women not only threaten them with disintegration and lack of privileges, but also serve as an opportunity for the community to channel its control and prevent anyone in the future from escaping adopted social and moral restrictions. Unfortunately, in most cases it is women more than men who are cast out as the "moral breakers" and shamed in the major sites of social life (Bartky 93). Let us now explore the shame that Trish, Nira, and Laura as women with subordinate identities experience, with a focus on the gendered implications of placing shame on them since it is their bodies that carry the risk of corrupting standards of morality.

Fischer identifies women's sexual purity as the essential and differentiating feature in the formation of the national identity of old Ireland. Women's bodies were deemed problematic since their potential impurity threatened nationhood (823). The sexual immorality of women and girls was understood through the prism of contagion, therefore the politics of shame operated by controlling their "polluted" bodies directly through physical and psychosocial confinement (Fischer 830–35). The institutionalization of women who dared to risk the moral purity of the nation was the only way to discipline their bodies. Likewise, Judeo-Christian mythology depicted women's desires as out-of-control, as sites of danger and disgust, which had to be controlled, in opposition to the male body, which was routinely represented as contained, controlled, orderly, and with definite boundaries (Wilz 81).

After the forceful invasion of their bodies, an overpowering system of domination is created which causes Trish, Laura, and Nira to feel intense pain, moral inadequacy, and unworthiness. Being the objects and the subjects of their own shame, these women experience that the boundaries of shame are inevitably fused and blurred. In the case of sexual abuse, body, face, and mind create separate discourses, which at first appear confusing, but shortly

intermingle and articulate one sole experience. The growing sense of inferiority discomforts the rape survivors of *Broadchurch* to the extent that it corrupts their views of themselves as individuals and leads to their submission. The physicality of shame gradually becomes apparent in the show through their bodily reactions. In most scenes, when communicating their abuse, all three of them limit visual contact by dropping their eyes, since, as Sedgwick argues, the self lives in the face and burns brightest in the eyes (136). Additionally, their heads, and sometimes the whole upper part of their bodies remain hunched to signal their longing for invisibility and desire to avoid the other person's face.

Within the large universe of patriarchal social relations, it is the harmonious relationship with the surrounding community which makes it difficult for rape survivors as “shame-existing subjects” (Zahavi 221) to separate “the inner from the outer shame” (Bartky 85). In the aftermath of her body's violation, Trish feels shame not only because of the importance of others in her life, but due to the judgment attached to the opinion about her prior to the assault. As she is a middle-aged woman, Trish's shame takes another form, especially upon learning that her rapist was an adolescent. The conflict she feels arises from the disruption of the “natural” order caused by someone her daughter's age, and her inability to defend herself from a teenage rapist.

Bringing the focus onto Trish in this way, through close-ups, the series invites viewers to consider her metamorphosis. At first, shame isolates her, but later on it is also shame that makes her socially astute by structuring and reshaping her relationships with those around her. Trish transforms herself from a passive, “imperfect” victim to an active survivor. This shift symbolizes her gratitude in seeking justice and saving other women in the community. Although guilt accompanies her in almost every episode at the beginning of the show, Trish's perception of herself gradually changes:

Cath: Look, I know you are not the same person you were before you were raped, but

Trish: I am more that person now than I have ever been. Now get out.

Cath: Fine.

Trish: No, no, no, no. Not that way. Not through my house. Back way. Slink out, like your husband did. (Episode 8, 36:13–36:32)

This conversation between the two childhood friends marks the end of their friendship. The viewers witness Trish's “destruction,” her burst into the

flames of her own shame, then her rebirth. She experiences a powerful renewal and is reborn from her ashes like the mythical Phoenix. A confident Trish breaks free from the shame and all the other social stigmas which accompanied her throughout her journey. At the end, she appears unapologetic, keeping her head high with a confident posture, leaving all the ghosts of the past behind, and ready to embark on the next stage of her life.

The character of Nira represents a girl who refuses to make a public statement or report the assault to the local authorities as it is difficult for her to deal with the fallout and the perceived stigma. She shares her story of abuse with sexual violence advisors only. It is impossible to make an assessment about the shame Nira experiences without recognizing the power dynamics involved. Her sense of self-worthlessness begins with her internal “deficiency” as a representative of a minority group deprived of racial privileges, and expands to the external shame she is expected to endure because of engaging in “morally inappropriate behaviour.” Her words, “If I report it, I have to tell my family. And they will be upset. And they will tell others and . . . to all those people, I will forever be the girl that was raped” (Episode 6, 13:23–13:28) reveal that she is afraid of others jeopardizing her identity. Nira is aware that if people around her learn about the sexual abuse, her perception of herself would be transformed. In order to control the distribution of her power, she stays silent, resists public surveillance, and prevents others from viewing her exposed, vulnerable self.

While recalling the assault, Nira turns pale. Her eyes freeze, her face trembles, and she gets defensive because she believes that she is further shamed for choosing not to disclose the details of her attack to the authorities. In her conversation with the Independent Sexual Violence Advisor, Nira feels judged because others have tried to inhibit her opportunity for self-determination by not respecting her decision and boundaries. Her testimony would serve as a reciprocal transaction for opportunities for justice by the bureaucratic system, therefore, her abuse is not considered as a personal matter but rather as a public one, and as a result, her empowerment is not articulated. Nira embodies all those survivors whose refusal to disclose details of the assault reflects that they are not entitled to continuous support; consequently, very little attention is dedicated to them.

Edwards views women’s proneness to shame as an important component of their continued oppression and argues that “one reason why women appear to be particularly shame-prone is because the feminine body “is always, potentially at least, a sexual body,” which means that regardless of their intentions, women are liable to become visible as sexual beings (572).

He further analyzes clothing as an important trigger of shame for women, as it fails them in ways it cannot fail men. Additionally, Sedgwick parallels clothing with veiling one's genitals. He refers to the biblical story of Adam and Eve and says that everything changed for humankind when in the Garden of Eden, Eve ate the forbidden fruit, representing the immoral. After Eve's indulgence, in Genesis 3:7, Adam and Eve had to sew fig leaves to cover their nakedness. Being naked made them both conscious of their bodies and also exposed them to feelings of guilt, shame, and unworthiness, hence the fig leaves to cover their nakedness. So is the case of Laura Benson, who in her interrogation by one of the detectives, says:

Alec: Did you speak to anyone about the attack at the time?

Laura: My GP. A week or two after. She told me I should report it. I told her I did not want to. I did not tell anyone. Till now.

Alec: Why didn't you want to report this at the time?

Laura: I know what happens. I read the papers. I had had a lot to drink. I mean, a lot. Plus, short skirt. Nice top. Make-up. You think I do not know what they would do to me? I know how women like me get treated.

Alec: Not by us. (Episode 5, 03:36–04:13)

The short dialogue between distressed Laura and Detective Hardy confirms that clothing for women is bound up with protection. Laura thought that dressing more conservatively would effortlessly provide her with invisibility in the eyes of the rapist, hence more power and control over her body. She feels guilty because she accepts and favors the moral demands of the community around her, and limits her own. As Freud describes, this helplessness and desperation that comes with guilt is internalized by the shamed individual to the extent that a fear of loss of love is foreshadowed (85). At the same time, her shame-anxiety over clothing is connected with a fear of being shamed through one's own fault, "one's own carelessness, adverse circumstances" (Jacoby viii). In the aftermath of rape, Laura's intimacy with herself is interrupted as she feels polluted and believes that the chosen outfit was the catalyst that incited the abuse. Although the victim's clothing should be inadmissible if introduced to show that she welcomed or consented to the sexual abuse, courts have considered clothing to be probative, relevant evidence.

The silent protest of all women of the community of Broadchurch in Episode 8 embodies remarkably not only their resistance to shame but also their defiance: these women vociferously manifest each-others' vulnerabilities

in a way which ensures they are all heard, believed, and their truths are ascertained. Such gestures of solidarity not only limit the manifestation of prevailing responses to sexual violence, but also function as commitments to “acknowledge, validate, and support the disclosure of other victims/survivors” (Taylor, *Sexual* 110). Such shared transformative disclosures give rise to joint sentiments which bind women together, and help them reclaim personal control over judgments that reverberate with shame. Their gathering represents a fascinating union of supportive agendas which, on one end of the spectrum, chart and mobilize their empowerment through authenticity and anti-oppressive protests. On the other end, this harmonic merging of their consolidation builds contemporary and safe spaces where the basis for a new sexual morality can be articulated and victimhood is not recognized as an influential marker of one’s identity.

Conclusion

Shame’s power to incite moral panic renders women helpless agents of social control. Many women in today’s neoliberal or conservative societies undervalue themselves based on questionably objective systems of morality, and base their self-perception on outside systems of evaluation. Therefore, shame is exposed as a fall into disgrace resulting in a loss of honor marked by a stigma or a stain. The humiliation coming from sexual abuse disturbs one’s self-esteem and widely encourages a whole new phase of self-depreciation, for the survivor/victim hears outside judgments and unconsciously adopts them as their own. Shame is closely tied to the Other’s eye represented by the community, which reinforces the demeaning feelings of degradation.

After the assault, the subjectivity of Nira, Trish, and Laura is diminished. Their selfhood is discussed as frozen and closely tied to their “otherness” due to their sexually stimulating bodies. As the events unfold, they prove that the boundaries given to one’s self-image after a physical and/or psychological abuse are blurred, and in that vulnerable position external judgments of the self are applied. In community-based cultures that so often and so early make girls and women feel powerless, everything that nourishes playfulness needs to be cherished and cultivated daily. Shame plays a structural role in the construction of female desire, especially mature women’s desire. For this reason, the director and scriptwriter re-establish the figure of middle-aged women as desirable and alluring. Through their screening techniques, they also criticize and disapprove of the suppressing

power of honor culture which numbs the boundaries of privacy and desensitizes violence toward women.

The cumulative effect of violent media is evident in the choices of many women's lives who, being afraid of what might happen to their bodies, lose the zest for living their lives, and are instead faced with a continuously lessening self-esteem instead of exploring who they really are. To counter shame, the mirror (camera) is a critical apparatus for the construction of female subjectivity and beauty. The scriptwriter and director prioritize techniques and dialogues which do not isolate the shamed individuals in their deadly thoughts, but support them instead, and introduce the viewer to their triumphant journeys of empowerment.

Sexual abuse is a universal predation and as such it cannot be fought solely by women. Instead of encouraging women to cultivate self-pity after being raped, and instructing men how to comfortably become perpetrators of violence, *Broadchurch* reconstructs women's visibility and uses the influence of the camera to provide a protected and comforting space where the stories of shamed female subjects can be heard without judgment. This TV show demolishes shaming images by assembling new, affirming images which seek to empower and privilege women. Once women accept shame, they also accept that there is something deeply wrong with them, something that is in some sense intrinsic and therefore cannot be fixed. That something, if exposed, would forever alter their relationships, not only with others but, most importantly, with themselves. Therefore, asserting and cultivating solidarity with the self and the world resonates with possibilities and works as a counter-humiliating strategy.

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Notes

1. It is the Other (imaginary or present) that gives meaning and significance to shame (Dolezal 422). Once the defaming social gaze is internalized, shame no longer requires a social audience to judge its subject.

2. Such persons are: those who admire us, those whom we admire, those by whom we wish to be admired, those with whom we are competing, and those whose opinion of us we respect (Barnes 4727).

3. "Vulgar" as defined by Merriam-Webster.

4. During the presidential election campaign of 2016, Hillary Clinton's infamous pantsuit turned into the media's main focus.

5. This is used as a descriptive, not a labeling term. I do not intend to reinforce gender stereotypes by creating big groups of "toxic" versus "non-toxic" masculinity because

those binary oppositions are reductive traps that every researcher ought to be cautious of. In describing the behavioral characteristics of male characters, I refer to terms such as gentle, compassionate, tender, and empathetic as explanatory ones only.

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REVIEWS

Arab Cinema Studies: A Revisit of the Past and Devaluation of the Present

Fatima El Aidi

Ginsberg, Terri and Chris Lippard, eds. *Cinema of the Arab World: Contemporary Directions in Theory and Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 422 pages. ISBN 9783030300814. Hb. \$24.99.

During the past few years, Arab cinema has witnessed a remarkable progress in the content and way of making national productions. Numerous films have competed for the most prestigious awards at widely renowned European film festivals, such as Cannes and Venice, while others have earned nominations at the Academy Awards. The increasing international recognition of Arab feature films and documentaries during the new millennium has made many film critics and scholars more interested in Arab cinema studies. It is true that such research remains very limited in comparison to critical explorations into European and American cinema, yet there are many ambitious attempts by Arab and Western intellectuals alike to fill in the gaps, for which Terri Ginsberg and Chris Lippard's latest edited volume, *Cinema of the Arab World* serves as a good example. This volume brings together essays by Arab and non-Arab film experts and filmmakers with scholarly background, as well as young researchers in the field; it is edited by two of the leading scholars of Arab cinema today, who also collaborated on another volume, the *Historical Dictionary of Middle Eastern Cinema*, published in 2010. Many chapters in this book developed from papers presented at the Cinema of the Arab World Conference, hosted by the Film Program of The American University in Cairo in 2018.

The majority of the films analyzed have previously been underrepresented in academic scholarship in both Arab and Western contexts, as these productions explicitly resist nationalist ideas and socio-cultural beliefs prevalent in Arab mainstream productions frequently scrutinized by film critics and scholars. The volume is dedicated to the rigorous study of the contemporary conditions of cinematic production and critical reception in the Arab world. The editors divided the collection of papers into four parts to make readers familiar with the history and status of Arab feature films and documentaries, bringing formerly neglected works to light and redressing previously misinterpreted or marginalized concepts through new theoretical approaches.

In the first part, “History, Positionality, Critique,” Hadi Gharabaghi claims that the practice of documentary production started among the Arab states with “the bureaucratic involvement of the US government” that helped the funding of binational documentary projects for “propaganda purposes” (4). He adds that through this process, the Arab world was introduced to American culture and modernization, and began to adopt some of its principles (4). It also expounds the promising attempts of the Gulf Cooperation Council states to promote an official national identity that differentiates one country from the other through cultural institutions and mediascapes. The main purpose here is to make the world aware that each of these countries has its own culture and identity, which are very distinct from one another. This part ends with Wissam Mouawad’s exploration of the effects of political instability on the Lebanese film industry and its continuous dependence upon international funding, especially from France and Western festivals, in order to guarantee worldwide distribution and a reputation for quality. Consequently, Lebanese filmmakers find themselves obligated to fulfill producers’ expectations by incorporating the so-called “Post Card Strategy,” which most of the time leads to “the projection of an exoticizing discourse about their country” and serves “a neocolonialist ideology” (80). Mouawad adds that filmmakers who refuse to employ the stereotypical depictions of Arabs in their cinematic output usually face exclusion and refusal from the film industry.

The second part, “Festival and Nation Reconsidered,” focuses on North African cinema with special attention paid to the development of the national film culture in Tunisia through the establishment of amateur filmmaking associations, such as FIFAK (founded originally in 1962) and its international film festival, FTCA, organized since 1964. Their members supported the inclusion of women in the building of a national cinema and used a corpus of amateur films against authoritarian regimes. Contemporary Palestinian cinema, for instance, is described as “not yet” an industry due to the absence of a fully-fledged Palestinian state and the unstable status of film institutions. However, the efforts put into this creative cultural industry are praised and recognized, as they aim to reconnect Palestinian people with the world. Light is also shed on FiSahara Festival (meaning “in the desert”), on the daily lives of those who live in the Sahara, and the strategy of utilizing film to publicize the Palestinian cause and defend their culture, in accordance with one of the most focal principles of the volume, which is to give justice and more critical attention to marginalized cinemas.

Documentary filmmaking, as one of the most neglected genres, is brought into focus in the third part of the volume, “From Resistance to Entrenchment and Back Again.” It tackles documentaries from Egypt, Syria, and Morocco, mainly from an anthropological perspective, looks, especially, at underrated works that were superficially received despite their political depth. In the case of Morocco, for instance, there has been an unprecedented progress in terms of the quality and quantity of documentary production since the upheavals of 2011. Most of these productions address controversial social and cultural issues that have been hidden from view mainly for political reasons. In addition to that, emphasis is also put on how films and documentaries in the Arab world have been employed to resist political oppression, social injustice, and cultural repression.

Syrian documentary director Amiralay Omar and Lebanese director Randa Sabbagh made “repudiated” films that withstood neoliberalism and authoritarianism (215). These films are viewed as performative texts that elide the borders between the cinema of the third world and European art films or Second cinema (206). Maroun Baghdadi is another Lebanese director whose documentaries are purely political; he seeks to galvanize public opinion using Eisenstein’s theory of montage. The fusion of images and politically oriented music with a focus on emotion and dialogue were among the techniques he employed to make his audiences embrace left-wing politics.

The last section of the book is devoted solely to Egyptian cinematic productions, and reveals the prevalent use of humor in movies to deconstruct totalitarian regimes. Isabelle Freda analyzes *Terrorism and Kebab* (1992), one of the most renowned films in the nineties, as an anarchic and carnivalesque work which draws upon Michel Foucault’s “grotesque sovereignty” to portray governmental ineptness and administrative malfunction (310). Humor is also adopted to unveil the truth behind the life of the ordinary Egyptian citizen, who is deprived of political agency and power—his is a “bare life,” Giorgio Agamben is quoted as saying (308).

“Political Aesthetics of State and Revolution in Egypt,” the closing chapter, ends with new analytical interpretations of two of the most misinterpreted documentaries. *Cairo Chronicles* (2004) is a feminist depiction of the trauma of the filmmaker’s exile from and return to Egypt. It is described as a performative critique of “mythological nostalgia” and post-colonial, patriarchal, capitalist Egypt as “a site of political corruption” (369). *Out on the Street* (2015), on the other hand, is regarded as a theatrical performance of capitalist social relations, which draws from decolonial,

Marxist, and critical theory, as the way it presents the effects of neoliberal policies on labor conditions in modern Egypt suggests.

This volume successfully takes the reader on a cinematic journey from the very beginnings, when Arab national cinemas began to emerge and grow during the seventies, to the latest films and documentaries that have gained international attention for their rigorous depiction of socio-cultural, political, and economic issues. It also acknowledges the efforts of most Arab countries to develop their own film industries by funding and establishing facilities where aspiring filmmakers, scriptwriters, and cinematographers can learn everything required to make quality films. However, some of the authors believe that these efforts might not be enough, as the Arab film industry still suffers from several problems, including the limited number of film productions per year, the deficiency of adequate international commercial distribution, the lack of expertise, prevailing censorship, and so on. Introducing the reader to Palestinian and Sahrawi cinemas and the impediments they encounter—as they are still not considered industries due to the lack of film production infrastructures and individuals to support them—can be regarded as the highlight of the volume, and one of the fully accomplished promises of the editors.

Despite its theoretical and analytical depths, the volume failed to fulfill my expectations for a single reason: it is not as “contemporary” as the title and date of publication suggest. The editors state in the introduction that “the recent burgeoning of attention to new Arab filmmaking within the international mediascape” was among the main factors behind their determination to publish such a book (vii). However, scholarly readings of the latest critically acclaimed commercial as well as non-commercial films screened in the last decade are totally ignored and disregarded here with very few exceptions. Many films and documentaries from Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, and Palestine have been increasingly present since the beginning of the millennium at Cannes, Venice, and the Berlin Film Festivals, the BAFTA Film Awards, the Golden Globes, and the Academy Awards. Still, focus is mainly on works from the seventies, eighties, and nineties, when films were made under different socio-political circumstances and for different audiences. Hopefully, the publication of a second edition in the coming years will address this flaw by incorporating more recent feature films and documentaries. Given the volume’s academic level, this initiative will certainly inspire and assist graduate students and scholars of Arab Cinema studies. Politics tends to be present in all aspects of daily lives, hence most of the works studied are purely political. However, the overtly politicized

readings and the choice of these particular films, perhaps, are questionable since there are other less politically-motivated films that could at least have been examined from a more socio-cultural or philosophical perspective as a break for readers less involved in the politics of the region. After all, the main reason behind the thematic choice of this volume is to get a deeper understanding of the films' cinematic language, cinematography, narrative styles, and composition.

Fatima El Aidi, Ph. D. student, University of Debrecen published a chapter on gender inequalities in Moroccan cinema (2021).

Achieving “Presence Within Absence” in Western Narrative Theory

Hend Ayari

Donahue, James J. *Contemporary Native Fiction: Toward a Narrative Poetics of Survivance*. New York and London: Routledge, 2019. 186 pages. ISBN 9780367185954. \$48.95

N. Scott Momaday’s winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for *House Made of Dawn* (1968) was climactic for Native American literature. Regardless of the fact that storytelling has always been embedded in Native American/First Nations worldviews, this date helped Native-authored fiction to be brought to the fore as well as to inspire scholarly interest in the field. Despite acknowledging Indigenous literature, Momaday’s novel was undoubtedly steeped in the “Western (European-American) standard that consciously excludes Native epistemologies” (121) for the sake of earning academic hospitality.

James J. Donahue’s ambitious project is to “develop a Native-based literary theory” (22) to atone for the absence of Native American authors in the American literary canon. The latest volume in the Routledge Narrative Theory and Culture series seems ideally suited to achieve the goal of “bring[ing] together the fields of narrative theory and Native studies, as there is much to learn from the combination” (i). His insightful analysis of how “four paradigmatic Native American/First Nations novels” (1) engage with Native survivance when read through the lens of a specific narrative theory is carried out to this end.

According to Gerald Vizenor, the originator of the term that animates the central argument of this book, Native survivance is “an active sense of presence, the continuance of Native stories” (qtd. in Donahue 6). The term relocates Native Americans from the past where they were relegated and places them in contemporary times. Donahue dedicates the introductory chapter of his book to the elucidation of this notion by repeatedly citing Vizenor’s collection of essays *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* published in 1999. Donahue maintains that the choice of a specific narratological device is inscribed in the act of survivance, as the authors of the four novels “are centrally concerned with who gets to tell these stories, and how the telling of these stories reflects one important aspect of Native survivance” (3). This is where Donahue’s contribution to narrative theory makes its mark: reconciling two areas of study—narrative theory and Indigenous literature—that have hitherto been kept apart by the procrustean bed of Western literary scholarship.

Fools Crow (1986) by James Welch, *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) by Leslie Marmon Silko, *The Orenda* (2013) by Joseph Boyden, and *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) by Thomas King are read by Donahue adopting a structuralist,

feminist, rhetorical, and “unnatural” narratology, respectively, to highlight how these novels embody the act of survival. In this respect, each chapter functions as a case study, offering a solid ground for diagnosing the author’s work just outlined. Each chapter is constructed on the lacunae and oversights of narrative theories to support the claim that the advancement of narrative theory is precluded by the omission of Native narratives as subjects of study. Following an extensively theoretical pursuit to contextualize his claims, Donahue provides practical examples of his approach as he analyzes the narratives.

“Focalizing Survivance; Racializing Narratology” is an extension of the author’s earlier attempt at reading *Fools Crow* in accordance with structuralist narratology. Donahue lauds Welch’s artistry in documenting culturally competing worldviews, those of the Americans and the Pikunis, by insisting on writing as an “insider” through the “construction of a culturally focalized narrator” (39). Donahue draws on Mieke Bal’s claim that the choice of perspective is ineluctably political (43); hence, his emphasis on cultural focalization which conveys “an active sense of presence” (7). In this sense, by constructing a narrative around Blackfeet mythology and narration, *Fools Crow* becomes a paradigmatic survivance narrative.

The feminist perspective in the second chapter took its final shape after the author’s participation in the 2017 Narrative Conference in Lexington, Kentucky. Donahue contends that his placement of this chapter in the second position signals a “paradigm shift” that ensued from the publication of Susan Lanser’s seminal essay in 1986, “Toward a Feminist Narratology,” in which “polyphony” is defined as peculiar to “women’s narratives and in the narratives of other dominated peoples” (qtd. in Donahue 74). Through a thorough analysis of Silko’s well-wrought “narrative voice” (61), Donahue unveils the adumbrative nature of a purely feminist reading of this novel. His assumption is that Free Indirect Discourse—by virtue of its unraveling the narrators’ biases—calls for an intersectional reading as it “highlights the power disparities along the lines of sex and race” (61). Donahue infers that *Gardens in the Dunes* adheres to what Deborah A. Miranda considers “Indigenous feminism” because it challenges fiction of authority through innovative formal poetics.

“Rhetorical Narrative and Racially Charged Disclosure” discusses Boyden’s *The Orenda* by building upon the foundational principles of rhetorical narratology—originally laid out in Wayne C. Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961)—and his disciple’s, James Phelan’s *Living to Tell about It* (2005). The emphasis on the platitudinous “the more voices we have, the more truth will finally emerge” (95) justifies Boyden’s use of multiple voices to revisit the history of the first contact between European settlers and the Haudenosaunee people,

which the novelist achieves through a “multiple character narrator” and “redundant telling” (91) as these strategies fittingly engage with the act of survivance through “the continuance of stories” (98). Whereas these rhetorical devices are artfully registered in *The Orenda*, they are “largely drawn from the Anglo-American literary tradition” (94). On this account, Donahue discusses Boyden’s choice of giving voice to a European character, Christophe—a choice that earned the novelist displeasure from First Nation scholars. By presenting him as an unreliable narrator, though, Boyden accentuates the subversion of “manifest manners,” (9) along with the Anglo-American literary tradition that supports this choice. Yet, it is unfortunate that Donahue does not elaborate on what makes *The Orenda* a paradigmatic novel, albeit identified by him as such.

Along with its catchy alliterative title, the chapter “Naturalizing Unnatural Native Narrative” constitutes the book’s most fascinating contribution to the imbrications of narrative theory and Native-authored narratives. Not only does this chapter introduce its readers to a “recent” and “most exciting” perspective on narrative theory (121), but it also opens new academic avenues since the “scope and parameters” of unnatural narratology are still unidentified (121). As Donahue puts it, “unnatural narratology is not named for a larger critical practice whose principles are then applied to the study of narrative” (122). Instead, it is a reaction to Monika Fludernik’s definition of “natural narrative” as “mainly spontaneous, conversational storytelling” (qtd. in Donahue 122) in *Towards a “Natural” Narratology*, published in 1996. The theories and methodologies used for categorizing unnatural narratology as anti-mimetic events engender the identification of Native-authored narratives as “unnatural.” This pretense of universality by theorists of “unnatural narratology” is of Western origin and, therefore, inseparable from the denigrating framework of Western narratology. Donahue examines unnatural narratology through King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*. By listing various instances of King’s formal poetics, he posits that the “unnatural” can be naturalized as a narration rooted in Native epistemology. To this end, he delineates “unnatural” examples in King’s novel and points out how they are manipulated by the novelist to present them as natural (138).

Here, a note on Donahue’s selection of novels is in order. Inasmuch as the corpus is relatively considerate of tribal and gender affiliations, as well as the author’s desire to feature survivance narratives, a few questions remain unanswered with respect to his choices. For example, *Green Grass, Running Water* is discordant with the other novels not so much because of its theme but because, unlike other works discussed, it is not a historical novel.

In the same vein, the absence of a solid ground for his selection is jarring. This assessment is echoed by Deborah Madsen from the University of Geneva in her review of *Contemporary Native Fiction*. She lambasted Donahue's choice of corpus, primarily, for leaving out any of Vizenor's novels, which, according to her, would have aligned perfectly with the treatment of the notion of survivance (183). Similarly, Madsen commented on what makes the narratives "paradigmatic" novels. I concur with her on this particular point, for the repetitious use of the term "paradigmatic" is perplexing. Donahue's claim that "Native-authored narratives are not survivance narratives just by virtue of the tribal affiliation of the author, the use of Native characters, or the presentation of Native peoples" (162) dispels all doubt as to whether the descriptor "paradigmatic" refers to the novels' enactment of survivance. As it has been suggested by Donahue, each novel is considered paradigmatic in its own way. Nevertheless, it is regrettable that the four novels do not partake of the same paradigm. The fact that they were crafted as paragons of Native survivance could have been a more tenable premise.

Contemporary Native Fiction is commendable for magnifying Native American literature rendered invisible by traditional Western narrative theory. Additionally, the book ends on a promissory note as Donahue warns in Coda: "[t]his book is at best a beginning to a conversation, not a final pronouncement" (3). As suggested in the addendum, Donahue acknowledges the efforts by scholars with a minority background for their attempt at including minority-authored narratives in narrative theory. This book's features make it a compelling read for a narrative theory enthusiast as it opens the horizons of this field long-dominated by the Euro-American canon. Seeing its germinal premise, Donahue's work is highly recommended to early-stage researchers in Indigenous Studies.

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Madsen, Deborah L. Rev. of *Contemporary Native Fiction: Toward a Narrative Poetics of Survivance*, by James J. Donahue. *Transmotion* 6.2 (2020): 182–84. Print.

Encounters with Children in Adult Fiction

Rebeka Kuszinger

Dinter, Sandra. *Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel*. London: Routledge, 2020. ix + 221 pages. ISBN 9780367361938. Pbk. £36.99.

Although the objective of defining the child and childhood has been present in the works of numerous thinkers since the seventeenth century, the past few decades have witnessed an upsurge of interest concerning both, in areas as diverse as developmental psychology, social and political theory, and cultural studies, a field previously dominated by discussions of race, class, and gender. Additionally, age studies have lately become another focal point of investigation in the field of cultural studies. Parallel to the development of such theoretical concerns, the concept of childhood has become one of the major themes in contemporary British fiction—complemented by the rising status of young adult literature—a development which has not failed to attract the interest of critics.

The popularity of the topic is also recognized by an interdisciplinary Routledge series, *Studies in Childhood, 1700 to Present*, dedicated to childhood studies. Published as the fortieth title of this series, *Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel* engages in a conversation with critics who have been examining the unprecedented popularity of the topic in mainstream British fiction. Based at the Friedrich-Alexander University in Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany, Sandra Dinter has co-edited *Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Childhood in Contemporary Britain: Literature, Media and Society* (2017) with Ralf Schneider as a part of the same book series. Drawing upon classic studies by Peter Coveney (1957) and Robert Pattison (1978), as well as more recent criticism by Adrienne E. Gavin (2012), Susan Honeyman (2005), and Mark Froud (2017), Dinter's monograph is the first to explore novels written after the 1980s for an adult audience from this perspective. Dinter's objective is to explore how the representation of the child, and, in some cases, the lack thereof, showcases a number of contemporary anxieties, while touching upon the way the very definition of childhood itself is constructed by different institutions such as the discipline of history and health care, childcare law, family and educational policies.

“The Rise of the Contemporary Childhood Novel,” a remarkable addition to the already existing theoretical and critical work on childhood, elaborates on how the representation of childhood is approached in literary criticism. According to Dinter, “[M]any critics have the tendency to return to

the same periods and texts, specifically the classics of the Romantic and Victorian eras” (5). She carves out her own position by indicating how her study differs from the dominant strand of criticism in terms of her theme, her chosen period, and her methodology, defining the main goal of her monograph, which is “to intentionally focus on texts and authors beyond the ‘great works’ that have been studied so many times” (5). Regarding the uniqueness of the monograph’s thematic approach, the author claims to have written the first systematic account of childhood in the contemporary English novel for the adult reader. Her statement that this particular focus has been underresearched might seem a bold assumption, for there are several surveys about such novels, Peter Coveney (1957), Robert Pattison (1978), and Reinhard Kuhn (1982), among others, can be mentioned as predecessors to such criticism. Yet, her confidence in making such a claim appears justified as the aforementioned researchers all precede the constructivist turn in the study of childhood, a turn upon which Dinter strongly relies, and which indeed adds to the novelty of her monograph. Dinter singled out the 1980s as the starting point of her research; she considers them a watershed in modern British history due to the political and cultural shift, and rupture initiated by Thatcherism. The chosen corpus includes novels by Ian McEwan, Doris Lessing, P. D. James, Nick Hornby, Sarah Moss, and Stephen Kelman; authors who have been less intensely researched in the context of childhood and who published between the period of the 1980s and the 2010s. As opposed to the works of previous critics such as Ellen Pifer and Susan Honeyman, Dinter’s monograph is limited to novels taking place in England. While female writers are included, the corpus comprises texts by white, middle-class authors. Dinter is aware of this bias, claiming that it is the result of her conscious selection criteria narrowing down the possibilities for analysis to novels that were written after the 1980s with England during or after Thatcherism as the background for their plots, novels, especially, that have unusual narrative forms. Yet, her choice to not include such contemporary authors as Jeanette Winterson can be rightfully critiqued for its limitations and homogeneity.

Choosing the constructivist approach to childhood allows Dinter to delineate a new ground for her analysis and to map the ways these texts portray childhood as a construct. Drawing on Foucauldian discourse theory, she states that the discursive construction of childhood and its institutional framework together “naturalize and enforce hegemonic constructions of childhood” (31), adding that many contemporary novels “draw attention to and dismantle the institutional and political facets of childhood” (32). This

leads to her claim that contemporary novels denaturalize childhood; hence, the aim of the book is to scrutinize the thematic and formal methods the novels use to achieve such an effect (8) and to identify to what extent the figure of the child is treated as a construct or how these texts deconstruct the child. *Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel* is clearly and logically divided into three sections: theory, socio-cultural and political context, and case studies. The introduction is followed by an informative chapter that lays down the methodological and theoretical foundations for the six analyses to follow, each discussing a single novel. Although childhood remains the central concern throughout, whenever relevant, the analyses also address complementary issues such as race, class, untraditional family structures, queer theory, body studies, and consumerism.

The Introduction explains the monograph's objectives, elaborating on the shifting themes of the contemporary child novel while also categorizing them. In the second chapter, "Dismantling Constructivisms of Childhood," Dinter fills in possible gaps between textual analysis and Foucauldian discourse theory by relying on Jürgen Link's concepts such as interdiscourse and normalism concerning the theorization of childhood as a "thoroughly" constructed identity, proposing that both "the 'real' and the representational sphere of childhood" (24) are immersed in discourse. She is also critical of the methodology she uses when pointing out possible shortcomings. "Constructions of Childhood in Late Modern England, 1980s–2010s" discusses the ways childhood was utilized in politics in England. This chapter also offers a survey of the most crucial changes in childcare, family, and education policy from the Thatcher years up until the coalition government of the period between 2010–2013.

Although the literary works examined differ from each other in terms of theme, context, and narrative method, they all consider childhood as a discursive construct, take place in a late modern setting, and address an adult reader while, in accordance with one of Dinter's major claims, attempting to deconstruct essentialized notions of childhood, but ending up representing childhood as a universal phase of life (46). Yet, the most salient similarity between these "childhood novels" is that they "all signal their discursive entanglement with childhood linguistically," (17) by regularly using the terms "childhood" and "child."

She begins the respective analytic chapters with Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* (1987), a novel that has been frequently investigated in terms of its non-linear temporality, its use of the concepts of physics, gender, narratology, and many other aspects, let alone the subject of childhood.

Dinter engages with previous readings while applying her own methodology to McEwan's fascinating novel which, she claims, sets up a constructivist perspective of childhood that the novel, ironically, does not uphold; instead, it perpetuates essentialist notions of childhood (66). *The Child in Time*, as she explains, only evokes the constructivist paradigm "to refute a dominant construct of childhood but with the intent of replacing it with a supposedly more accurate construction" (68). Since this novel functions as a vantage point from which different approaches to childhood can be examined, Dinter's choice to start off the analytic part with McEwan's novel is helpful for readers as well for she can comprehensively demonstrate how constructivism and, at the same time, essentialism function in narrative fiction. This is followed by a chapter about the representation of radical constructivism in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988), a fully canonized literary work, approached from numerous perspectives. In Dinter's reading, Lessing explores the discursive and institutional network involved in the production of childhood (88). Dinter demonstrates that childhood is approached from a metaperspective in *The Fifth Child*, since the child character, Ben, functions as an aporia that cannot be solved by the discourses constructing "normal" and "abnormal" childhoods. Dinter conceives of Ben as a tool through which the novel represents the different institutions and discursive authorities such as doctors, teachers, the police, and social workers, and their way of legitimizing childhood in its hegemonic forms.

The analytical chapters are in a constant dialogue with one other through reading and comparing the novels with each other, yet discussing them in chronological order. In Chapter 6, for instance, she connects P. D. James's *The Children of Men* (1992) to McEwan's novel on a thematic basis, claiming that both, in their different ways, are concerned with the disappearance of children from society, and that both are politically loaded, tackling Thatcherism. Yet in *The Children of Men*, the constructed child stands as a countermodel to the hegemonic view of childhood, while it also alludes to queer theory since James's novel "succumbs to the ideology of reproductive futurism" (110) as it portrays issues such as infertility. Queer theory resurfaces in Chapter 7, which analyzes Nick Hornby's *About a Boy* (1998), a novel that also offers Dinter an opportunity to address issues like sexuality, single parenthood, consumerism, and defeminization. Here, the constructivist approach is evident in Dinter's discussion of the way childhood is represented as a performative construct. In Hornby's novel, childhood is imbued with consumerism as a determining factor of who can be considered "normal," as Dinter puts it (135). In her reading, Hornby's novel portrays a

normalization process of the child character according to the principles of consumerism.

The notion of metaperspectivity, already employed in Chapter 5, is more comprehensively and convincingly addressed in Chapter 8, “Historiographical Reflections on Childhood in Sarah Moss’s *Night Waking* (2011).” Moss’s novel, revolving around a scholar who is researching the different constructions of childhood in history, enables Dinter to analyze how contemporary English novels explore childhood from a broadly Foucauldian perspective, as the novel itself portrays psychology’s viewpoint on childhood through the main character’s comments that she leaves in a novel she reads. These meta-commentaries appear in *Night Waking* as epigraphs which illustrate how the discipline of developmental psychology naturalizes childhood. The last analytical chapter, “The Limits of Constructivism in Stephen Kelman’s *Pigeon English*” (2011), studies the formal heterogeneity of the contemporary English novel of childhood. In a thorough narrative analysis, the chapter focuses on the role of the first-person child narrator as a device in the construction of childhood, embarking on an extensive discussion of the voice of the child. Exploring the concept of consumerism and premature sexuality, this chapter also reflects on the child at risk as well as “risky” child characters as *Pigeon English* portrays youth gangs, and juvenile delinquency, while also deploying child protecting initiatives.

Dinter’s book proves indispensable for any researcher interested in childhood studies and the fictional representations of childhood. In a series of meticulous textual analyses, *Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel* asserts that the conceptualization of childhood is a cultural construct. She demonstrates how the very definition of childhood itself is challenged in our times, and how it is problematized through such institutions as childcare law or education. Closing on a more personal note, as an early career researcher whose doctoral topic is the representation of childhood in recent and contemporary British fiction, I could not have wished for a more suitable study to help me with my work at the initial stages of my research. Dinter’s book is an excellent compendium of the insights of childhood studies in literature, as it gives space for further research by keeping an open mind when investigating the constructions and deconstructions of childhood.

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Ghost Walkers: Southern and Eastern Europeans at the US–Canada Border in the Interwar Period

Balázs Venkovits

Johnson Bavery, Ashley. *Bootlegged Aliens: Immigration Policy on America's Northern Border*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2020. 278 pages. ISBN 9780812252439. Hb. \$49.95.

Current immigration debates in the Americas often concern issues of illegality, deportation, and border control mostly focusing on the US-Mexican border, and frequently labeling immigrants as undesirables, criminals, and potential threats to society. In her engaging book, Ashley Johnson Bavery shows us that such debates are not entirely new but fit into a longer narrative of US immigration control, nativism, suspicion as well as have clear roots in the 1920s and the experience of southern and eastern European immigrants looking for better opportunities in the new world. Scrutinizing events and trends taking place one hundred years ago, Bavery demonstrates how ethnic Europeans were stigmatized as likely burdens on society, criminals, illegals, and even terrorists, which led to harsh living and working conditions, discrimination, and exclusion, also due to a combination of local, national, and international decisions and policies.

Between the 1870s and 1920s more than twenty million people immigrated to the United States, primarily from Southern and Eastern Europe, during the era often referred to as the period of New Immigration. Such a wave had a major economic, social, and cultural impact on the receiving country as well as the newly arriving immigrants and their home societies. The era did not only bring about unprecedented immigration rates, but also growing attempts at control, restriction, selection, and testing, which ultimately manifested themselves in the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the introduction of a literacy test (1917), and culminated in quota limitations clearly targeted against immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe in 1921 and 1924. Simultaneously with the introduction of these quotas, Canada remained relatively open. (Johnson Bavery could have devoted perhaps a bit more attention to the examination of the reasons behind the different attitudes of the two countries.) Consequently, European immigrants saw Canada both as a possible new destination and also as an (illegal) springboard to the US, eventually leading to shifting patterns of arrival, smuggling, and varied attitudes of, and towards, newly arriving immigrants.

Most of the works on European immigration focus on the decades preceding the 1920s, studying questions of integration, nativism, assimilation,

ethnicity, and race among others. Bavery, however, picks up the story exactly where many scholars stop and provides refreshing insights into the post-1924 era and peculiarities of southern and eastern European immigration to North America. This in itself makes it an attractive reading but the author does more than that when she presents so far little-examined trends in a transnational, inter-American setting, examining not only the United States, but also Canada and, more specifically, the Detroit-Windsor transborder region, highlighting the phenomenon of illegal immigration. The novel approaches and focus areas are coupled with scrupulous archival research and an enjoyable style of storytelling that make the book a worthy reading for both scholars in migration studies and the broader public interested in the topic.

Studying immigration history, politics, labor relations, while simultaneously focusing on transborder and local policies, the author sheds light on key themes that have often been neglected so far. One of these novelties and strengths of the book includes her focus on the northern border of the US, examining the emergence of immigration policy not only in Washington D.C. (as is most often done), but also in Ottawa, often discussing events on both sides of the border, in Windsor and Detroit alike. This is crucial as the events and emerging trends of the 1920s cannot effectively be studied if the focus is on the United States only. While she employs this broader context, the author also stresses the significance of local actors and decisions, and how these shaped federal policies and their actual implementation, successfully revealing how immigration is also a profoundly local issue with the Detroit and Windsor area, providing a distinctive example for it. Studying the perceptions of the whiteness, foreignness, otherness of immigrants from Russia, Hungary, Italy, and Poland, among others, she also adds valuable comparisons with the experience of Mexicans, Arab Americans, and African Americans. Bavery's book shows that European immigrants have not always been seen as legal and offers an alternative history characterized by harassment by nativists, bad working and living conditions, and stigmatization.

The author provides fascinating insights into contemporary documents, reports, also referring to immigrant accounts in different languages, even if sometimes she does so with some spelling mistakes or other problems, like describing the Hungarian-language *Amerikai Magyar Hepszaba* [sic] as a Polish newspaper based in Chicago (63). The great variety of sources represents a strongpoint, and the interwoven personal stories highlight that behind the statistics and quotas there were real people and families facing tough decisions, and often discrimination and exploitation, while being vulnerable to deportation. Still, the European side of the story is something that the author

could have expanded on a bit more, revealing how European countries reacted to the quotas and how their policies influenced the migration trajectory. There is, however, a brief attempt at this on page 59. This is not meant to be a strong criticism as the scope of the book probably does not allow for a detailed elaboration of this aspect. Later studies, possibly as part of international collaboration between the two regions, could be conducted in this regard as immigrant decisions were not only shaped by policies in North America, but also in Southern and Eastern Europe, where large-scale emigration was a key issue from a political, economic, and also military standpoint.

The seven chapters of the book provide a detailed and illuminating overview of immigration policies, their implementation, and repercussions in the 1920s and 1930s, an era often ignored between the great waves of New Immigration and the post-World War II era. The first three chapters focus on the implementation of immigration quotas from 1921 to 1929, while the others tend to concentrate more on the Depression/New Deal era. Chapter 1, one of the longest units, provides a solid basis for the rest of the book and a comprehensive overview recommended for anyone interested in immigration history. The reader can gain a better understanding not only of the US regulations, but also of the growing state apparatus associated with it, as well as smugglers and “ghost walkers” trying to cross the US–Canadian border illegally, and how the formerly mostly imaginary border became a real one for many. In line with the rest of the book, there is a delicate balance between federal policy overview and the consideration of the ways employers, Border Patrol officers, and immigrants themselves decided how laws would actually be implemented locally. This is also a good resource for those interested in the history of nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment in the US and Canada, offering an overview of the activities of organizations like the KKK/CCC, Daughters of the American Revolution, and in later chapters that of the Black Legion. The chapter introduces many of the negative labels used for ethnic European immigrants of the time (undesirable, likely to become a public charge, and so on) to be expanded with other categories later on.

Chapter 2 focuses on various European immigrant groups and their attempts to keep their quotas high while distancing themselves from stigmas of illegality, revealing clear differences between the perception and treatment of Northern and Southern/Eastern Europeans (the latter facing raids, accusations, deportation, and policing). Such differences become even clearer in Chapter 3, which explores the commuter controversy of the border area, the problem of Canadian day laborers as well as how border crossing was

negotiated as an Anglo-Canadian privilege whereby “ethnicity played a key role in dictating who would be allowed to cross the border for work” (95).

The next four chapters focus on the Depression Era that brought about significant changes in immigration policy in both North American countries, but also in the perception of immigrants. The reactions to unemployment had a negative impact on immigrants and resulted in stricter deportation and immigration policies to protect jobs and benefits for citizens, also resulting in increased policing and profiling. The final chapters concentrate on Detroit more specifically, underlining the entanglement of labor, welfare, immigration, a nativist backlash, and the addition of new labels to describe Southern and Eastern European immigrants as threats for the society as communists (Chapter 6) and as welfare cheaters (Chapter 7).

The well-written policy overviews both in the US and Canada, and the detailed local reactions to them, are presented in a way that provides novel insights for scholars in migration studies while remaining enjoyable for a broader readership as well. Probably because of the attempt to cater for the needs of different readers, the author is sometimes a bit repetitive, mentioning and defining key events or concepts at several points, resulting in occasional redundancy. The chapters address different key topics but are professionally cross-referenced and find the right balance of national, international, and local reactions. Bavery provides new insights to her readers by examining a so far neglected area and group, in a little studied era within the field of immigration scholarship. Even if with a north-south and ethnic European-Hispanic shift after World War II, in many ways 100 years later we seem to be back to the same debates often fueled by nativist chords in the “nation of immigrants.” Johnson Bavery shows how important it could be to look back and learn from the past, and she offers an attractive, well-researched, and engagingly written book for this purpose.

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