Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 1-11
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/1

Issue Editor's Note and Introduction to the Special Thematic Block *The Engulfing Self and the Self Engulfed: Transformative Monstrosity in the Anthropocene*

Issue Editor's Note: The Monster with a Thousand Faces

HJEAS

"A screaming song is good to know in case you need to scream"—goes a line from legendary children's author Ruth Krauss's *Open House for Butterflies* (1960). Although intended for children as lighthearted words of wisdom, it certainly seems that we are all living in an era when it is a good idea to have a few "screaming songs" up one's sleeves. However, instead of a one-off instance of screaming in panic—an immediate reaction to some external threat—our contemporary cultural climate appears to be one of constant whimpering. "The motivation associated with behaviors in response to potential, signaled, or ambiguous threats" (Blanchard, Griebel, and Nutt 3) is not fear, but rather anxiety, which seems to be the underlying condition shaping the first decades of the twenty-first century.

As the 2014 manifesto of the Institute for Precarious Consciousness declares, "We Are All Very Anxious," arguing that anxiety is the dominant affect of our late capitalist era. For the authors, it is mostly due to our social-technological embeddedness, which facilitates constant surveillance and voluntary online self-exposure, along with a myth and expectation of productivity and personal growth that prompts us to strive for unattainable standards. Since Margaret Thatcher famously asserted that "there is no such thing as society," the individual has often been framed as solely responsible for their triumphs and disasters alike. This can be traced in the "management discourse" (Institute for Precarious Consciousness 6) that offers *self-help* solutions to everything from decluttering your home to parenting hacks to time management against distractions and most recently, "glowing up" (Orleans-Lindsay), that is, turning yourself from an ugly duckling to a beauty queen and documenting the change on social media.

However, this desire and illusion of being able to control the relatively private aspects of one's life indicates that an acute display of anxiety at an individual level is set against the background of the grand scheme of things that we are unable to control, producing what we might call "anxiety culture."

> Concerns are proliferating around aspects of our living conditions that seem to be spinning out of control: climate change, . . . the stability of ecosystems;

> . . . massive population migration and the ensuing disturbances in social and political orders, most recently seen in the Russia-Ukraine war, . . . drastic technological changes with regard to our forms of communication, commerce, and employment; spiraling inequalities within and between nations; a building legitimation crisis in democratic societies and the attendant rise of populism, nationalism, and militarism; terrorism, mass shootings, . . . the post-COVID-19 reality, with the global pandemic already having shown a powerful capacity to manifest and then fray the fragile social fabric of national and global culture. (Allegrante et al. 1)

As this editor's note is being written in the early days of 2025, some of the songs that Krauss suggested seem to be very timely picks for our day-to-day musical repertoire. It is not surprising, therefore, that the authors of the present issue, albeit differently and sometimes implicitly, seem to be preoccupied with various manifestations of the poly- or permacrisis period that we inhabit: monsters of sorts. As Gaia Giuliani contends, "'[w]e' are living in a time of monsters and catastrophes, as if propelled into a never-ending dystopian loop" (1). What we mean by "monster," however, varies. As Nina Auerbach famously states, each socio-cultural period gets "the vampire it needs," or, rather, the one that it deserves (145): much like the Campbellian hero, our monsters also have a thousand faces. While pandemic representations, newly escalating war scenarios, Anthropocene concerns and populist discourses are equally invested in a clear distinction of "in" and "out," us and others, our respective monsters are not only at the gates, at the other sides of the fences, but are already breaking in. Radical alterity comes with radical transgressions, too.

The five essays of the special thematic block in the first half of the issue, edited by Ildikó Limpár, tackle monstrosity in the shape of actual monsters in speculative genres, both on the screen and on the page. Approaching the end of the Anthropocene, the collection suggests, our monsters of choice change just as much as our relationship to them does. The boundary between human and nonhuman gets blurred, threatening the humanist subject with the ultimate dissolution of being devoured, as the first case study on Camille DeAngelis's *Bones and All* (2015), a cannibal-themed young adult romance, by Anna Kérchy demonstrates. The second essay of the thematic block, by Annamária Hódosy, retains a utopian core within the dystopian setting of *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022) television series, exploring how the show presents various solarpunk utopian experiments against the backdrop of a zombie apocalypse that threatens to eliminate human corporeality and human communities alike. The subsequent paper by special

block editor Ildikó Limpár turns back to the figure of the vampire in the Netflix miniseries *Midnight Mass* (2021) to connect the monstrousness of the vampire with religious and political fanaticism. Vera Benczik again takes account of the political implications of encountering the radical alterity of a plant-based life form in Ursula K. Le Guin's "Vaster than Empires and More Slow" (1971), proposing "voluntary vulnerability" to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable gap between humans and their others. Finally, Mónika Rusvai's exploration of Robert Holdstock's *Mythago* novels proposes a potential "contact zone" and means of reconciliation between "man and all beings that he once labeled monstrous: women, animals, plants."

While Ildikó Limpár's essay details how the vampire can be read as a symbol of demagoguery and manipulation, in the context of the US administration monsterizing various groups of people, the sixth essay of this issue, by Priyadarshini Gupta, takes account of one such instance of post-9/11 processes of demonization: that of the American Muslim population. After 2001, Gupta contends, everyone who is even adjacently connected with the Muslim faith was regarded with suspicion, and hence "the ideal Muslim" is praised as someone who wishes to erase their Muslim identity in favor of embracing a secular, American one: "an American first and a Muslim second." By analyzing Ayad Akhtar's 2013 *American Dervish,* Gupta maps out various, nuanced strategies of actual American Muslims to balance societal pressure on the one hand, and intrinsic spiritual demands on the other. Instead of looking at religion as an ideologically monolith entity in the novel, the essay explores the day-to-day religious practices of Mina, Akhtar's female protagonist.

Where Gupta's essay scrutinizes ways for post-9/11 Muslim communities in the US to resist what could be regarded as an imperative of self-erasure to avoid being marked as a monstrous and potentially destructive other, the next paper, by Yi Zhang, extends the inquiry into identity formation through the lens of Afro-American Eurasianism. By tracing the journey of Langston Hughes and other Black intellectuals into the Soviet Union, Zhang connects the two most monstrous others of the American Dream ideology: the human rights abuses against the Colored population on the one hand, and the menacing shadow of Soviet communism, on the other. Although, as the essay concludes, Hughes did find a sense of kinship and a hopeful perspective within the "Brown" people of Soviet Central Asia, his experience ultimately revealed that the promise of racial solidarity was dimmed by "the practical limitations of ideology."

Getting back to the idea of monstrousness as the transgressing of boundaries that were previously believed to have been rigid and impenetrable, the anxieties surrounding contamination—a direct result of not being able to keep "them" "out"—gained an obvious momentum during and after the coronavirus pandemic. Andrea Virginás's essay takes up this theme by examining a number of pandemic-themed disaster films from the 1970s to the present day, analyzing contagion as both a physical and a mediatized phenomenon. Virginás identifies a fundamental shift in the site of contamination: from the physical encounter and exchange of breath or bodily fluids that was typical in the 1970s, to screens as media of infection, hence destabilizing boundaries between infected and observed, real and mediated, physical and virtual.

Building on the tension between the real and the mediated, the next essay turns to a digital landscape—specifically, one in the immensely popular video game *Minecraft*—as a site where longstanding ideological constructs about nature and humanity are both reinforced and reimagined. This idealistic setting that Stefano Rozzoni examines through the lens of pastoral aesthetics in the game is in fact surrounded by monsters: as the night falls, the revenants of the *Minecraft* universe force the player to take shelter and economize their resources. If the pandemic film demonstrates a monstrous collapse of bodily and mediated experiences, the video game pastoral, as the paper suggests, exposes another form of monstrosity: the persistence of dualistic thinking. Furthermore, it critically engages with how *Minecraft* landscapes uphold or challenge anthropocentric and exploitative perspectives on the nonhuman.

When the boundary between us and them, actual and imaginary, human and nonhuman collapses, it is often our sense of reality as we know it that is threatened—which obviously leads us back to anxiety being the most prominent affect of our age. In times of crisis, the old ways, the traditional distinctions just will not work. But maybe that is the antidote to the impending catastrophe: the Archimedean point that shows a fresh angle is not necessarily on the outside, but on the margins of our conception. Monsters in speculative fiction are definitely aligned with what Darko Suvin famously calls cognitive estrangement: "an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (7). The last essay of this issue, Giulia Annuzzi argues, presents another instance of such a device: an ancient ruin that embodies the failed potential of a stillborn future. The study maps the evolution of this tool for imagining different futures (and pasts) from early Modern imagination to yet another destabilizing idea from the fringes: twentieth-century speculative archeology or "fringe archeology." In the case

of Peter Kolosimo, the Italian example of a largely Anglo-European narrative, the menacing specter of lost civilizations and hyper-evolved beings does not signal decline or catastrophe. Instead, much like the monsters of speculative fiction, these ruins invite us to rethink the limits of our historical consciousness, unsettling dominant narratives to make space for new possibilities.

"In the Anthropocene, we are all 'monsters'—not discrete, independent actors, but things enmeshed with other things in various constantly shifting networks. The human is always entangled with the nonhuman; ironically, what makes us human is that we are not fully human"—writes Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock in his *Gothic Things* (27). Then, even if this monstrosity is logically framed as a source of anxiety, it is also a means of transformation—disrupting the familiar so that novel ways of seeing, knowing, and conceiving might emerge. Perhaps, then, what seems monstrous at the margins is not a harbinger of collapse, but an opening to futures we have yet to imagine.

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Introduction to the Special Thematic Block
The Engulfing Self and the Self Engulfed: Transformative Monstrosity in the Anthropocene
Ildikó Limpár

Heroes are natural foci of narratives: when we read a story, we follow the protagonist and look at their adventures from their perspective. Joseph Campbell's publication of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1949, republished several times, brought a renewed critical interest in the heroic quest and confirmed a perspective that was dominant for decades. Nearly half a century later, however, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seminal essay on monster theory, published in 1996, directed scholarly attention to the narrative element that is often inseparable from heroes: monsters. The monster's function often complements that of the hero but may not be limited to being an embodiment

of a threat that can be defeated by a heroic figure; the manifold—in fact, gradually increasing—roles that monsters play in our stories thus naturally have captured academic interest and allowed for a new critical field, that of Monster Studies, to emerge and thrive in the past three decades.

I started this introduction with mentioning these two seminal theoretical works because they curiously indicate how cemented our anthropocentric view still seemed until the end of the twentieth century, as we were very much fixated on the man (and less frequently, the woman) as a heroic figure in our narratives/world. It also demonstrates how, at the very end of the century, we shifted focus and moved to exploring the monstrous that defines our world, having realized that we may be the protagonists of the Anthropocene but surely not the heroes of the narrative that we are living in. Mapping the monstrous dimensions of our existence in both art and scholarship did not reduce the role of heroic narratives; the better understanding of our monsters has, in fact, generated fiction with new kinds of fictive heroic quests besides the more traditional ones, while it also urged the reevaluation of what *human* and *heroic* both mean in our age. The Anthropocene and our growing awareness of living in it has brought about a new trend of fantastic fiction, in which distancing from an anthropocentric mindset and developing posthuman ethics (Braidotti 48) are presented as the necessary prerequisites for evolving into the new human who may survive the Anthropocene or Capitalocene. This proposition understands the human of the post-Anthropocene as one who acknowledges companionship with all cohabitants of the biosphere (Haraway 17) and has the potential of heroism to fight against the apocalyptic forces generated by a humanity lacking bioempathy.

Similarly to how monsters, in general, embody our fears and desires alike, in narratives where anthropocentrism is positioned as the hindrance to a positive futurity, merging with the other may appear both as a fear and a desire. Becoming part of the Other, the threat of being devoured is an existential threat; and in an apocalyptic scenario, it is also a social threat, where the individual tragedy shows, synecdochally, humanity's role either as a consumer destroying (thus metaphorically devouring) its own habitat; or as the punished sinner, who is being consumed by an unstoppable power that is usually triggered by mankind itself. Yet the threat of being consumed often manifests as a desire for finding a solution for the artificially created binary opposition between man and nature, restoring ecological harmony to mend what Timothy Morton called "Severing"—the split between mankind's anthropocentric narrative and the ecological reality that renders the human

species an integral part of the biosphere shared by nonhuman others instead of placing us above others.

Not accidentally, then, consumption as an act of consuming or the state of being consumed has taken central stage in the most diverse imaginative narratives that prompt us to think about our status in the world and the futurity we have ahead. This phenomenon is demonstrated by the thematic block of the present *HJEAS* issue: we invited submissions on monstrosity and received papers where the monstrous, in each case, is linked to real and/or metaphorical consumption. As a result, we now may present a most exciting thematic block, in which the articles engage in dialogues with each other in a productive manner, all addressing ways in which we may navigate in our falling world.

Cannibalism, one of the most tabooed activities related to consumption, is the main topic of the first piece in the block, titled "*Bones and All:* Cannibal Romance and the Ethics of Eating Well." Anna Kérchy discusses the implications of monstrosity as cannibalism in Camille DeAngelis' *Bones and All* (2015), a disturbing coming-of-age apocalyptic dark romance, which put a spin on how interspecies YA romance fantasy portrayed the "romanticized cannibalistic engulfment of the self." Basing her analysis partly on posthumanist theory, Kérchy emphasizes how interspecies novels express "a desire to connect with other lifeforms" and how this novel, particularly, "slyly introduce[s] the radically alien perspective of the animal gaze within the anthropocentric visual economy to enact the meatification of the human subject, and to trouble the ordered system from within." Scrutinizing the ethical dilemmas of our carnivore culture, Kérchy interprets the novel "as a fictional reformulation of philosopher Jacques Derrida's 'ethics of eating well' (1991)."

Closely related to cannibals are two monster types that are also naturally linked to the theme of consumption: the zombie and the vampire. But while the cannibal in *Bones and All* may be read as the cultural signifier of the Eremocene (the age of loneliness), the zombie and the vampire discussed in the next two papers are cultural signifiers of the Anthropocene and thus are directly linked to apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic processes.

Annamária Hódosy's essay, "Wellbeing in the Necrocene: *The Walking Dead* as a Solarpunk Eco-Ustopia," examines one of the best-known zombie TV series, understanding the zombie-infested world as standing for the Capitalocene (Moore) or the Necrocene (McBrian). However, Hódosy does not only explore the various ways zombies signify the present state of the world but also aims to extend this analysis and demonstrate how this

filmic association between zombiism and capitalism may affect the readership's attitude to the capitalist structure they live in. Even though such a series may be expected to generate solastalgia (Albrecht) and by that a desire to cling to the capitalist exploitative culture, Hódosy argues that *TWD*, in fact, manages to project "solarpunk" visions of the future, offering viable social practices to reduce energy consumption proactively (that is, before falling into an irreversible apocalypse represented by zombification). The postapocalyptic, dystopian world of *TDW* thus reveals its undeniably "ustopian" (Atwood) feature in highlighting the utopian idea that wellbeing (understood as happiness) must be prioritized before economic prosperity.

The next essay, "Vampirism as Apocalyptic Hypocrisy in *Midnight Mass,"* puts the relationship between consumption and apocalypse into a new light. Ildikó Limpár interprets the figure of the vampire as standing for monstrous fanaticism, which sucks out cognitive capabilities and morality linked to critical evaluation from people, leaving religion as an empty shell, represented by the soulless human bodies that burn to ashes in the sunlight and ignite the whole world. The emptied spirituality, in this reading, is directly linked to people's focus on the surficial and the physical; Limpár, accordingly, posits that the materialism masked by religiousness is embodied by the vampire who, stripped by its humanity, violently triggers an apocalypse when blind faith suppresses all critical evaluation.

The last two papers in the block delve into encounters with and engulfment by the radical Other in two earlier SFF works that are timelier than ever, as the scholarly work done in Eco-Criticism and Critical Plant Studies in the past decade has highlighted the importance of narratives in which an anthropocentric position is successfully challenged by the radical—most often vegetal—Other.

While earlier Hódosy linked the Gaia-theory (Lovelock) to the zombie attack, in Vera Benczik's essay vegetal otherness may be interpreted as the embodiment of the said principle. "Here There Be Trees: Radical Otherness in Ursula K. Le Guin's 'Vaster Than Empires and More Slow'" examines the sublimity of the "monstrous frontier" (Limpár), the undertones of postcolonial criticism and the expression of ecological concerns in Le Guin's story. Benczik argues that the non-normative human may be de-otherized, de-monsterized via an encounter with the radical alien; but while this experience underlines the human–nonhuman ecological connection, it is facilitated and affirmed by the non-normative human, who then merges with the vegetal planet sentience in the end. This trajectory shakes the rest of the human characters' anthropocentric view and partially accomplishes the de-

otherization of the monstrous frontier, too, but the radical other's unattainability remains as firm as at the beginning of the encounter, and peaceful encounter demands sacrifice.

Mónika Rusvai's essay also centers around the engulfment of the self by the radical—vegetal—other, but her approach highlights how SFF may be able to break down the human–nonhuman dichotomy and affirm a positive non-anthropocentric view. Using Dawn Keetley's theses of plant horror as her primary theoretical framework, Rusvai focuses on vegetal "deathlessness" to discuss Robert Holdstock's Ryhope Wood in his *Mythago Cycle* (1984-2009). In her argument, she highlights that "Holdstock consciously brings the plant body into focus and offers a revised definition of the human through the corporeal re-integration of the monstrous vegetal," which results in understanding "the human as a creature that is inseparably linked to the more-than-human world."

To conclude the thematic block introduction with this notion, we *are* inseparable from our biosphere, we *are* interdependent units in our ecosystem. Only by acknowledging this truth may we regain some of the heroism and lose some of the monstrousness that defines our present conduct. Monsters of our imagination guide us in this direction if we listen to them. Either as menacing warnings or as visions of positive transformations (in perceptions and/or attitudes and actions), the fantastic narratives discussed in this special block on monstrosity offer us valuable revelations, knowledge to rethink our present and future position in (and hopefully, after) the Anthropocene. Let us consume this delicious—but perhaps hard-to-digest—block to avoid being consumed by what we have monstrously created.

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Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 12-34
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/2

Bones and All: Cannibal Romance and the Ethics of Eating Well

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary paranormal fantasy romance genre targeting young adult readership has experimented with an impressive variety of interspecies pairings while recycling the trope of impossible/forbidden love as a means of self-discovery. However, after the human–vampire, human–werewolf (*Twilight*), human–angel (*Fallen*), human–cyborg (*Cinder*), and even human–zombie (*Warm Bodies*) couples, the latest coming-of-age fantasy romance budding between two teenage cannibals unable to control their meat-eating impulses seems to be breaking ultimate taboos, moving towards the abjectification of the subject to showcase ultimate moral dilemmas of our times. I wish to argue that the cannibal romance as a body-genre in Linda Williams's sense of the term disturbs our ideologically disciplined cultured embodiment to foreground raw flesh, bloody meat, tremulous corporeal intensities which unleash anarchic Dionysian impulses to perform social criticism. The narratological patterns of the heteronormative romance plot are subverted, and the compulsory open ending of "living happily ever after" is mocked in a story about violent deaths and difficult survival, foregrounding precarity, vulnerability, and remorse as formative experience of humankind. I suggest that at the end of the Anthropocene we are likely to interpret the novel as a fictional reformulation of Derrida's ethics of eating well, an apology of the carnivorous human in the era of the sixth mass extinction and an unredeemable environmental crisis he is responsible for, and also a call for the respectful relation to the other on the plate, or at the table—but also, in a deconstructive sense, "a respect for that which cannot be eaten, cannot be assimilated in a text, that must remain indeterminate, untranslatable, a remainder that cannot be read, that must remain alien." (AK)

KEYWORDS: interspecies romance, cannibalism, ethics of eating well, gastropolitics, anthropocene, body horror

A generic mutant: YA dark fantasy failed-Bildungsroman

In her classic work, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson insists that the social-historical contextualization of the literary fantastic genre is necessary to highlight the cultural-political implications and critical potentials of the speculative fictional writerly mode. According to the symptomatic reading propagated by her, far from shallow escapism, each era documents the imprint of its collective cultural unconscious, recording the communal anxieties and desires in fictionalized forms in these sublimatory narratives.

Monster figures, in particular, spectacularly embody the paradigmatic psychic malaise of the era when they have been imagined into being. Accordingly, Frankenstein impersonates the dangerous side-effects of industrial revolution and the hybris of scientific curiosity; Jekyll and Hyde capture the dread of Darwinian degeneration; Dracula evokes the horrors of sexual promiscuity, syphilis, and foreign invasion; Godzilla stands for radiation fears, while revengeful robots and evil mutants reflect growing concerns about the rapid development of AI and GMO technologies; and zombies stage the mindless shopping addicts' dehumanization by capitalist consumer culture.[1]

One of the most popular fantastic fictional trends of the first two decades of our postmillennial era has been a hybrid genre that could be best described by the complex label "young adult dystopic dark-fantasy failed-Bildungsroman." Besides generating unprecedented box-office success and intense fandom interaction, this generic mutant—mixing the trauma narrative tradition, the death-drive-motivated sublime of catastrophe movies, and the bittersweet yearnings of the coming-of-age story—fits the Jacksonian symptomatic-sublimatory agenda. The genre's mostly serialized novels thematize micro- and macro-cosmic-scale cataclysms, largely unresolvable conflicts interconnected on individual and collective levels. These stories concentrate on what John Clute (1997) calls "a thinning of the universe," the second in the four stages of the classic fantasy plot (Wrongness–Thinning–Recognition–Healing), a crisis period when magic and/or vitality are diminishing, dark powers are rising (with the advent of a supernatural evil or a despotic institution, and vague impending threats of natural disaster and/or civilizational collapse), and the hope for a better world is gradually vanishing.

Rebellious teenage heroes and heroines do their best to fight against this thinning of the universe. Yet according to the logic of the dark fantasy genre, even if the status quo can be momentarily reestablished, real healing never comes for good, the world can never be fully cured. The traditional

"happily ever after" seems impossible, problematized in a postmodern vein for its classist, sexist, racist, ableist ideological implications, as it is scrutinized in Cristina Bacchilega's analysis of the disclosure of systemic hegemonic oppression in transmedia repurposings entwined in the twenty-first-century fairy-tale web (Bacchilega 2013). Maturation for the twenty-first-century fictional adolescent protagonist simply means coming to terms with the constantly changing (never fully grown, hence fallible) nature of the self and society, the understanding of the unpredictability of changes which can equally be for better or for worse. This acknowledgment of precariousness coincides with the questioning of the teleological improvement and the doubting of the idyllic option for a satisfying closure traditionally implied in the *Bildungsroman* life-narrative and the Enlightenment myth of progress. Maturation also entails a realization of the moral compromises one must make as an adult, of the shortcomings of humanist values (condemnable for its speciesist and narcissist dimensions, among others), and of the arrested development of a humanity in crisis.

To mention a few examples from YA fantasy hits, Bella must fully abandon her humanity and transform into a vampire to win the true love of her undead groom in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*. Her dehumanization is the price of her paranormal empowerment. Harry Potter can defeat Voldemort only if he first accepts his kinship with the Dark Lord: the boy's self-recognition as an horcrux also recalls the melancholic acceptance of the complex entanglement of good and evil, life and death, ego and shadow-self. After his cleansing from the demonic doppelganger, Harry is still doomed to navigate as an in-between figure, unable to bridge the gap between the wizarding world and the human realm ruled by muggle ignorance. He remains an outsider in both realms. Katniss Everdeen stays psychologically wounded for life as a result of the deadly competition in the hunger games. Founding a family is a small consolation, a weak attempt to make bearable a life rendered fundamentally unbearable by human injustice. Coming of age in these postmillennial popular cultural YA classics means facing the evil to momentarily defeat it, but also accepting the beast within, and admitting the incurable inhumanity of the human race itself.

In a Jacksonian interpretation, these stories reflect the apocalyptic Angst that resonates with our current *Zeitgeist*: an omnipresent sense of vulnerability and helplessness incited by the increasing awareness that humanity today is fatally threatened by epidemies, wars, global warming, economic collapse, and overpopulation. These irreversible and unredeemable processes make us realize that the Unthinkable practically emerges on so

many levels that it is becoming an integral part of our daily lived realities. As a result, the Western world suffers from psychic disorders, paranoid phobias, maladies of the soul which proliferate on a mass scale and are gradually accepted as the new normal. Climate anxiety, flight shame, FOMO, hypochondria, agoraphobia, depression, alienation, sociophobia (triggered by the Covid pandemic), eating disorders, techno-addiction, attention deficit disorders are tormenting a despairing proportion of the populace today. These mental problems afflict particularly harshly teenagers and young adults who already experience the identity crisis naturally concomitant with their maturation. The global premonition of an impending catastrophe is aggravated by the press's sensation-seeking doomsday heralding headlines and a remorse felt over our compassion fatigue, our increasing numbness to the indigestible information-overdose of televized tragedies.

The general sense of precarity, a mood of affective/cognitive confusion in the face of uncertainty and insecurity, characterizes our postmillennial times. Rosi Braidotti associates the posthuman condition with an internally contradictory alternation of emotions: "excitement and exhilaration in view of the advanced technologies that drive the Fourth Industrial Revolution's age," flipping into "anxiety and fear at the thought of the huge costs and damages inflicted by the sixth mass extinction, on both human and non-human inhabitants of the planet" (465). This emotional imbalance evokes in all, regardless of age, a feeling of disorientation reminiscent of the growing pains of adolescence's transitional state. This is a potential reason that accounts for the popularity of the YA[2] dystopic dark fantasies: the genre resonates with the crisis state we are inhabiting today and oddly may even help us to make sense of our gradually unthinkable realities at this geological moment at the end of the Anthropocene.

Interspecies romance in the Eremocene

If young adult novels as coming-of-age stories stage the struggles of a crisis-period on an individual level, presented from a subjective perspective—while mirroring collective anxieties—YA romances also hold interesting affective narratological implications. They stage the difficulties of verbalizing emotions, passions, and carnal desire. They reveal the hardship of harmonizing the enworlded public and embodied private experience of the obsolete notion of romance. It also critically reflects on the ethical challenges of conceptualizing love in our gradually dehumanizing era.

Both intraspecies and interspecies Young Adult romance thematize the dreadfulness of desire, the struggle between the urges to find oneself and

to find someone to belong to. This desire for one's other half, in the Platonic sense, coincides with the melancholic recognition of isolation, implying that we are not complete but fractured on our own. The focus falls on the antagonistic pull between the yearning for freedom and the yearning for the possession of/by another. In interspecies romance fantasy, the other is often portrayed as otherworldly, supernatural, demonic, or monstrous because of the threat the desiring/desired alterity imposes on the integrity of the self. In such a couple, there is no longer "me" and "you," just "us" via a mostly romanticized cannibalistic engulfment of the self.

Elaborating on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's monster theory, Ildikó Limpár argues that monsters are cultural symbols that guard the borders society creates to protect its normative values, and since adolescence is a time for border-crossing explorations meant to test the viability of these cultural rules, fantastic coming-of-age narratives' leitmotif of the encounter with monstrosity facilitates the mapping (and transgressing or, rather, fluidification) of one's identity boundaries (2–4). I believe that the guilty pleasures of these YA monster stories come precisely from the taboo-breaking destabilization of boundaries between self and other, us and them, human and monster, normal and pathological, and the resulting painful-pleasurable recognition of our very own monstrosity. This is what Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytically informed semiotics in her book *The Powers of Horror* (1982) calls the potential "abjectification of subjectivities" (5). In this process, the repressed carnal desires and dreads surface through the disclosure of our tremulous private corporeal realities' fleshly non-beings beneath our cultured embodiments. The abjectification culminates in the crisis of identity and rationality as well as the predictably unpredictable "collapse of meaning" (2).

The contemporary paranormal fantasy romance genre targeting young adult readership has experimented with an impressive variety of interspecies pairings while recycling the trope of impossible/forbidden love as a means of self-discovery. We have seen human–vampire, human–werewolf (*Twilight*), human–angel (*Fallen*), human–demon/hunter (*City of Bones*), human–cyborg (*Cinder*), human–zombie (*Warm Bodies*), human–amphibian (*Shape of Water*), human–thing (*Stardust*), humanoid witch–vampire (*A Discovery of Witches*) couples fighting to overcome the difficulties delaying their union.

Interspecies romance recycles archaic tropes familiar from fairy tales: the Beauty and the Beast and the animal husband/bride themes are often coupled with a "from rags to riches" plot and magical metamorphosis motifs

as human and non-human life forms mutually affect one another through their amorous interactions. The genre's assumption that the interspecies bond entails reciprocal embetterment of the partners involved highlights the moral pedagogical implications.

Already in the case of postmodern recyclings of the fairy-tale genre we can sense a paradigm shift, a change in the use and moral evaluation of the metamorphosis trope, which paves the way for the confusing genre of the cannibal romance. In classic fairy tales, the happy ending often involves the transformation back into a human form: the Frog-Prince-like characters are relieved—usually by courtesy of the "kiss of true love"—from their cursed bestial anatomy at the stories' satisfying finale. Elsewhere, as for instance in the Celtic and Norse legends of the seal folk, the magical shapeshifter's animal-skin is stolen while she is bathing in the form of a beautiful woman; unable to transform back into animal form and join her sisters, she is left behind, marries her thief, and much later (mostly after bearing children) she finds her skin and is confronted with the moral dilemma whether to return to her kin or to remain trapped in the human shape for good. Shapeshifting is even more complex in other stories: throughout her adventures, Andersen's original Little Mermaid transforms from half-fish half-human aquatic hybrid to human girl and then to seafoam and to a nature spirit, "a daughter of the air" awaiting to metamorphose into a pure, immaterial, immortal soul. Her journey (incompletely portrayed by the Disney animation adaptation) leads from animal to human to thing to force of nature to spiritual essence. While these multiple transfigurations are invested with Christian religious significance for Andersen, they also carry posthumanist implications. In postmodern revisions, as in Dreamworks' 2001 blockbuster 3D animation movie *Shrek* or Angela Carter's numerous feminist fairy-tale rewrites, tables are turned: human characters reject the anthropomorphic metamorphosis and choose to keep their animal hides,[3] implying that a bit of bestiality might be necessary for experiencing the intense richness of the vitality of being.

Stories about human-beast shapeshifting—regardless of the fact whether wearing the other species' skin is a curse, a reward, an accident, or a choice—invite us to challenge our anthropocentric worldview, to suspend our sense of speciesist supremacy, and to consider ethically charged existential philosophical issues. Interspecies romance revolving around the issue of empathically identifying with the desired/dreaded other urges us to confront questions concerning humanity, trying to understand what our relations and responsibilities towards one another are and what we may learn

from other species. Hence, interspecies romance necessarily opens the way for reevaluating ideological strategies of normalization or pathologization, of integration or exclusion, and it pushes readers to rethink normative social constructions of mental health, body image, identity scripts, interpersonal bonds, collective scapegoatings and solidarities.

Among the many posthumanist critical dilemmas raised, it is exciting to consider how the essential motivation for interspecies romance is a desire to connect with other life forms. This reaching out to others might be interpreted as a compensatory gesture characteristic of the Eremocene, our era named an "age of loneliness" by evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson (Trachsel 69). According to Wilson, today, in the age of the sixth mass extinction, the escalating environmental damage (pollution, overconsumption, overpopulation) is attributable to the original sin of humans' dissociation from the non-human, the unraveling of the "web of life" constituting the ecological system. Results of this alienation are cli-fi fantasies of a barren, hostile, or disintegrating nature, which reveal the human atonement felt over environmental destruction and the loss of the illusion of human control over nature. In interspecies romance the very controllability of human nature, the knowability of the self, is questioned through the encounter with the other. In both speculative fictional genres the question remains the one raised by Wilson: will we go on exploiting the planet to meet the immediate needs of humans, and guarantee the well-being of our species (and only our species) even at the cost of violent undue interference in ecological balance and the lives of multiple life forms, or will we consider stopping the destruction for the sake of future generations, trusting in mutually enriching potentials of solidarious "interspecies dependencies" (Haraway 11) and multispecies cohabitations?

Bones and all: eat the one you love?

A recent coming-of-age dark fantasy romance, *Bones and All* by Camille DeAngelis (2015), encapsulates the postmodern mood of disorientation—alienation, heartbreak, and a questioning of the self through the encounter with monstrous otherness—in a road trip narrative set in a distant, vaguely familiar US. This is a dystopic realm where the dehumanization of the human race is numbly accepted as natural humanoid cannibalistic monsters are imperceptibly integrated within the society of human beings they feed upon. The monsters, laconically called "eaters," are reminiscent of the Arabic folklore's ghouls, demonic beasts (originally

sometimes pictured as humanoid creatures shapeshifting into hyenas) who snatch corpses from cemeteries or lure people away to devour them.[4]

However, the troubling strangeness of DeAngelis's cannibals is due to the incertitude surrounding the origins of monstrosity in her storyworld: we never learn whether the insatiable hunger for human flesh is a result of a magical curse, a mysterious epidemy, or a hereditary degeneration, whether it is a supernatural power or a disempowering disability, whether anthropophagic acts are elicited by biological needs, psycho-sexual drives, ritualistic motivations, decadent deviation, or criminal behavior. Moreover, cannibals bear no physical marks of difference, so they are indiscernible from others and cannot be spotted in public. Although (and precisely because) they look like the rest of us, they embody the uncanniness of gothic horror by slyly introducing the radically alien perspective of the animal gaze within the anthropocentric visual economy to enact the meatification of the human subject, and to trouble the ordered system from within.

The uncanny effect is enhanced by DeAngelis's conjoining of the gothic horror and the teen romance genres, as well as her sympathetic portrayal of her cannibal protagonists as vulnerable teenagers who are isolated as outcasts because of their monstrous differences but desperately keep longing for love. Emotional confusion is created in readers confronted with the relatable tenderness of the bestial anti-heroes. The non-homogenizable nature of the cannibal race equally creates cognitive dissonance: anthropophagic addiction is sometimes explained by necessity and sometimes by choice, hence making moral judgments difficult if not dubious, while revealing the multi-faceted variety of differences.

The plot of *Bones and All* can be summarized as follows: sixteen-year-old Maren is abandoned by her mother, who cannot bear any longer the psychological burden of her daughter's cannibalism. She is tired of secretiveness and culpability, of having to pack their car to move after each time Maren half-accidentally commits a murder whenever she is about to fall in love and ends up devouring her unknowing potential future partner. Maren embarks on a journey of self-discovery in search of her origins, looking for her father, whom she has never met, desperately trying to come to terms with her own monstrous self. During her hitchhiking across the US, she meets kind humans and enemies—some of both get eaten—and fellow eaters addicted to human flesh. This latter group includes her own grandfather, who is a predatory, perverted paternal figure; some hobos loitering on the margins of society; and a mysterious wanderer Lee, who, presumably, teaches Maren the meaning of true love by offering himself to be eaten up by her.

The budding romance between the two adolescent cannibals is a curious case of interspecies romance.[5] We learn from their reminiscences that both Maren and Lee have had human love interests, failed fatal flings (which all ended up with deeply traumatizing, or straightforward eating up human partners). After their tragically absurd romantic prehistory, the pair apparently make each other's perfect match: both are in-between creatures, humans (or humanoid mutants?) turned bestial by their irrepressible meat-eating impulses. They are outcasts on the fringes of their society, holding on to the last morsels of their humanity manifested in the atonement felt over their hideous cannibalistic acts, as well as the desire to take care of each other and to share the quest for the meaning of life and death.

In fact, because of their constant remorseful self-reflection, Maren and Lee seem more morally mature, more humane than members of the non-cannibalistic human society, the normal citizens who seem aware but negligent or forgetful about cannibalism proliferating in the storyworld. Although anthropophagy violates the ultimate taboo of our species, this perversion remains imperceptible and non-persecuted in the narrative: cannibals can pass as/among people, they are more on the run because of their guilt than criminal prosecution that somehow never manages to detect them. Human society either lives in full denial in the face of the traumatic impossible turned real in the figure of the human-eating-human, or it chooses to remain consciously blind to the otherness lurking within the self-same. The young cannibals are like cancerous cells ravaging invisibly from the inside the healthy body of human society built on the collective consensus of mutual trust. In this respect, they evoke the "enemy within" rhetoric commenting on the malignant activities of the terrorist cells during a 9/11 press coverage (see Mitchell): they embody metaphorically the internal ills of society.

The cannibal romance as a "body-genre" in Linda Williams's sense of the term (2) disturbs our ideologically disciplined cultured embodiment to foreground raw flesh, bloody meat, tremulous corporeal intensities, which unleash anarchic Dionysian impulses to perform social criticism. The narratological patterns of the heteronormative romance plot are subverted, and the compulsory open ending of "living happily ever after" is mocked in a story about violent deaths and difficult survival, foregrounding precarity, shame, mourning, and melancholy as formative experience of humankind.

The very genre of "cannibal horror romance" is both a cliché and a paradoxical misnomer. Its cliché aspect relates to the embodied metaphor of passion, expressed through excessive terms of endearment: "I love you so much I could devour you."[6] On the other hand, cannibal romance is also an

ultimate paradox: it annihilates the couple, leaves only one partner behind, and only the haunting memory of the consumed partner remains. Readers are overwhelmed by a sense of perplexion because of the brutal abortion of the conventional closure of the romance narrative.[7]

The ancient Greeks distinguished between eight different kinds of loving: *eros* is romantic passion, *philia* is fondness between friends, *storge* is an empathic tie between family members, *agape* is unconditional adulation of God, *mania* is possessive love, *pragma* is accepting love, *ludus* is playful love, *philautia* is self-love (see Soble). *Bones and All* meticulously stages the failure of all these affective relational varieties: the mother abandons the daughter, the lover feeds on her partner, divine providence is absent from this world. This is an anti-love story portraying a world where tenderness is doomed to become twisted, perverted, ephemeral—yet, it remains the only reason to live or to die for.

Reasons to bite

The proliferation of the reasons why the cannibal characters kill and eat in DeAngelis's novel illustrates the moral panic and cognitive dissonance caused by these terrifying yet fascinating monster figures' taboo-breaking trespassings. Maren is responsible for the horrific revitalization of the romance trope: she is like a female praying mantis, a monstrous "*femme castratice*" (Creed 85);[8] whenever a boy approaches her romantically or sexually, their intimate encounter is abruptly ended by her eating him. For Maren hunger is associated with erotic excitement and amorous attachments, which clearly surpass and subvert the heteronormative reproductive sexual economy's romance scenario and are closer to the dangerously unstoppable, femme fatale-ish, queer desires. Maren's first prey was her babysitter via an instinctively aggressive enactment of an infantile libidinal longing for the primary caretaker, followed by a bloody "accident" in a summer camp when she was eight and first experienced half-unknowingly the irrepressible nature of her predatory appetite. Afterwards, hunger overwhelms her each year once, when she cannot help eating the boy who romantically advances her and could have become her boyfriend.

Luca Guadagnino's filmic adaptation of the novel (2022) makes the queering of Maren's desires even more explicit: her journey from abandonment (this time by her father, not her mother) to self-discovery begins with her involuntary coming out as a cannibal at a sleepover party when after painting each other's nails she kisses and then suddenly bites off the finger of one of her girlfriends. Shocked, she runs away from the scene spectacularly troubling the ideal image of girlhood: the innocent glee turned into ravaging violence is

metonymically represented by the colorful claws (painted nails) and bloody teeth. In both the novel and the film, Maren keeps on suffering from guilt, shame, and loneliness. She is endlessly pitying her victims' ruptured lives and is tormented by an undefinable longing for companionship.

Lee, the boy she befriends on her journey—and whom she meets, ironically, in a foodstore—eats bad guys who deserve death, people without whom the world would be a better place. He is a heartbroken Byronic character full of spleen, grieving his former girlfriend, who ended up in a psychiatric hospital because she could not cope with the sight of seeing him eating fellow humans. His figure is heavily indebted to Anne Rice's Lestat from *Interview with a Vampire*, perhaps the first bloodsucker with a human self-conscience, a remorseful, brooding villain hero. In the end, as in an ultimate act of love, he offers himself up for consumption for Maren. During a stoic acceptance of the predator–prey hierarchy, his only means of rebellion—like suicide was a means of escape for modernist poets—is choosing to be eaten instead of remaining an eater.

Sully, an old man who turns out to be Maren's grandfather, is a petty criminal and a psychopath serial killer, who steals from the random victims he consumes, makes a fetish object of a braid (scalp) from their hair, and would even eat up his own grandchild, similar to how the titan Cronos/Saturn would consume his own children for fear they would destroy him according to a prophecy. Cronos as a god of time communicates a warning of no future in a fatally corrupted world. The novel could also be interpreted as a rewriting of the Little Red Riding Hood story, a cautionary tale of being lost in the dark woods, of erring and punishment. Bruno Bettelheim (166–83) highlighted in this "little girl lost" story the splitting of the Father figure into a protective good father (the hunter who rescues granny and Little Red), and the Bad Father (the predator wolf who wants to eat the girl up). They impersonate two sides of the same coin (like the witch and the good fairy in the female equivalent of the splitting into bad/good mother figures), since it is difficult for a child to conceptualize the ambiguity that the parent is both a nurturer and a punisher. Maren's biological father is a catatonic patient with amnesia when Maren finds him in a mental ward, but from his past notebooks it turns out that he had gentle affections for Maren's mother and their child (Maren), whom he never met. The grandfather, in contrast, is a ruthless murderer and a repulsive, abject creature with a bad breath smelling of putrefaction, rot, and death. While the deranged father is lost in time or rather timelessness, the grandfather appears as Father Time, the companion of the Grim Reaper, who brings death and ceases time. This splitting of the (grand)father figure also represents a rupture

in the patriarchal hegemonic system as noticed by the teen female focalizer, envisioning the falling apart of her world, and the disintegration of human reality on the whole.

Further intertextual echoes of Little Red Riding Hood's tale can be detected in the cannibalistic act that can be interpreted as an aggressive compensation of anxieties related to intergenerational rivalry, intrafamiliar tensions, troubled bonds by blood-ties. DeAngelis's eater revives the hungry girl from Paul Delarue's early peasant folk oral version of the tale entitled "The Grandmother's Tale," in which Red Riding Hood is tricked by the wolf—representing all-encompassing desire and lust—to taste the flesh and drink the blood of her dead granny before climbing into bed with the predator to consummate bestial passions. Maren, like Delarue's Red, is always famished for more and is never anyone's meat.

Furthermore, the novel revives the dysfunctional family trope of classic Gothic fiction borrowed from the sensation novelistic tradition, cropping up in classics like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, or E. A. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," dark fantasies populated with villainous patriarchs, mad mothers, incestuous siblings, and virginal damsels in distress. The irony of DeAngelis's rewrite is that her young heroine is no less blood-thirsty than her adversaries, and instead of a specific Gothic setting like a doomed ancestral castle or a haunted mansion, all the world serves as the humanoid predators' hunting ground.

A symptomatic reading of carnalization

The insatiable hunger for human flesh can have a variety of different metaphorical meanings. It can be interpreted in terms of pathology, as addiction, contamination, eating disorder, or incurable illness. It can be a dark secret, a radically differing non-standard sexual orientation, uncontainable queer desire, but it can just as well mean a vague search for the real flavor of life or an insatiable appetite endlessly stimulated by consumer culture. There is no real explanation provided for the origins or motivations of cannibalism—neither fantastic nor rationalistic. DeAngelis's cannibals are unlike the ghoul who eats human meat because of demonic possession, or the psychopath driven by mental disorder, or Papua-New Guinean tribes motivated by religious convictions. There is no cure and no resolution, either, for this deadly deviation.

For DeAngelis's young cannibal antiheroes, becoming a monster implies losing everything (home, family, friends), becoming vulnerable, realizing the fearfulness of a world in which they are identified/othered as

ultimate sources of fear. They impersonate the "enemy within" the self and society, the potential meaninglessness or latent nonsensification troubling meanings. They are the unexpected threat who feel remorse but cannot renounce their predatoriness: they perform the "abjectification of the subject" (Kristeva 5) by revealing a perspective from which human identity is reduced to prey, raw meat, consumable flesh.

This carnalization showcases major ethical dilemmas of our times. It problematizes the unsustainability and illusoriness of the ideologically prescribed, normativized divide between the normal (healthy/sane) self and the monstrous abnormal other, who prove to be imperceptibly inseparable, infiltrating into one another. It also reflects on the recognition of our vulnerable exposure to the natural lifeworld (Nature) and to our nature (the risk of becoming prey to our passions). It asks the age-old moral philosophical questions already tackled by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: who is to blame for the monster's monstrosity, do monsters deserve love, and is the corrupted human race capable or worthy of love at all?

In a more pragmatic social critical vein, the story confronts us with the classist blindness of the majority human society that ignores the marginalized others on the fringes. The storyworld's oblivion to cannibals and the pointless wondering of eaters resembles how the homeless, vagrant, poor, junkie, multiply marginalized social outcasts largely deprived of rights are nearly invisibly drifting out of the visible, respectable strata of the community. It also invites readers to ponder about how to come of age as an isolated outcast without any social network of protection, without any normative reference point in relation to which one may identify oneself.

DeAngelis admittedly aimed to convey a political message with her novel: her cannibal body-horror was meant to disclose the ethical crisis of our carnivorous culture by calling attention to the speciesist partiality that mourns the violence afflicted on human flesh but remains uninterested in the consumption of other life-forms (Sondermann). However, some of the novel's most exciting passages are not necessarily the ones with explicit anti-carnivorous ideological implications, but rather those memory fragments which attest anti-heroine Maren's troubled relation to eating. Besides her traumatic flashbacks of consuming human flesh as symptoms of her bestiality, she also recalls cherished memories of her dining with her mother as ephemeral—simulated?—instances of intimate family bonding. Meanwhile she is haunted by vague reminiscences of one of her early victims, a boy in the summer camp, who invited her for a weird secret snack of locust shells, wishing unsuspiciously that their shared appetite for "things that weren't

meant to be eaten" (17) would serve as the foundation of a budding friendship grounded in the infantile pleasure of oral trespassing and culinary taboo breaking. The disastrous consequences of this innocently perverted gustatory delight (Maren eats the boy instead of the locust shells) are followed by a remorsefully self-punishing grief manifested in anorectic self-starvation, which sheds light on the complexity of Maren's character (she is not a psychopath but a monster with a self-conscience) but also reminds us of the psychopathological problems lurking behind eating disorders. These embodied memories in Maren's coming-of-age narrative illustrate the intricacies of our affectively charged cognitive responses to food. In a provocative interpretation, one may even wonder if the human prey to this teen cannibal serves as comfort food to alleviate loneliness and social isolation in an increasingly alienated, if not hostile, environment.

Speaking silences: meat guilt and a call to moral veganism

On the novel's textual level, not much is said about the cannibalistic act itself. DeAngelis shies away from the explicit verbalization of bloodshed. In this sense, the book is closer to a suspenseful thriller than an actual horror story, not to mention the splatterpunk genre one would associate with the cannibal theme. Episodes culminating in manslaughter begin with a brief cataloguing of sensorial stimuli that arouse an irrepressible hunger decoded as passionate yearning overwhelming the self.

> I didn't want to. I really, really wanted to. I leaned in and sniffed him. Chili powder—rotten eggs—cotton lint. I pressed my lips to his throat and felt him stiffen with anticipation. He put a hand to my ponytail and stroked it, like he was petting a horse. He breathed on me, I smelled the chili, and just like that there was no going back.
> * * *
> I stumbled out of the red tent toward the lake, out to the edge of the dock, and flung the grocery bag into the water. Then I pulled off my pajamas and threw them out as far as I could. I watched my Little Mermaid T-shirt sink below the surface of the lake, heard the plastic bag gurgling as it filled. (21)

> I put my lips to his neck, pressed them there, and drank him in. I could smell the cocktail sauce on his breath, the little pieces of shellfish rotting in the dark corners of his mouth. I stepped back and looked at him. His eyes were closed and he was smiling like I could do anything I wanted to him and he'd be over the moon about it. This won't be what you have in mind, I thought. But it's too late now. When I was finished I fell onto the scrap of

> carpet in front of the dryer, shivering so badly I made the machine rumble like it was working. No one upstairs could have heard any of it. Through the speakers in the living room some sister act was crooning, "Take good care of yourself, you beloooooong to me . . ." (45)

The subtle allusion to the first gentle tentative contact (a light caress of the hair, the touch of lips on skin, the mingling of breaths) is followed by a certain caesura, silence, a restrained reluctance to verbalize the act of consumption. The cannibalistic deed is typographically marked by three asterisks, iconically symbolizing the teeth ripping into human flesh, or a simple space, perhaps standing for a withheld breath, which is then followed by an ongoing text. Both asterisks and absences suggest the unspeakability of the cannibalistic act and the compassion fatigue of our world that goes on untouched by individual tragedies such as the loss of a random human life. These elliptical constructions integrate a pause in the narrative by intentionally leaving out the taboo-breaking episodes to express the burden on imagination to conceptualize the horrific unsaid. The passages succeeding the ellipsis mostly thematize the instant atonement felt after the killing and the clumsy attempts to hide the evidence of the crime; they also contain subtle ironic commentaries on the impossibility of romance with emblematic scenes, like the sinking of a blood-soaked Little Mermaid shirt in the lake, or the crooning of a kitschy love-song overheard, vibrating over a mauled corpse.

These speaking silences, gaps, blanks in the text can also be symptomatically connected to "meat guilt." This feeling is familiar to many consumers of today's capitalist market economies even if supermarkets strategically try to reduce our shame by selling prepacked meat products in which we no longer recognize fellow sentient beings. A cognitive/affective confusion is related to what psychologists refer to as "meat paradox" and philosophers call "the omnivore's akrasia" (Aaltola). Many people both love and eat animals; they believe in the value of animal wellbeing yet forgetfully consume meat products which have caused suffering and death to nonhuman creatures.

Similarly, in the cannibal romance, love and destruction, care and consumption are not incompatible experiences either. A coming-of-age rite of passage might imply consuming your beloved to celebrate love and learn to love yourself while rebelling against your norm-setting community. (Note that eating an Eater breaks the laws of the cannibal community too.) By creating affective confusion with her absurd, dark, cautionary (anti)fairy tale of consumption, DeAngelis aims to promote a vegan ideology[9] by provoking

audiences to think of their naturalized, unproblematized predatoriness, to consider how "every time we are eating meat, we are eating the body of someone who did not want to die" (Sondermann) and how even our romantic dates revolve around our food fetish and the eroticization of communally feeding on flesh.

On the other hand, when the young cannibals listen to a radio broadcast of a midnight mass, we are reminded that one of the most significant religious ceremonies of Christianity, a major pillar of Western culture, is the holy communion that symbolically stages the drinking of blood and eating of flesh of Jesus Christ, the son of God, through a transubstantiation that merges the holy and the profane, and turns sacred the straightforward monstrous. The preacher on the radio also raises the theological question concerning the culpability of sinners and the believers' moral responsibility of forgiveness. This can be translated, in biological terms, to the meaninglessness of holding the predator accountable for its predatoriness and has interesting implications with regard to the ethical and political aspects of dietary choices. For the cannibal, consuming the totality of the body (hence the title "bones and all") without leaving any remainders behind is a feasible option in the fictional world. Yet, this fantastic impossibility also evokes the amnesia regarding the violence that is necessary for the remorseless pleasures of meat production/consumption.

The ethics of eating well

In our era, at the end of the Anthropocene, we can easily interpret the novel as a fictional reformulation of philosopher Jacques Derrida's "ethics of eating well" (1991). This is an apology of the carnivorous human in the age of the sixth mass extinction and an unredeemable environmental crisis he is responsible for due to his greedy overconsumption. The Derridean critique of carnophallogocentrism discloses how interconnected networks of hegemonic oppression systemically "cannibalize" otherness: it problematizes the ruthless exploitation of marginalized minorities, and argues that intersecting patriarchal/carnivorous means of domination (of women, animals,[10] Queer, poor, disabled, Black, etc.) are foundational in the constitution of the Western subjectivity grounded in a sacrificial logic of self-identity that devours and regurgitates differences of all kinds to solidify standards of normativity. Although Derrida argues for an inalienable carnivorous nature of mankind—even the comprehension of the Cartesian cogito enacts incorporation, digestion, "a kind of sublimated eating" (Olsson and Birnbaum)—his ideology criticism invites the recognition of a moral responsibility to relate respectfully to the other at the table or on the plate. In

a deconstructive sense, Derrida's philosophy and DeAngelis's story equally urge "a respect for that which cannot be eaten, cannot be assimilated in a text," which must remain indeterminate, untranslatable, a remainder that cannot be read and must remain alien (Derrida qtd. in Olsson and Birnbaum). Hence, the acceptance of incertitude, vulnerability, and the burden shared by all living things of the potential of becoming meat may serve as a foundation of solidarity, too.

The carnalization/meatification of humans is equally humiliating and liberating: it awakens us from the slumber of our human vanity and instructs to empathize with the horror of the victimhood, of sentient, intelligent animals' being reduced to edibles. In a way the message of DeAngelis's cannibal romance resonates with environmental activist, ecofeminist philosopher Valerie Plumwood's emphatic rejection of the anthropocentric illusion of the master/monster divide after a kayaking accident when she was attacked and nearly killed by a crocodile. The experience of becoming prey made her rethink her human self, "as part of the food chain, eaten as well as eater," necessarily "coexisting with the otherness of the earth," defined not only by its privileged agency but also in terms of its usefulness for other nonhuman members of the ecosystem within the shared nature-culture continuum of our terrestrial milieu. Similarly to Plumwood's story of her crocodile encounter, *Bones and All* functions as "a humbling and cautionary tale about our relationship with the earth, about the need to acknowledge our own animality, and ecological vulnerability" (Plumwood, "Prey to a Crocodile") from a pseudo-"posthumous posthumanist perspective" (Lovász on Plumwood 84) in line with the *ars moriendi* tradition.

However, the posthumanist message of DeAngelis' book is not entirely optimistic. With a touch of postmodern self-destabilization, the novel's open ending offers a bitterly sarcastic finale. The farewell scene is located in a library—a place often portrayed in dystopic fiction as a last refuge of survivors, a symbolic sacred site of our civilization, a Foucauldian heterotopia encapsulating all the wisdom of humanity beyond spatio-temporal limitations. However, Maren decides to work in the library on the university campus only to shed the last remnants of her humanity, to gain easy access to prey, to fully give in to her cannibal instincts and submit to the utter monstrification of her self. The bookwormish look, the nostalgic reenactment of epistemophilia is a camouflage of the carnivore predator to deceive its victims. With a cheap horror twist, the hunger for knowledge turns into a hunger for blood, brains, bones. The fleshliness of metaphorical language, the acquired taste for the savoriness of writing theorized by

Derrida, ironically becomes literalized here through the connection of body and book.

Bones, of course, belong to the skeletal structure of the human body, to the invisible abject depth beneath the visible, culturally disciplined surface of the skin ego. They are metonymic markers of impending death in the *memento mori* tradition, the pieces of our anatomy which resist most the passing of time. In the novel's fantastic storyworld, no bodily remains whatsoever are left behind after the cannibal attacks, as the predators eat bones and all, as if they just could suddenly erase their prey from the realm of the living via an act of forgetfulness mirroring the denials involved in the meat-eaters' guilt.

Among the many exciting (and dramaturgically beneficent) modifications of the novel's cinematic adaptation, director Luca Guadagnino changes the significance of the title to emphasize the romance plotline, the love between Maren and Lee. In the film, an Eater has to really, really love someone to eat their bones and all, in their integrity, not leaving any morsels behind. Hence being consumed becomes a privilege, and eating a tender act of love, a touching fusion of self and other, a romanticized encounter of omnivorous edibles in the food-chain.

In conclusion, DeAngelis's *Bones and All*, as a disturbing cannibal romance, fits into the popular fantastic fictional trend of YA dystopic dark-fantasy failed-Bildungsroman. This chimeric hybrid genre expresses the emotional imbalance characteristic of adolescence and also captures the sense of disorientation defining the postmillennial Zeitgeist of the Eremocene, our age when the lonely species of humankind suffers from the alienation from the lifeworld it feeds on. The consumption of human flesh for different reasons, but especially and most importantly as an act of love, raises a wide variety of ethical questions from theological dilemmas (involving the clashing of the symbolical and literal meanings of sacrificial dietary ritualistic practices) to vegetarianism/veganism as an ideology of non-violence, the affective-cognitive dissonance of the carnivore's meat-guilt, and even to the Capitalocene's commodification of food sold as a token of love, and love sold as food, a nutrient necessary for humankind's survival endlessly devourable, digestible, dischargeable; rapidly reducable from worthy to waste, like flesh is to meat.[11]

Far from being a light YA chiller, *Bones and All* represents a beacon of hope that sheds light on the transformative powers of literature and paves the way for increasingly politically self-conscious trends of humanities like vegan philosophy (see Quinn and Westwood). Besides provoking horror with hideous cannibalistic crimes, the novel urges intersectional self-reflection on

neoliberal capitalism's carnophallogocentric web of systemic exploitation to reject the "consumption" of the marginalized many by the powerful privileged few, and to promote veganism as a worldview grounded in intra- and inter-species solidarity.

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Notes

1. See among others: Christa Knellwolf and Jane Goodall, eds. *Frankenstein's Science: Experimentation and Discovery in Romantic Culture*, 1780–1830. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008; Sally J. Kline, *The Degeneration of Women: Bram Stoker's Dracula as Allegorical Criticism of the Fin-de-Siècle*. Rheinbach-Merzbach: CMZ Verlag, 1992; Julia Reid, *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the "Fin de Siècle."* New York: Palgrave, 2006; Henry A Giroux, *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*. New York: Peter Lang, 2011; Hódosy Annamária, *Klímaszörnyek*. [Climate Monsters] Szeged: Tiszatáj, 2023; Csetényi, Korinna,"'The monsters are us': Mad Scientists and Mutated Beasts in Contemporary Natural Horror Fiction," *Posthumanism in Fantastic Fiction*. Ed. Anna Kérchy. Americana E-Books, 2018. 158–72.

2. On the other hand, the infantilization of new generations, a sort of perpetual puberty, the Peter Pan syndrome is a sociological phenomenon. Youngsters stuck in the mommy hotel of the parental household for financial and psychological reasons experience difficulties in separating from parents. These longer stages of belonging extend the transitional stage between child and adulthood. This is another factor that provides a potential explanation for the sweeping success of the recent YA/new adult reading category labels of the book publishing/marketing industry.

3. Anthropomorphic metamorphosis is rejected either literally as in the feline finale of "The Tiger's Bride," or metaphorically, as in the case of the "wolfish," predatory Little Red Riding Hood in "The Company of Wolves." Both stories feature in *The Bloody Chamber,* Angela Carter's collection of feminist fairy-tale rewritings.

4. Further human-eating mythical monsters include zombies and ogres.

5. The romanticization of cannibalism is a common trend in popular youth culture today: there is an increasing fandom admiring the dark lyrics of Lana del Ray's passionate ballads, the psychopathology of twisted minds raised by series like Netflix's *Dahmer*, the latent sado-masochistic queer subtext in NBC's by-now cult classic *Hannibal* crime television series, or taboo-breaking grotesque-cute gurokawai manga-inspired art by artists like Japanese Kurokawa Inuko.

6. This ironic, backwards phenomenon of heightened affections stimulating a violent response is called "cute aggression" in social psychology and is meant to balance the emotional equilibrium after someone has been overwhelmed by very strong emotions.

7. "Sick-lit" is a popular subgenre of YA novels where the romanticization of the illness narrative and the medical recontextualization of the literary cliché of "tragic love hindered by the death of a hero/ine too young to die" is an ethically equally questionable gambit. We keep asking ourselves if novels like *The Fault in Our Stars* or *Five Feet Apart* are responsible representations of challenging topics including teen mortality, disability, grief, mental illness, or just senseless "torture-porn" appealing to our worst voyeuristic impulses? Yet, at least in these stories, untimely death is to be blamed only on unjust Fate and not the partner involved in the romance.

8. Barbara Creed's seminal book offers a typology of the monstrous-feminine in contemporary horror film from a feminist psychoanalytical perspective focusing on tropes of the archaic mother, the vagina dentata, the vampire, the witch, the possessed body, the monstrous mother and the femme castratrice. She agrees with James B. Twitchell that modern horror myths function as fables of sexual identity and often help teenagers cope with the anxieties related to reproduction (5).

9. With a similar political motivation, the Mormon author of *Twilight*, Stephenie Meyer, used the trope of infinite yearning fuelling the interspecies romance to advocate chastity and premarital celibacy and promote an "undead abstinence ideology" (Siegel 261). The apple on the book's cover refers to the Mormon reinterpretation of the Fall of humankind, the theme of overcoming the natural human by wrestling with one's earthly desires to gain eternal holiness.

10. Carol Adams's *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* advocates a vegan lifestyle by drawing a parallel between women's and animals' bodies as consumable objects meant to satisfy a male diet and gaze. According to Adams, meat-eating contributes to violence against women, feminized men, and animals; hence dietary choices have moral and political stakes and are directly connected with questions of social and environmental justice, and animal rights and welfare. For the abusive sexual politics of meat, Adams blames patriarchal institutions of food-production/consumption rather than individual consumers. This theme is elaborated on in Argentinean Agustina Bazterrica's dystopian novel *Tender is the Flesh*.

11. I thank the anonymous reviewer for their thought-provoking remarks on love as food, a cherished commodity of the Capitalocene.

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sciendo

Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 35-59
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/3

Wellbeing in the Necrocene: *The Walking Dead* as a Solarpunk Eco-Ustopia

Annamária Hódosy

ABSTRACT

The zombie genre has a number of characteristics that allow for a more thorough consideration of the link between the fictive zombie outbreaks and the problems of the Anthropocene. The present study aims to scrutinize why this issue can be considered even when it is not directly addressed, as in *The Walking Dead* series (2010–2022), which is analyzed after an overview of how the zombie has transitioned from embodying individual and social condition to indicating ecological threats. The discussion intends to demonstrate that the social connotations within the zombie tradition identify the zombie-infested world with modern capitalist society, thus making the genre a possible parable of what Jason Moore calls the Capitalocene and Justin McBrien the Necrocene. The *TWD* series shows an interest in not only the ensuing catastrophe but also the potentialities of "good life" after climate change, portraying the protagonists as not only escaping the dead but building new communities for the living and developing green technologies necessary to adapt to the climate crisis. *TDW* therefore transforms the zombie genre from a "splatterpunk" dystopia into a solarpunk dystopia, or "ustopia," considering that it presents an almost eco-utopian vision of a dystopic world. (AH)

KEYWORDS: zombie, TWD, ustopia, capitalocene, necrocene, ecology, ecopolitics, consumer society, wellbeing

The zombie and the Anthropocene

Tales of the Walking Dead (2022) is an American post-apocalyptic horror drama anthology television series based on *The Walking Dead* universe, a fictitious world overrun by zombies. In episode 4, a lonely scientist, Dr. Everett, who, in a hermit-like solitude, devotes his life to the study of the undead, takes center stage. He believes that the rise of zombies is contributing to the regeneration of the environment that humans have destroyed over the past hundred and fifty years—in the era that scientists call the Anthropocene (Biermann and Lövbrand 1). As Dr. Everett explains, "that is the problem

with *Homo sapiens*. All we do is take, take, take until there is nothing left. And then once nature corrects the damage, we go back and do it all over again." A girl, saved from the zombies by the scientist, wonders why the man does not consider the undead to be abnormal abominations: "I am confused. Are you arguing for chompers or for nature?"[1] The scientist's response reveals the rejection of such binarism: "They are one and the same now. *Homo mortuus* are part of nature; *Homo mortuus* will exist as long as humans are around, which puts our survival in question" ("Amy/Dr. Everett"). This approach posits the zombie epidemic as Earth's mechanism to eliminate the problem posed by humans the same way some ecologically-minded people did two years before the show was created, at the beginning of the Covid epidemic, when they proclaimed that "we are the virus, and the coronavirus is the vaccine" (Lambermont) that is meant to heal the planet.

All this invokes James E. Lovelock's Gaia theory, according to which the Earth is a complex self-regulating system that maintains the conditions for life on the planet through negative feedback loops. In his 1991 book *Gaia, The Practical Science of Planetary Medicine,* Lovelock claimed that Gaia "is sufficiently like a living organism to be subject to illness or injury." Although Gaia is self-healing, "we have grown in numbers and in disturbance to Gaia to the point where our presence is perceptibly disabling, like a disease," triggering a counter-reaction aimed at the "destruction of the invading disease organisms" (Lovelock 153). In episode 4 of the *Tales of the Walking Dead*, it is the *Homo mortuus* that seems to be the "planetary medicine" to the planetary malady caused by *Homo sapiens*.

While it is quite rare, even unique, that a reference to the ecological crisis is so direct in a zombie-film as it is here, the zombie genre has a number of characteristics that together allow for a more thorough consideration of the link between the fictive zombie outbreaks and the problems of the Anthropocene. In the following, I will discuss what arguments there are to demonstrate that "from the 1970s on, thanks to Romero's films, the viral zombie has reflected our horror at the workings and effects of capitalism and consumerism and in more recent narratives fears related to an irreversible climate change as the outcome of the Anthropocene are stressed" (Limpár, "Matters" 229). Focusing on what may play on the viewer's ecological fears—or, more precisely, climate anxiety—in zombie films, the present study aims to scrutinize why this issue can be considered even when it is not directly addressed, as in *The Walking Dead* series (2010–2022), which will be analyzed after an overview of how the zombie has transitioned from embodying individual and social conditions to indicating ecological threats.

The fiction of "zombification" often highlights the dark side of the economic system, and the social connotations within the zombie tradition identify the zombie-infested world with modern capitalist society, where people are marginalized victims of the capitalist economy or, through their absorption in consumer culture, contribute to the exploitation of others and nature, thus making the genre a possible parable of what Jason Moore calls the Capitalocene (122) and Justin McBrien the Necrocene (116). Finally, the post-apocalyptic surroundings in the films make it not only possible but inevitable for survivors to seek forms of society capable of self-preservation, which also allows the viewer to ponder the conditions of a sustainable economy.

Within this framework the post-apocalyptic drama series *The Walking Dead* (*TWD*) presents a vision of the end of capitalism, which becomes a specific solution to the ecological crisis. The zombies in the series—called walkers—function not so much as "ecoterrorist agent[s] of Mother Earth" (Kérchy) like in the spin-off *Tales*, but as remnants and reminders of the social and economic consequences of the necropolitical trends in contemporary society that make it impossible for many to live a decent life. The last seasons are distinguished by the fact that the protagonists no longer lament the end of the perished modern world but start to build a new one: one which is ecologically sustainable and in which social justice prevails. The drama demonstrates that wellbeing does not depend on the present economical abundance but is possible in conditions of scarcity and is measured by the quality of human relationships and an ethic of care. This is what makes *TWD*—or at least some of its episodes—worthy of being considered as an almost eco-utopian vision in a dystopic world, or a "ustopia," a term coined by Margaret Atwood to describe worlds that contain elements of both dystopia and utopia.[2]

The zombie and the Necrocene

The zombie genre can easily be considered as a manifestation of the aversion toward the body, a testimony to the dualism of mind and matter, showcasing the spirit and individuality of the subject in opposition to perishable organic matter. As Margrit Shildrick writes, "the disruption of corporeal integrity and the open display of bodily vulnerability is always a moment for anxiety and very often for hostility" (309; see also Poole 207, Dudenhoeffer 9). Additionally, as disgusting things are mostly organic, according to Simon Estok, they might also be signs of ecophobia (6–7).

Indeed, the zombie does not only betray, but also represents "a deep-seated phobia about 'nature'" that "has a long history, and it has been argued that such a sentiment, consciously or not, may lie at the heart of Western culture's long-held desire to alter, change and even destroy those aspects of our environments that (seem to) threaten us" (Hillard 105). Biotechnology is an attempt to achieve this goal. In contemporary zombie films, such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), *Resident Evil* (2002), or *The Crazies* (2010), the zombie plague appears as a side effect of pharmaceutical experiments (Schmeink 206). So, "despite the fantasies of virtual disembodiment and the utopian discourses stating that virtual reality will liberate us from the constraints of the material body, there seems to be 'no escape from the meat'" (Detsi-Diamanti et al. 5), just as—for many characters—there is no escape from the zombies in this genre.

However, the narratives of zombie films are symbolic not only of the fear of the body or organic materiality. The decaying bodies may signify a problematic body politic, that is, they may serve as "a depiction of social and symbolic (dis)order" (Ureczky 10). Many would argue that the contemporary trend of featuring monsters is a symptom of social crisis, although not necessarily of climate crisis (Birch-Bayley 1138). At the same time, whatever triggers the disasters in the cinema nowadays, the outcome recalls predictions of the climate catastrophe: social breakdown, famine, violence, pestilence (McKibben 83). Cinema seems to heed these predictions when the plots begin with the outbreak of a zombie epidemic: the opening episodes are always about the sudden end of the familiar Western way of life and the need to introduce a new set of values. In serial representations, the plot is mostly set against a backdrop of wars for the possession of increasingly scarce resources. These narratives evoke not only the "climate wars" (Hulme 125-6) of the *future*, but also the dangers inherent in the *present* modern way of life, the most important of which is the growing number of consumers for the finite quantity of raw materials to be consumed. This is not a new development, though: the issue of sustainability came to the foreground in 1972 with the publication of a computer simulation-based report titled "The Limits to Growth," which seems to have given a boost to zombie narratives. The ecological problems of the world became a hotly debated topic right around "the emergence of Italian zombie cinema in the 1970s," and the reignition of these discourses after the millennium coincides with the era of the so-called contemporary "zombie-renaissance" (Hubner, Leaning, and Manning 8).

Many zombie films suggest that the undead are, in fact, a vitriolic metaphor for the mindless citizen absorbed in consumption. The association between the zombie and the consumer citizen was established in Romero's 1978 *Dawn of the Dead*, where the protagonists, who first fight the zombies and then the survivors for the possession of a plaza, are destroyed in the final battle because they cannot give up what they consider the territory of their own. This association has prevailed and become even stronger via visual representations in which the main behavior traits of zombies and humans are nearly indistinguishable—for instance, in the *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) or in *Warm Bodies* (2013). In these examples, the living either mindlessly consume or destroy, just like the zombies. "Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombiemaker," Mark Fisher observes, "but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us" (15).

Indeed, the great era of zombie films coincides with the rise of global capitalism. Many researchers agree with Jason Moore that "the issue is not one of anthropogenic-drivers—presuming a fictitious human unity—but of the relations of capital and capitalist power. The issue is not the Anthropocene, but the Capitalocene" (286–87). Considering this notion, the zombie is clearly the signature monster of the end of the Capitalocene, where problems with "food and climate, finance and energy represent not multiple, but manifold, forms of crisis emanating from a singular civilizational project: the capitalist world-ecology" (Moore 290). To Moore's diagnosis Justin McBrien adds that the endless accumulation of capital "is not only productive; it is necrotic, unfolding a slow violence. . . . Capital is the Sixth Extinction personified: it feasts on the dead, and in doing so, devours all life" (116). That is why McBrien offers the name Necrocene as an alternative to Moore's term, which the zombie-apocalypse aptly represents.

In McBrien's and Moore's analyses, the economic expansion of the North and the Northern way of life was based not only on the exploitation of nature in general, but also on the resources and manpower of the Third World (McBrien 120–21; Moore 289). The residents of the South are the victims of the increase in consumption in the North, but they are also the scapegoats for the resulting problems. Two years after the publication of "The Limits to Growth," Garret Hardin wrote an influential treatise on the so-called "lifeboat ethics," which claimed that a solution to the ecological crisis was made impossible by the high reproduction rate of the poor world (173–77). As McBrien claims, "now the very reproduction of 'humanity' was a threat to human existence" (131). The discourse of overpopulation resurrected a misanthropic neo-Malthusianism that perceived the greatest

threat to the biosecurity of the globe in "the growing 'hordes' of the Global South," a threat that the sight of the swiftly growing hordes of the undead in zombie films could easily evoke.

The trope of the zombie can be seen as representing the losers of colonialism and the subsequent capitalist restructuring, which may threaten the socio-political status quo. The term "zombie" was originally used in Haitian mythology to refer to the magically resurrected dead, deprived of their souls by the magic of vodou. In the colonial era, the zombie myth offered a fantastic explanation for slavery (Richardson 123–24, Bishop 76–78, 198; Schmeink 204; Murphy 49; Poole 194). In keeping with the zeitgeist, early zombie films between the two world wars drew parallels between the enchanted natives and factory workers on assembly lines. In contemporary zombie films (just like in vampire or werewolf fictions), the transformation into "soulless" beings is not caused by magic but is rather the symptom of an infectious disease spread by biting. On the one hand, this invention makes the plot more credible in a secular culture, while on the other hand, it connects the narrative to the current discourses on epidemics. The fear of disease often fuels (or is used as a pretext for) the exclusion of migrants from the Global South, who are frequently accused of spreading viruses (Pianigiani and Bubola) and who, in most media images, "migrate" in hordes or herds (McBrien 131–32), similarly to the undead in the films.

Racial tensions can also be linked to the anxieties arising from the increasingly sharp divisions between social classes. Today's zombies rarely connote slavery, but are still often and easily associated with social pariahs or the precariat who—deprived of health care and clearly more exposed to disease—are confined to their vegetative functions (Bishop 71–73; Vint 135–36). Since in today's movies zombies are created by infection, it is also possible to see them as the representations of our perception of being sick; their condition can easily raise questions that pertain to the ethics of care. The sight and the definition of the zombie in the movies as *living dead*—together with the danger of becoming one—may express fears that are rooted in the transformation of the health care system in the Northern countries in the 1990s, when the ethics of care was increasingly subordinated to "the authority of an all-encompassing market rationality permeating all areas of life, the economic and the political, the social and the intimate alike" (Brugère 68). Even the very proliferation of zombie films can be seen as a response to the decline in welfare institutions, a direct consequence of the neoliberal economic concept that was gaining ground in the 1970s and which had ecological roots, as it was intended to compensate for the increasing scarcity

and expense of natural resources by cutting wages and eliminating free or cheap forms of public provision. In this frame of thought care is promoted mainly as self-care, "referring only to health, to the able-bodied adult, or to human capital," while providing support to "the poor, to migrants, to people who are stripped of any power" is not encouraged, because it is not profitable (Brugère 70). The ensuing crisis of care is best interpreted as "a more or less acute expression of the social-reproductive contradictions of financialized capitalism. . . . The care deficits we experience today are the form this contradiction takes in this third, most recent phase of capitalist development," Nancy Fraser writes in 2016 (99–100).

It is probably no coincidence that the fashion for early zombie films began after the Great Depression of 1929 with *White Zombie* (1932). The genre's rise after the turn of the millennium cannot be dissociated from the new waves of the financial crisis—so much so that a 2009 article in *Time* magazine by the famous fantasy writer Lev Grossman declared the zombie the "new vampire" and "the official monster of the recession," while Chris Harman wrote a whole volume of social criticism entitled *Zombie Capitalism*, and David McNally analyzed the zombie as the "market's signature monster" alongside the vampire. However, as Fred Botting argues, vampires represent the winners of "new times and global economic restructurings," while in the same fantasy framework "zombies—occluded, outcast, overlooked—constitute the other side of the new global economy" (20).

In this context, the trend of zombie films can be seen as the illustration of what Achille Mbembe describes as the "late modern" trend in politics and warfare: "[I]n our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating death-worlds, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead" (92). No wonder that in the world of the zombie-films "daily life is militarized. Local military commanders have the discretionary freedom to decide whom to shoot and when," which Mbembe calls the manifestation of necropolitics (82–83).

The Walking Dead and solastalgia

In the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the epidemic, almost all zombie films portray life as reverting to the Hobbesian "natural condition of mankind" ruled by "continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 138). The surviving humans, according to the scientist interviewed in *Dawn of the Dead*,

"have got to remain unemotional, rational, logical" (01: 41:18–25). In the fight against the zombies, the survivors emerge as the remaining bannermen of the intelligent, language-using, autonomous, self-conscious and self-interested *Homo economicus*. The focus of the films then usually shifts to the relationships of the healthy to one another, which are also mostly dominated by hostility, since it is generally taken for granted that there is no other way to survive than to compete with one another for the limited resources still available, thus providing an alarming image of the climate wars of the future (Drezner 37–44). As Vera Benczik explains about post-apocalyptic films,

> Economic, social, and cultural regression is a common dystopian element in the (post)apocalyptic canon: survivors revert to old(er) social patterns, and a totalitarian system based on aggression, power, and oppression, a strictly patriarchal social order, and the sharp division of gender roles indicates that not only has progress stalled, but as a result of global trauma, humanity has been pushed back into a state from which there is no escape. (11)

In depicting the violence that seems inevitable to overcome the threat, antagonists and heroes become more and more similar: they are all "monsters" in some way or another (Vint 141). In the latest generation of zombie-themed series (*The Walking Dead,* 2010–2022; *Fear the Walking Dead,* 2015–2023; *Walking Dead: Beyond,* 2020–21; *Black Summer,* 2019–2021; *In the Flesh,* 2013–15, among others), the social/ideological characterization of the groups of survivors moves into focus, which is of interest in certain cases because they can be used to test the ideas of ecopolitical trends. Writing about the first season of *TWD*, Reed and Penfold-Mounce argue that "the most significant development that this fantasy horror television show makes is its ability to inspire the sociological imagination amongst its largely non-scholarly audience" in that "it stimulates consideration of human emotion and relationality within the context of large-scale social change" (136, 126).

Social structures that firmly justify "the stronger's right to life" are not immediately demonized in *TWD* (Török 369–92).[3] After the first five seasons of the show, Stephen Gencarella forthrightly stated that "the series is decidedly fascistic in nature, and celebratory of fascist masculinity as the key to surviving an apocalyptic situation" (125). The following seasons, however, testify that *TWD* prefers to allow the viewers to explore and judge the possible social contracts raised by the narrative. It is often argued that traditional democracy enabled by the abundance of fossil fuels and

technological development (Mitchell 32) is not viable in this world of scarcity. Rebacca Solnit highlights how "contemporary disaster scholars speak of vulnerability—of the ways that disasters find existing frailties and weaknesses in the system and pry them open to victimize some more than others. In this respect, disaster does not democratize" (112). In *TWD*, where democracy prevails at first sight, it usually turns out that terrible atrocities kept in the background challenge the notion of equality. For example, in season 5, a community in a place called Terminus promises care and safety to those who settle there. But visitors who take these promises seriously are captured and eaten, because that is how the locals feed themselves.[4] As Negan, the charismatic and all-powerful leader of the so-called Saviors—another group introduced in season 6— believes, if someone is rescued from the clutches of the zombies, it costs them perpetual slavery, because no one can seriously believe that they are being kept and cared for out of sheer compassion.[5]

At first glance, the series, like other kinds of post-apocalyptic cinema, represents the fear of losing the way of life that has contributed most to the devastation of Earth. As the zombie crisis represents first and foremost the loss of a familiar consumerist lifestyle in the Global North, and the protagonists are all American, *TWD* seems to be the typical representation of Rebecca Solnit's concept of "elite panic," a view of the future that "expresses the elite's fear of losing their own position" (Solnit 235; see Csányi and Kiss 168–69). It also seems plausible that the series, above all, tries to revive a sense of "solastalgia," a term created by Glenn Albrecht for "the pain or distress caused by the loss of, or inability to derive, solace connected to the negatively perceived state of one's home environment" (Albrecht et al. 96; see Csányi and Kiss 168). If that is so, it presumably encourages the viewer to cling to their current situation, which is an attitude that works against commitment to social change. All this appears to demonstrate that, as Tom Bentley claims, "the values of individualism, diversity and open exchange, which have been fought over for centuries, . . . are embodied in the structure of capitalism" (15). As these values are lost in the world of the film, the narrative warns the viewer to preserve it, since it still "constitutes the only viable possibility for organizing economies" (Bentley 15). *TWD,* however, eventually defies the expectation that showing the scarcity of the post-apocalyptic world can only amplify the greatness of the abundance characterizing contemporary consumer society.

The solarpunk utopia of *The Walking Dead*

The journey that the small group of *TWD*'s protagonists take has many interesting lessons in social theory and political science. One might even say that the narrative is a post-Anthropocene version of the Enlightenment traveling novel, presenting different possible social constructs so that the characters may try them all out as they move from one community to another. Scarcity is a feature of all the mini-societies of filmic zombie-worlds, many of which sustain themselves in the same way that almost all societies have done since the agricultural revolution: the exploited majority is forced to pay the cost of the elite's living. What the cannibals of Terminus and the Saviors have in common is that they support themselves by living off the labor of others. For the main characters, the challenge is to preserve the gains of democracy in conditions of scarcity without passing the costs on to their fellow human beings. Evolutionary biology believes that such behavior is not only feasible but is natural as well: "in the case of social animals the development of patterns in the behavior which includes altruistic decisions and what we call 'moral sense' gives them some adaptive advantages in their own social environment, and sometimes, among other groups or tribes" (Perez Bernardes de Moraes and dos Santos Millani 2). In the series, the protagonists' journey demonstrates a trajectory from selfishness to altruism. While they never find the perfect society, they become increasingly determined to develop a polity in which there is room for compassion, care, and tolerance.

In the last few seasons of *TWD*, we encounter several communities that share a commitment to direct democracy to ensure that the will of all members is taken into consideration. These communities cooperate and shake off the tyranny of the groups that oppress them. Besides wanting to be free, they also have one thing in common: they strive to become economically sustainable. Thus the aforementioned struggle to find the perfect social structure coincides with that of the eco-politicians who are trying to define the kind of social order that is ecologically sustainable as well as socially just and livable. Narrowly speaking, the series is not about the environment: the state of nature, the climate crisis, and the role of politics are barely even *discussed* over the long years of the series. Sustainability is demanded by the represented environmental factors: the lack of energy resources, the collapse of infrastructure, and the fact that existing non-renewable materials start to wear out.

Depending on the circumstances, sustainability takes many different forms in *TWD*. At one point of their journey, the protagonists arrive in a

settlement called Alexandria, which was designed to be ecologically sustainable and equipped with a range of green technologies (solar panels, fiber mills, closed and cyclical power supply, water reservoirs and ecological sewage treatment, resistant native crops, etc.) well before the zombie outbreak, as it was originally intended to be the home of enlightened elite consumers (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
The Walking Dead. Season 9, Episode 1

The characters then befriend a community on a farm called Hilltop, which has no such technology, and where they farm with traditional, premodern methods on common land (Figure 2).

Figure 2.
The Walking Dead. Season 9, Episode 1

In Oceanside, the traditional semi-nomadic village lifestyle of premodern cultures prevails. In the so-called Kingdom, the concept of urban permaculture seems to be dominant, with the community living its life in a cooperative system that provides a social net for the inhabitants: for example, the goods they produce are cooked and eaten in a communal canteen, schooling and day care for children are also communally organized, and the military for self-defense is formed by the inhabitants on a voluntary basis. In a sense, due to its long running time and the experimental possibilities this allows, *TDW* transforms the zombie genre (at least for a time) from a "splatterpunk" dystopia (Vint 137) into a solarpunk ustopia.[6]

The struggles of the characters in the show may simulate those necessary for adapting to the climate crisis. In the past century, economists seemed to believe that perpetual economic growth was possible and necessary. But as the Club of Rome predicted and climate change proves there are "limits to growth" (Heinberg, *The End* 23). In his book *Afterburn,* Heinberg claims that

> What's needed, evidently, is an attractive new paradigm that might lead us to proactively reduce our energy consumption. The voluntary simplicity movement blazed that trail back in the 1980s, and the Transition Network has made considerably more headway by organizing whole communities

> around the task of reducing fossil fuel consumption while relearning preindustrial skills and rebuilding local economies. (44)

TWD may be seen as an attempt to make this "new paradigm" "attractive." In season 8, the protagonists make a deal with a strange woman, Georgie, who requests food and music records in return for information written in a book. She insists that "inside, there are handwritten plans for windmills, watermills, silos, hand-drawn schematics, guides to refining grain, creating lumber, aquaducts, a book of medieval human achievement so that we may have a future from the past" ("The Key" 38:22–38:40). And indeed, in season 9 the lead characters put down their cars and switch to horses. In episode 1, titled "A New Beginning," they visit the ruined Smithsonian Museum to acquire tools for production, including a canoe, genetically pure seeds, and a wagon. The leader of Alexandria, Rick Grimes, claims: "We are not just fighting to survive any more. We are making a New Beginning".

The season's third episode ("Warning Signs") opens with Rick Grimes as he wakes up in the morning, kisses his partner, goes into his daughter's room, and then out to the street. With a satisfied look on his face, he surveys the scene that will soon be revealed to the viewer too. In front of the high walls protecting the housing estate from zombies, the park and front gardens typical of the twenty-first century are replaced by tidy kitchen gardens and solar panels between the houses. Rick contemplates with contentment, walks to a tomato bush, plucks a fruit, then walks to a pile of stones—revealed earlier to be his son's grave—and places the tomato on top (as is the way with flowers elsewhere), paying homage to the memory of his boy, whose last wish was that the living should fight not with each other but for each other. Indeed, a little later in the episode, Rick tells a friend that he believes it is time "to build life, not to take it" (27:43–46). Instead of presenting a picturesque spectacle of streams, hills, and untouched nature, the scene transforms into an aesthetic and moving portrayal of sustainable agricultural life.

In episode 6 ("Who Are You Now") of the same season, just before the credits, the camera pans to a bird landing on a zombie's shoulder, which is merged with a tree and is already not that different in color and material from it. The bird pulls a worm out of the zombie's ear, and then we see that its nest is just a little further away, where several hatchlings await the worm (Figure 3).

Figure 3.
The Walking Dead. Season 9, Episode 6

The zombie becomes part of the cycle of life and a symbol of interdependence. Not only the organic materiality of the body, but its abject aspects and decay are also aestheticize (and turned downright kitsch). Living death here is no longer a state that is even more terrible than death but an expression of the vitality of matter which "counters and critiques the obdurate, though postmodern, humanisms that seek transcendence or protection from the material world" (Alaimo 4). If the migration of the zombie hordes may be a metaphor for the "aggressive expansion" and the "push for homogenization" in today's consumer society as the "hallmarks of the desperate struggle for survival of every declining civilization," the series clearly sees the potential for renewal in small communities, diverse as they are, that represent "the peaceful coexistence of alternative explanations of the world, ways of life and technologies" (Lányi 33).

Wellbeing in *The Walking Dead*

In seasons 8 and 9, it becomes almost a mantra that mere survival is no longer enough. Exceeding it, however, does not mean obtaining more material goods, but "rather the realization of a truly human striving towards a meaningful life" (Lányi 102–03). In the world of *TWD*, this is expressed in useful creative activities as well as in playing music, dancing, watching films, holding fairs, and engaging in conversations that make up a surprisingly large

part of the show. We almost get a utopia, although in Season 10 the narrative turns into a dystopia again when the homes and hard-earned wealth of the surviving communities are vengefully destroyed by an extreme zombie-centric subculture, the Whisperers (who live together with the undead, staying silent and wearing zombie masks).

In Season 11, another group, called the Commonwealth, comes to the rescue of the central characters. Not only at first glance, but for almost half the season, the Commonwealth delivers what in many cases was the seemingly impossible wish of almost all the characters: the restoration of the past world. If anything, this seems to be the perfect proof of *solastalgia,* and indeed, after many of the inhabitants of Alexandia and Hilltop move to the Commonwealth, we get insights into their life, which—in a way that has not been seen before in the series—resembles the life of Western societies in the twenty-first century. The citizens are not simply safe; a well-equipped army ensures their protection, so they almost live like they did before the crisis: in blocks of flats, taking home boxed food from the canteen for dinner, preparing for school or work. We even see a former journalist writing articles and a former surgeon operating on a patient. Money has been reintroduced, and the protagonists learn again what it is like to worry about finances.

However, something is not right, and the focal characters are feeling increasingly disturbed. This time the apparently pleasant everyday life does not hide dark, Gothic secrets (such as cannibalism or slavery) as we have seen in the antagonistic communities mentioned before. The most annoying things are the small details of the old world, such as long queues in the canteen or parents being unable to give their children pocket money because they do not have a well-paid job. More problematically, the police are corrupt, journalists' articles are censored so that newspapers can only publish propaganda that supports the status quo, and average patients have to wait so long for an operation that they die before getting to it. The way things are presented exhibit the exact condition that (eco-)political activists blame capitalism for: "the system is a more or less closed oligopoly of elite insiders. The political and personal connections between the largest corporations and government are so extensive as to amount to collusion. Transparency is minimal, regulation is corrupted by industry interests, accountability is a politically manipulated show" (Bollier).

Nothing illustrates this better than the Halloween party in the governor's mansion in episode 10, season 11. At the party, a journalist points out "the class divide on display" ("New Haunts" 29.41–49), to which Pamela Milton, daughter of the former US president, replies that her father would be

pleased to see how much his daughter cares about the health and wellbeing of their residents. A ruined soldier-turned-terrorist, however, exclaims: "This is bullshit! Does anyone here really believe that the Commonwealth cares for all its citizens? . . . This is what you care about. Fancy parties and paintings. Not people like me. We are nothing to you. Disposable" (31.48–32.56). When arrested, he keeps protesting: "There are thousands more like me. Resist the Commonwealth! Visibility for workers! Equality for all!" (37.25–33) Similar protest slogans appear on the walls of the buildings, and the viewer learns about the emergence of an underground movement that exposes the evils of the governance. The regime is eventually overthrown, thanks to a deliberately leaked monologue, delivered by the future leader, which states that "the Commonwealth is built on buying into bullshit. The desperate need to believe that the ol' American dream is still real. You know, 'Anything is possible.' We could rise above our station! It's a friggin' joke. The reality is that the poor stay poor so that the rich can do whatever the hell we want. The game is rigged. There are no bootstraps to pull up" ("A New Deal" 38.03–38.31).

The ensuing uproar could be interpreted as a sign that people do not really want to be confronted with the reality of the rift between the social classes or, given the situation beyond the walls, are never satisfied with what there *is*. Another interpretation might be that now is the time they realize that the past should not be reanimated. Once the protagonists—and through them, the audience—experience a community with relative equality and direct democracy, a world like the one we live in today no longer seems like what it should be. The post-apocalyptic ordeal and the alternative communal structures it introduces provide a perspective from which the failures of the present practice of *business as usual* become much clearer. In light of the protagonists' struggles and the results they achieve, the evils of the Western way of life become more visible, and the already proven fact that happiness does not depend on material wellbeing becomes more tangible. This is why "nowadays thinkers, politicians and even economists are calling to supplement or even replace GDP with GDH—gross domestic happiness. After all, what do people want? They don't want to produce. They want to be happy. Production is important because it provides the material basis for happiness. But it is only the means, not the end" (Harari 30).

Overconsumption in today's advanced societies does not translate into real wellbeing (Latouche 20). Because of society's prevailing belief that the more one consumes, the better life they have, policies that promote GDP growth at all costs are implemented, making the environment and the poor pay the price. If the aim of social policy were to actually improve the quality

of life, the focus should be on education, health, and time for leisure, family, and community activities (Mont 35). As Richard A. Easterlin, the pioneer of wellbeing research, posits, "a reallocation of time in favor of family life and health would, on average, increase individual happiness" (11182). And indeed, the weary warriors of *TWD* invariably leave the relative material prosperity of the Commonwealth for the alternatives offered by Alexandria, Hilltop, and Oceanside, which, though harsh and difficult, define wellbeing in terms of freedom, natural environment, network of relationships, and equality.

When the Commonwealth plans to take over the weaker communities, a girl comments that "They just want to swallow up other communities. They are like the Whisperers. They just wear different masks" ("The Rotten Core" 26.11). The words "mask" and "swallow" in this reasoning link the social-philosophical problems of the series with the zombie theme in a most interesting way. The mask, worn by the Whisperers to hide among the zombies, becomes an expression of the allegorical potential of the zombie story, while the term "swallow" presents the political inclination to incorporate and violently subjugate others and it evokes the notion of cannibalism, a ubiquitous aspect of the zombie narrative, and thus makes the political implications of the zombie thematic even clearer than before.

Conclusion

Episode 4 of *Tales of the Walking Dead* has some traits in common with a recent trend in zombie fiction in which the zombie represents a stage of evolution beyond humans. In this new approach, the zombie "signifies the possibility of renewal and a complete change of perspective," a "shift towards a post-anthropocentric, posthuman subjectivity that is willing to see beyond the fate of what is narrowly defined as human" (Limpár, "'Able Zombies'" 234). Some of the characters in *TWD* are also inclined to such a "change of perspective," but it usually proves to be a fantasy, a departure from common sense. Unlike the films belonging to this trend, *TWD* confronts the world of the Anthropocene not through posthumanism, but through a critique of social norms and capitalism.

Season 11 concludes the social vision of the series by rejecting the possibility of resurrecting the current world without a trace of *solastalgia*. It also presents the sustainable communities we have seen before as sources of wellbeing rather than prosperity, which also makes it impossible to see the post-apocalyptic world of the series as an expression of elite panic. The innovative twist of the series, whereby the characters return to a world that

has been mourned for eleven years, offers a new perspective on the Anthropocene, illustrating how, "in the age now dawning, our hopes will shift and our ideologies will shift with them," as Bill McKibben claims. Not surprisingly, then, the protagonists' discoveries about the Commonwealth and themselves mirror McKibben's revelations: "In the new world we've created, the one with hotter temperatures and more drought and less oil, big is vulnerable. We are going to need to split up, at least a little, if we're going to avoid being subdued by the forces we've unleashed. . . . It shouldn't be completely scary; we almost intuitively realize that for many things small is often better" (146).

Implementing no-growth economies in *TWD* "can be defined as a process of transition from management according to the traditional industrial-market paradigm of development to a paradigm of inclusive development, based on sustainability and restoration of ecological balance" (Adamowicz). Although in the world of the series this process takes place out of necessity, the change is in line with the objectives of eco-politics, since "in politics the greens aim to create the conditions for decision-making based on responsible participation and joint deliberation" (Lányi 14). *The Walking Dead* can even be viewed as offering a model for the solidarity economy. Alexandria, Hilltop, and the Kingdom "make the commons a core institution that 'guides' all other social forms . . . towards achieving the greatest common good and the maximum autonomy" (Bauwens, Kostakis, and Pazaitis 8). Although zombie films have always been highly critical of consumerism, recent representatives of the genre show an interest in not only the ensuing catastrophe but also the potentialities of "good life" after climate change. While portraying the protagonists not only escaping the dead, but also building new communities for the living, this example of the genre "offers a fresh vocabulary and logic for escaping the deadend of market-fundamentalist politics, policy and economics and cultivating more humane alternatives" (Bollier).

The fresh vocabulary also invents new names for the undead. An interesting feature of *TWD* is that the word "zombie" is never used—as if the concept and the myth of the zombie had not developed in the diegesis of the series. Every community has a different word for the undead in the local jargon, which makes sociological sense in linguistic terms, and all fit the undead. The Saviors simply use the term "dead ones," elsewhere the terms "eater" or "biter," "muncher" or "chomper" are common, and the protagonists use the word "walker," since the undead are constantly on the move. The choice of words in a given context can be significant. Sometimes,

as could be expected, it denotes what is considered the other of humanist (rational, moral, aesthetic) ideals, such as "lamebrains," "empties," "freaks," "deadheads," "uglies," or "stinkers." At other times, the designation creates the other with the explicit purpose of portraying it as dangerous to provoke fear. Commenting on the name a totalitarian leader used for zombies in season 3, a user on reddit mused: "I always thought that the Governor calling them 'biters' reflected his need to create enemies to keep his dictatorial power." In some cases, the name implies that this other is not external but reflects internal anxieties of the group. For example, "eater" is prevalent where people give up autonomy for food and safety. The cannibals of Terminus, who call zombies "cold bodies" in contrast to warm-blooded humans, perhaps use this term because they themselves kill their fellow human beings in cold blood. The Commonwealth, where the name for zombies is "rotter," is described as rotten to the core by the main characters, whose most fervent desire is to finally escape the nomadic existence of perpetual wandering, projected on zombies in the term "walker." This pattern connects zombie symbolism with the theme of ecopolitics: the zombie becomes a symptom of a socio-somatic disease that is the consequence of repressed or untreated collective problems—threats to the wellbeing of both humans and the Earth.

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Notes

1. There are countless words for the undead in *The Walking Dead* universe, for example "chompers" (as here), except for "zombie." The problem of naming is discussed in the Conclusion.

2. "Ustopia is a world I made up by combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood).

3. The series was in its seventh season at the time of the paper's publication, and the author notes that "at this point in the series there does not yet seem to be any chance that 'the war of all against all' situation will change" (Török 383).

4. This threat appears in countless films, many of which present cannibalism not simply as a taboo violation, but as an eventuality in a post-apocalyptic, post-climate-crisis world. Examples include *Soylent Green* (1973), *Ravenous* (1999), *Tooth and Nail* (2007), *The Road* (2009), *Hell* (2010), *The Day* (2012), *Colony* (2013), *Snowpiercer* (2013), *Tear Me Apart* (2015), *Drifter* (2016), and *Mortal Engines* (2018). The first season of HBO's zombie series, *The Last of Us* (2023), also features a community that survives by cannibalism, even though not all members are aware of their own survival practices.

5. The Saviors do not live off the wealth they themselves produce but offer protection to others in exchange for their goods, a deal they force upon the communities around them.

6. The term is used by Sherryl Vint to describe the ubiquitous feature of zombie films that they devote long scenes to the mass smashing of rotting zombies (Vint 137).

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Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 60-83
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/4

Vampirism as Apocalyptic Hypocrisy in *Midnight Mass*

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the vampire figure appeared on the literary scene, it has been examined in the context of Christianity, as this form of the revenant monster calls for interpretations that address questions of the soul as well as the phenomenon of resurrection and eternal (after)life. Parallel with this approach, the vampire body has also become a focused topic in Vampire Studies in the past few decades, especially in relation to the vampire lover in supernatural romances. Netflix's *Midnight Mass* (2021) presents a new take on the vampire lore when it combines a special interest in the body in an extremely religious context. This paper argues that the newly interpreted revenant embodies the menace fundamentalism threatens people with, and it presents evil as a nearly unstoppable, spreading infection that roots in the inability of interpreting signs and phenomena correctly as a result of indoctrination. The show's treatment of the blasphemous vampire reveals a criticism of an engagement with the scripture and the sacred that focuses on literal meaning (the body of the text, that is) as opposed to the spirit of the Bible, which is also reflected in the focus on the physical metamorphoses as a prerequisite of blind faith and as a motive that will bring complete moral and physical annihilation to the community. (IL)

KEYWORDS: monster, vampire, religion, fanaticism, apocalypse

Introduction

The folkloric variants of what we may broadly label as the vampire, and consequently the literary vampire that draws on folklore and myth, have been frequently examined and discussed in the context of religion. This form of the revenant monster calls for interpretations that address questions of the soul and hence the demonic as well as the phenomenon of resurrection,[1] the possibility of an eternal (after)life, and the topic of irresistible temptation. While this latter motif is also a fundamental Christian theme, it has from the start of vampire literature been presented as a possibly sexual attraction, with the latent (and tabooed) homoerotic desire of the Byronic vampire that is finally acted upon in J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (Auerbach 42, Jönsson

34–35). The desirable, seducing vampire body has become a focused topic in Vampire Studies and has enjoyed a renaissance in the past few decades thanks to the success of the supernatural romances featuring attractive, demonic, undead lovers in print and on screen. Yet while Netflix's mini-series *Midnight Mass* (2021) reveals a desired romantic relationship at its foundation, it rather evokes the Hawthornean tabooed romance that explores faith and religion, sin, guilt, and atonement instead of the lust for the Other that interspecies romances tend to revolve around. The show does focus on the body in many respects; however, even though the importance of changing/healing the flesh is linked to the desired love relationship, it is mostly located outside the romantic framework. With an invigorated take on the vampire lore, show creator, writer, and director Mike Flanagan resurrects the interest in the vampiric body and its ties to the biblical tradition to accentuate the horror underneath the pronounced distortions of Christianity in the western world.

Considering the series as a systematic subversion of biblical narratives and motifs, which privileges the flesh over the soul, this article argues that the show's unique focus on the body is a fundamental tool to highlight the despiritualization that links to the monster's figure. This recent variant of the revenant embodies the menace fundamentalism and fanaticism threaten people with, and it presents evil as a nearly unstoppable, spreading infection that roots in the inability of interpreting signs and phenomena correctly as a result of indoctrination. The vampire embodies the monstrosity of hypocrisy, fanaticism, and the lack of knowledge that is capable of pushing mankind into an apocalypse—a claim that in the end opens up the narrative to an interpretation that uses the Christian context but looks beyond religious implications, comprehending apocalypse as a consequence of mankind's inability to read the signs that may prevent catastrophes.

Hypocrisy: keeping the literal, losing the spiritual

Midnight Mass starts out with a physical journey and a corporeal transformation that results in a spiritual one affecting a whole community. A very old and senile priest of a small village's Catholic congregation, Monsignor Pruitt (Hamish Linklater), is sent on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, but due to his confused state of mind, he gets lost and finds himself alone in a desert area, where he needs to take refuge from a dust storm in a cave. In this isolated, dark place he is attacked by a terrifying, winged creature, who sucks the blood of the priest and then feeds him with his own blood. Next morning, when the priest wakes up restored, young and healthy, he interprets his rejuvenation as God's miracle carried out by his Angel.

Adamant to share this miracle with his community, he returns to his home village, taking the vampire with him in a locked, wooden case. All this, however, is revealed only in the third episode, in a flashback. The people of Crockett Island are not aware of these past events; the young-looking pastor, who gradually transforms into a bloodsucking, homicidal monster, claims to have come to stand in temporarily for Monsignor Pruitt, who allegedly is in the hospital on the mainland. The newly arrived pastor (played by Hamish Linklater) calls himself Father Paul—no doubt as a reference to his spiritual change and a foreshadowing of the "miracles" he means to perform. The chosen name is suggestive of the priest's sinful past[2] as well as his unique, new interpretation of the resurrection.[3]

Father Paul's decision to return to his home with the "angel" and bring new life to his flock starts a series of disastrous events, many of which look wonderful at first sight. This contrast between seeming and reality is gradually revealed to be indicative of the overall hypocrisy that the community suffers from and finds its symbolic root in their priest's hidden hypocrisy. From retrospect we understand that Monsignor Pruitt's confusion and going astray are suggestive of the life he led, as he diverted from the path his vocation compelled him to tread. While he worked as a spiritual leader of his community, he had a passionate affair with a woman called Mildred (Alex Essoe), breaking his sacred wow of celibacy and fathering a child. His strong desire for the life he could never have with his mistress is coupled with an equally strong sense of guilt and his unyielding will to stay true to his vocation shape his understanding of what happens to him on the Holy Land: he takes it not as a temptation to be resisted but as a chance to live the life he never could. Craving for a life that is not limited by celibacy but openly acknowledges romantic love and the desires of the flesh, Father Paul is driven by the idea of the restorable body to gain a second chance at life with his beloved woman, while seemingly working on the spiritualization of the island's community.

The new pastor's work is fully supported by Bev Keane (Samantha Sloyan), the other main hypocrite of the village, who also sees a chance in the coming apocalypse: the solidification of her role as a judge with the privilege of deciding about other people's fate based on their assumed moral qualities. Her attitude to Christianity allows no doubt because that would demand her to think and interpret and put effort into comprehending meaning(s). She uses the Bible as a manual to life; however, she follows the word instead of the spirit, privileging the body (the literal meaning arising from the specific order of the letters) over the spirit of the text (the complex meaning behind

the literal), that is, privileging the superficies related to ritual (like what is the "right" chasuble for a specific occasion) over living according to what the ritual actually signifies.

Bev's shallowness and her preoccupation with seeming are aptly demonstrated by her role in sealing a weak deal with the oil company whose carelessness jeopardized all the families who earned a living by fishing. As a payment for her role as a mediator between the fishermen and the company, she extracted church donations from the families to build a recreation center beside the church, ignoring the financial distress she left these people in as a result. This move accentuates the tension coming from privileging the material (the body) over the spiritual (the soul), which is at the core of the crisis that enfolds in the narrative. Observed from a biblical perspective, Bev is aligned with the often condemned, money-loving tax-collectors and the Pharisees, who rejected radical generosity in the form of offering alms for repentance (Giambrone 549), and is shown in opposition to those who gave from the little they had and practiced radical charity that "*has become an identification with the death of Christ*" (550; emphasis in the original) and thus the hope of resurrection. Bev's hypocrisy, however, is manifest on many other levels, too: she lacks the Christian value of compassion and forgiveness and rejoices in the suffering and deaths of the "sinners," and while she takes pride in increasing the Church's material possessions, she has a devastating effect on the spirit of the island's community by her unforgiving, exclusionist, toxic attitude towards "sinners," that is, those who do not think the way she does.

Bev's and her pastor's actions aptly prove that a fish rots from the head down—a metaphorical summary of the spiritual crisis that the setting, Crockett Island, underlines. The small and impoverished fishing village Father Paul returns to and rebuilds a religious community in is an integral component of the Biblical allusion that presents the priest first as a Jesus-like character with a community of fishers who become his apostles. While these people will literally turn into "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19), they will "fish" or rather hunt for people in the end to kill and feed on them, bringing on an apocalypse instead of salvation.

Apocalypse: the triumph of the material over the spiritual

The crisis is presented on two levels due to the show's special treatment of time. *Midnight Mass* proposes two types of temporalities: the diegetic time, that is, the time of the narrated events, which would be linear or historical time in K. A. Nuzum's time taxonomy; and symbolic time, equivalent to Nuzum's mythic or circular time (Nuzum 209). This is made

visible by how the series utilizes the Christian context in various manners, including the presentation of church rituals and other biblical allusions. Just as "[b]y eating the body and drinking the blood of the Christ, the faithful enter the mythic, repeatable time of the Last Supper" (Nuzum 209), the non-ritualistic Biblical allusions also connect what is experienced in the historic time to the symbolic via recalling the already well-known, making it appear as a repeated, circular experience. All the titles of the seven episodes name a book in the Bible, and each episode incorporates allusions to the eponymous books in their scenes, turning them into an integral part of the story. The first episode title, "Genesis," alludes to the beginning of a new world brought to the village by its priest. That world reaches its apocalyptic climax in the last episode, which, appropriately, references the "Book of Revelation." In between these endpoints, the story unfolds in the holiest period of the liturgical year, from Ash Wednesday to Easter, which suggests a curious parallel between the events related to the biggest miracle and celebration of Christianity, Christ's death and resurrection, and the most feared events described in the Scripture, which is the apocalypse. And indeed, the whole narrative turns out to be a horrifying subversion of the Christian resurrection narrative, in which Christ's blood is replaced by a vampire's blood, which, if consumed, changes the person; and if the person dies, resurrects him as a hungry, bloodsucking monster. *Midnight Mass* thus fuses two types of mythical time: the Christian, ritualistic one and the monstrous one, which, at the same time, is also liminal (Nuzum 210), turning the sacred into monstrous and thereby criticizing the possible monstrosity that resides in the human use of the sacred.

The series establishes a connection between the Easter narrative and the apocalypse by the premise that the Eucharistic rite of Christianity emphasizes the transformative power of Christ's blood. The Catholic interpretation of the Eucharist, which symbolically repeats the key event of the Last Supper, specifically holds that via transubstantiation the bread and the wine of the Holy Communion becomes the flesh and blood of Christ "substantially present for the nourishment of our souls" (Pohle). This interpretation, when looked at from a non-theological perspective, evokes the famous quote from *Dracula*, "[t]he blood is the life" (Stoker 142), which not only associates the holy communion with vampirism, the consummation of a supreme being's blood to gain an eternal life, but also acknowledges the prerequisite of resurrection for gaining eternal life. But whereas the Scripture holds that Christ's blood is to transform the spirit that will not need the body in the end, the demonic blood is to resurrect and then keep alive the soulless,

bloodthirsty body. The monstrous reading is based on superficial similarities with the Catholic one, but instead of presenting a narrative of hope and spiritual revival, it presents a story of damnation—the exact opposite of what the Gospel teaches. It is not a Christ-narrative but an Antichrist-narrative, which takes us right to the apocalyptic context.

While there is a surprising correlation between the biblical apocalypse and what happens on Crockett Island, not even the devout Catholic community notices the signs. The exception is Bev, who does see the omens as the manifestations of the Second Coming but is also mistaken about what the apocalypse brings, as the signs easily mislead anyone who does not want to see beyond one's own privileged narrative.

The Holy Land as the starting point for what happens on the island makes the associations with the grand New Testament narrative very clear. The priest's pilgrimage was meant to be a final gift from his congregation for his life-long service, yet it becomes the beginning of a new journey that starts with a descent into a cave which is followed by an ascension from it, leaving the cave as empty as Christ's tomb was found after his resurrection. The light imagery supports the suggested parallel, as the rejuvenated priest leaves the place of darkness to come to the inviting, heavenly light.

Father Paul seems to bring a spiritual revival to the village after he is seen to perform what appears to be a miracle. As he keeps mixing the vampire blood in the communion wine, people who take the Holy Sacrament experience wondrous revitalization and healing. Glasses become needless, a painful back will be no longer an impediment to moving freely or even dancing. The pastor's former, secret lover surprisingly de-ages as she receives the holy communion every day. Most spectacularly, Father Paul heals the teenage Leeza (Annarah Cymone), who became paralyzed after a shooting accident. While the immediate effect of these so-called miracles seems to be positive with the Catholic community experiencing a spiritual revival, the longer-lasting consequences are catastrophic (which in themselves question the nature of these wondrous phenomena). At first, the wondrous events "only" accentuate the already existing dividing lines within the community, further distancing believers and those who do not attend Church. The monstrous transformation then culminates in the deaths of Father Paul's followers and the resurrections of what remains of the human parishioners: vampires, whose thirst for human blood is insatiable. The catastrophic denouement confirms that what the churchgoers experienced falls into the category of false miracles, one of the omens of the apocalypse described in Revelation.

The Bible clearly differentiates between miracles and magic and warns against the latter, as it comes from demonic power, so magic performers are seen as "abominations to the Lord" (Deut. 18: 10–12). In the Scripture, magic is recurrently associated with the Antichrist and the False Prophet. Thessalonians 2:9 describes the Antichrist as a "lawless" one, whose coming "will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie." According to Revelation (13:13), the False Prophet, who is associated with the Antichrist, will perform miracles that are very much like God's, but his aim is to deceive people, thus he conceals his own nature. He is the second beast Revelation describes, saying "it had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon" (13:11). This portrayal suggests a meek and modest, humble disguise that hides a predator, an idea that recurs in Matthew, in which we are told to "beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves" (7:15). The mixture of hypocrisy and the underlying violence is reflected in Father Paul's character: he builds his whole ecclesiastical performance on lies, which he confesses in advance—acknowledging thereby that he does understand the sinful nature of his desires, thoughts, and actions. His return to the island with the blood-sucking beast—identifiable as the Antichrist in this analogy—sets the apocalypse into motion, the very first sign of which is the countless dead bodies of wild cats on the seashore the night after they set foot on the land.[4]

The process of spiritual disintegration is made possible by the intense deceptive work that directs the believers' attention to the body instead of the spirit: while everyone focuses on the improvements of people's physical condition, the healing or revitalization of the body, they fail to question its source, arguing that "[i]t feels wrong . . . [t]o interrogate a miracle." Afraid that they would appear to be ungrateful and unworthy of the benefits they have, they refuse to "[s]econd guess a gift from God" (Leeza's father in "Book Three: Proverbs"). This mentality is completely foreign to those who believe in science, like the local doctor, Dr. Sarah Gunning (Annabeth Gish), those who have a different faith, like the Muslim Sheriff Hassan (Rahul Kohli), or are disillusioned with religions and have sought answers to their questions in alternative manners, like Riley Flynn (Zach Gilford). As the parishioners want to prove their worthiness and faith, they lose their analytical and hence critical faculties. This behavior is not a testimony of strong faith; on the contrary, it reveals fear and doubt that their chosen status would be challenged by a test. Such an attitude is not condoned by the Catholic Church; in fact, the Vatican itself lays emphasis on the importance

of doubt in the cases of alleged miracles, calling for investigations that start with scientific methods, employing external specialists and considering the possibility that dark forces or magic may have caused an inexplicable phenomenon (Ebdrup).

The widely witnessed false miracles function as spectacular magic tricks that divert attention from what is really happening and what is hence effectively kept in the dark—just as Erin Greene's body hides the proof for the monstrosity of Father Paul's invigorating activity. For Erin (Kate Siegel), her pregnancy and thus her baby-to-be-born symbolize hope and a new start in life and generate unlimited, unconditional love; however, the communion wine "heals" the pregnant body and makes the fetus miraculously disappear as if it were a tumor—an "alien presence," as her doctor friend explains her ("Book VI: Acts of the Apostles")—that needed treatment. What happens to Erin becomes thus symbolic in the context of faith and religion as well: the unfathomable loss offers a counter-narrative to the nativity chapters, with Erin having a role parallel to the Virgin Mary's, whose pregnant body is the testimony to a miracle bringing humankind's salvation. This analogue is supported by Erin's circumstances, because even though the father of Erin's baby is a flesh-and-blood man, he is left behind and is non-existent for the expectant woman, who finds a supportive friend in Riley. However, the peculiar regress of Erin's pregnancy replaces the promise of salvation with the promise of damnation, subverting the biblical narrative. The after-effect of the miracle-inducing communion wine undoes a life-in-progress, the miracle of life, preventing the arrival of hope and leaving Erin's womb empty, suggesting the spiritual vacuum that gradually devours the community despite the seeming religious revival.

This horrible omen, however, is concealed by Erin's body, whose restoration to its former state is easily explicable with mundane causes and attracts no attention, while spectacular, incredible transformations, healings are witnessed on an everyday basis and steal the spotlight because they are reminiscent of the healing miracles that the Bible attributes to Jesus. Healing the weak-sighted—a result of old age—echoes the biblical act of healing the blind and is made very noticeable in the show, as those who struggle to see well wear remarkably big, emphatic glasses (and draw attention to them with acting nuances). But, of course, what really thrusts the congregation into the limelight is the staged spectacle of healing Leeza's paralytic body, which to the parishioners suggests a very clear parallel with how Jesus healed the paralyzed man and instructed him to arise and walk (John 5:8). The incredible recovery takes center stage so much so that everything else that may appear

peculiar—like Erin's tragedy or people going missing—becomes marginal and hardly noticeable. With Bev taking care of damage control, what fits her narrative is emphasized, while collateral damage is deemed necessary and part of the grand design, as only "unworthy" people need to die for the greater good, which is the salvation of the people that Bev sees as righteous.

This twisted logic contributes to the final tragedy of the flock: the new, staged miracle of raising the dead may seem to repeat Jesus's act of resurrecting Lazarus, but again, these two events are related only on the surface and thus completely subvert the biblical miracle of resurrection, as those who are assisted to die and then resurrect due to the power of the vampire's blood become in a way "children of the night"[5] (Stoker 18) instead of "children of the light" (John 12:36) that true believers would turn into according to the Gospel. By considering John 11 and 12 as demonstrating not only textual but also conceptual unity that becomes complete and clear with the Prologue, Pauline theologist Troels Engberg-Pedersen explains the act of raising Lazarus as a necessary event to understand Jesus's mission and the role of his resurrection—a commentary that also throws light on what lies at the core of the subversion in *Midnight Mass*. As Engberg-Pedersen contends, "The 'I' (ἐγώ) that is Jesus is also the light (φῶς) of the Prologue that has come into the world, sent by God in order that 'everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness' (NRSV), that is, in order that all who believe in Jesus as the full figure of the Prologue and the present passage may themselves move into the light" (170). In the examined passages, the "proper way of believing in [Jesus]" is emphasized as the token of the desired result, which is eternal life. Moving to the light expresses salvation and "the precondition for this is both 'hearing' Jesus's 'words' (ῥήματα), 'keeping' them and 'receiving' them" (171). Cognition is thus an essential component for one's own salvation and resurrection into eternal life.

In the series, Bev and Father Paul keep demonstrating how they try to bend the interpretation of the sacred text to suit their purposes and justify their actions, but of course the most fatal misinterpretation relates to the act of resurrection itself. For in the Bible

> "Eternal life" is resurrected life, and it will be brought about when the πνεῦμα [spirit] and λόγος [reason/thought] that lie behind Jesus's ῥήματα [words] operate in those who come to believe in Jesus as the φῶς [light] and the carrier of the λόγος and πνεῦμα. That happens when they do not merely "listen to" Jesus's ῥήματα, but have themselves come into possession of the

> λόγος and πνεῦμα that underlie those ῥήματα and so "hear" them properly (cf. 12:47). (Engberg-Pedersen 173)

Neither Father Paul nor Bev Keane can hear, keep, or receive the Lord's words appropriately. In fact, the closer they come to their own resurrection, the further they move from the πνεῦμα (spirit) and thus their own salvation. They are so much anchored to the material reality that they fail to understand "the resurrection of human beings (Jesus included) into eternal life concretely as a radical transformation that will leave the present world of 'flesh' (σάρξ) completely behind," which Engberg-Pedersen demonstrates to be the core idea in the fourth Gospel (175). Instead, the two characters accept the demon-granted physical transformation—the very transformation that deprives them of their souls according to most vampire lore—as a testimony of being chosen and worthy of the mystery that they never fully understood, similarly to those for whom, as Engberg-Pedersen argues, the act of raising Lazarus was performed and explained (166). They believe in the dogma of the Catholic Church about the resurrection of the dead on Judgment Day, but due to their selfishness and, in Bev's case, vanity, they fail to understand that it must be the work of God and hence the resurrection is very different from the one they induce.

> As at the creation all things are perfect from the hand of God, so at the resurrection all things must be perfectly restored by the same omnipotent hand. But there is a difference between the earthly and the risen body; for the risen bodies of both saints and sinners shall be invested with immortality. This admirable restoration of nature is the result of the glorious triumph of Christ over death as described in several texts of Sacred Scripture. . . . But while the just shall enjoy an endless felicity in the entirety of their restored members, the wicked "shall seek death, and shall not find it, shall desire to die, and death shall fly from them" (Revelation 9:6). (Maas, A.)

Stopping the Apocalypse: clipping wings to fly

Father Paul and Bev seem to mistake the concept of eternal life for the corporeal resurrection that grants them (possibly) an extended lifespan and promises an earthly—and hence corrupted—version of resurrection and a new beginning, possibly an Eden on earth. Their belief is tied to the renewal of the body and not the soul; not surprisingly, then, the body and its relation to the soul will be the focal point of the denouement.

A key metaphor in the subverted resurrection narrative is the community center that Bev considers an ark, an analogue to Noah's ark, which already draws in the theme of apocalypse since "[t]he narrative of the flood in Genesis 6–9 is the first biblical instance of an exclusionary apocalyptic pattern in which the righteous few are whisked out of harm's way while the rest of creation, regardless of relative guilt or innocence, is subjected to spectacular and complete destruction" (Greifenhagen 24). The harm, this time, is not water but the sun's light, as the vampires need shelter from sunlight not to perish. The biblical ark serves the purpose of providing refuge for Noah, the only man who is described as "a righteous man, blameless in his generation," "one who walks with God" (Gen 6:9), but Bev's ark is meant to save those who have walked away from God and do not possess a full understanding of the Gospels and now have only the body and not the soul. Saving these bodies would lead to the unfolding of a full apocalypse, not limited to the isle but spreading over the mainland, too—the ark, then, would serve a purpose that is downright opposite to that of Noah's ark. To further explore the subversive nature of the allusion, it is the water that helps contain the apocalypse after the destruction of the ships that could have been used by the vampires to leave the island.

However, instead of what Bev considers an ark, an actual rowboat recurrently appears in the narrative to transform from a strange dream-component into a symbolic ark that contributes to saving souls and stopping the apocalypse. The boat haunts Riley's dreams (or rather nightmares) and seems to emphasize his isolation in a sea of troubles that stands for his life, but it turns out to be a foreshadowing—or even a divine—sign that helps him realize what is the right thing for him to do to save others. After the ur-vampire drinks from him, he decides to row into the sea with Erin to make sure he burns in the early sunlight. His purpose is twofold: he does not want to turn into a bloodthirsty monster who would feed on other people, and he wants to warn Erin and make sure she understands the threat. The rowboat saves Riley's soul, as he willingly gives up his body and refuses to succumb to the demonic powers. Even though he combusts in the light, Riley is shown to have an out-of-body experience in which he is comforted by the apparition of the girl he hit with a car. This is not a haunting he used to suffer from; for a change, the girl appears in her restored form, suggesting that Riley has earned his redemption, and he may rest in peace.

A similar (if not the same) boat as an ark motif returns in the end, when Riley's brother, Warren (Igby Rigney), and Leeza find refuge in the last boat left intact. They are indeed saved from corruption and are given a second

chance at life. While saving the children is practically an archetypal motif in literature, with the young characters tending to stand for innocence, hope, and thus positive futurity, how *Midnight Mass* presents these adolescents makes this association much more specific and clearer due to the explicit Christian context. Leeza is shown to be capable of forgiving Joe (Robert Longstreet), the person who injured her and ruined her life. Warren is depicted as being devoid of hypocrisy: he is interested in Leeza even before her recovery, showing that what he cares about is the girl's personality and his care stems from more than physical attraction. He is his brother Riley's young version, who is not spotless but wants to avoid the mistake his sibling made.

The teenagers' survival appears as a confirmation of a return to (relative) normalcy due to the disappearance of the demonic. Father Paul's plan that envisions himself and his ex-lover Mildred as Adam and Eve given a second chance in an Edenic state is replaced by the reality of a naturally young couple surviving the expulsion of the evil from the world and having a chance of living in good faith. The restoration of the world is signaled by Leeza's body, which falls back into its prehealed, paraplegic state, substantiating the idea that life on earth is not about perfection and that the divine mission, ultimately, concerns the rebirth of the soul and not that of the body. The regained disability, therefore, is the token for paradise regained, a promise of acquirable salvation.

This change in Leeza's body comes as the result of Erin's mutilating the body of the ur-vampire in a scene that deepens the understanding between the corporeal and the spiritual. Erin's experience with what wings mean in life used to be very physical and painful: she had to hold pigeons while her mother clipped their wings. But this physical act, as it turns out, was a symbolic reminder of the mother's bitter life experience that "[e]veryone gets their wings clipped at some point" (E4, "Book IV: Lamentations"). The wings, for Erin's mother, stand for freedom and happiness. Since it is physically linked to clipping pigeon's wings, and we have a defining Christian framework to interpret motifs in, the pigeon creates associations with the Holy Spirit, which is often represented as a spread-winged dove, and with the story of Noah's ark, in which the saving of the souls in the ark is heralded by a dove who has returned with an olive branch from the mainland. This dove is a symbol of peace and a new start, providing "unambiguous evidence of the recession of the waters" (Moberly 347) and hence the end of the apocalypse. Symbolically, then, when Erin's mother clips the pigeons' wings, she rejects salvation by re-enacting her own assumed damnation. She

confirms her interpretation of predestination (a very uncatholic notion), and her toxic parenting equates Erin with damnation itself.

However, as the series suggests in various ways that interpretation is the key to living a satisfying, loving life, we can see that Erin is able to turn her mother's interpretation into an inspiration that she and her community may benefit from: she recognizes her baby's potential of saving her life and considers her pregnancy as the manifestation of grace and the possibility of a new start (as is symbolized by the dove in the Noah's Ark chapter). She transforms herself from a victim of an abusive parent and then an abusive husband into an active agent of saving the world. Stopping the spread of evil literally depends on slicing up the vampiric demon's wings until it becomes unable to fly away from the island—and no one knows this better than Erin, who learnt as a girl that the creature whose wings are clipped should be held firmly, and thus she offers her own blood to the vampire to keep it in one place. Her past abuse becomes her strength, which Kate Siegel, the actress playing Erin, explains in an interview by drawing an analogy between her character, who is being eaten alive, and victims of rape,[6] highlighting that "women who have been assaulted are the strongest women [she] know[s]" (Collider Extras). Even though she dies while embracing her role as a sacrifice, Erin gains power over the evil and her monologue makes it clear that while her body is gone, her soul is uplifted to heaven—it may fly now that she disabled the demon's monstrous body. The strength and willingness of the spirit triumph over the weakness of the flesh just as it was confirmed by Riley's willing sacrifice.

Apocalypse now: the apocalyptic monster beyond the religious context

In order to avoid the trap of simplifying the issues that the series discusses and of suggesting that Catholicism or Christianity is monstrous, show creator, writer, and director Mike Flanagan aimed at presenting characters with diverse attitudes to religious beliefs and ethical behavior, rejecting a reductive binarism of the religious (Catholic/Christian) and the non-religious (non-Catholic/non-Christian). This way Flanagan opened the discussion to interpretations that may focus on the more general aspects of fanaticism that affect contemporary culture. I will first examine Flanagan's strategy of presenting a nuanced differentiation among believers and non-believers alike and then proceed to discuss its implications concerning a reading that reflects on cultural crises of our time, including the brokenness of democracy and, relatedly, the emergence of a "culture" of ignorance whose impact reaches well beyond the domestic sphere.

While horror narratives often lay emphasis on the importance of the Church either by focusing on the corrupt nature of the institution or by presenting the Church as "humanity's last bulwark against evil" (Grafius 109), *Midnight Mass* is more interested in the personal than the institutional, relying on a strategy of presenting diversity in human nature independently of one's belief. For instance, the focused conflict is not presented as a stark contrast between believers and non-believers, as the very faithful, Muslim Hassan is as clear an opponent to the Catholic villain character Bev as the non-religious town drunk, Joe, who proves capable of repentance and wishes to become a better person, or Riley, who rejects all kinds of religions yet protects his beloved ones even after his fate has been sealed. Riley and Erin are the kind of foil characters who are primarily differentiated by their attitudes to religious faith, yet they are linked with the very same biblical allusions: both may be considered as prodigal son characters, who have returned home and now fight for overcoming their troublesome pasts, and Christ characters with their willing sacrifice of their lives to deliver humanity from evil. It is not the rift between Christians/Catholics and non-Christians/non-Catholics that is emphasized by the show, either, as the Catholic Erin plays the role of the heroine, while the Catholic Bev is the most villainous character.

One should notice a significant difference between the two villain characters, Father Paul and Bev, in their motives and their sense of guilt (the former possesses it, while the latter does not). Father Paul and Bev Keane demonstrate how religion may be abused to justify personal needs. The priest wants to believe in the goodness and justice of his God, who would grant him his heart's desire after dedicating his whole life to His service. This belief reveals a weak character, who deep in his heart knows the problems of his justifications, hence the confession of his deeds before committing the sins and the last-minute repentance when he realizes where his selfishness and wish-fulfilling misinterpretations lead. Bev, however, never doubts and never repents, because her pride (a cardinal sin) prevents her from admitting that she may have been mistaken. She also believes that God is good and just, and therefore He will grant her wish, but as she is not only weak, but is "not a good person," either, as Annie Flynn (Kristin Lehman) describes her ("Book 7: Revelation"), her wish includes the suffering and the deaths of those who are, in her opinion, not worthy of God's love. As she does not ever doubt her moral righteousness, she accepts every horrible consequence of the alleged miracles and always finds a verse from the Bible to make sense of them and justify the horror in the name of the greater good.

The behavior of vampire-turned Catholics in the show also supports the notion of diversity in human nature. Some succumb immediately to evil, while others, like Riley's parents, are able to resist the temptation of killing others. It works according to Catholic teachings on sin: Satan "exercises over sinners only a moral influence, which is moreover measured to the welcome which the individual gives to his inspiration" (The Sacred Congregation). Accordingly, the fact that there is a massive massacre in the end and only some of the newly turned vampires resist the urge to kill communicates the fallibility of human nature. It warns us that blind faith is not strong faith but a possibly monstrous one. People with blind faith are like newly turned vampires: they instinctively harm and respect no other lives—not even the lives of their once beloved friends or family members.

The treatment of the biblical heritage as a blasphemous vampire narrative criticizes an engagement with the sacred that focuses on the literal meaning (the body of the text, that is) as opposed to the spirit of the Bible, which is also reflected in the focus on the physical metamorphoses as generator of blind faith and as a motive that will bring complete moral and physical annihilation to the community. Vampirism suggests a new life after death and resurrection, but in fact it brings about an existence in which kindness, the emotional-spiritual aspect of human existence, is lost. Symptomatic of the age it emerged from—the years defined by Donald Trump's rise and fall and the threat of his second rise/re-election that has since come to pass—this vampire signals deception, manipulation, and embodies the apocalyptic dimension that epidemic-like hypocrisy has taken in our world, aptly supporting the notion that the figure of the undead embodies an ongoing existential anxiety that "become[s] connected to extremist or excessive states in popular culture" (Bacon 5).

As Sorcha Ní Fhlainn argues in her *Postmodern Vampires: Film, Fiction and Popular Culture*, there is a "symbiotic reflective relationship between the Postmodern vampire and the American presidency in popular culture" (184). Ní Fhlainn's discussion of how vampires relate to the political climate defined by the various presidential politics ends with an overview of the Obama-era, but it already makes the US's political tendency of radicalization that emerged with brutal force during the 2008 presidential campaign very clear (230). Voices of the radical right wing became amplified by and after the presidential campaign that led to the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and normalized his "fundamentalist populism" (Westermeyer 116), a style used by people "characterized by vilification of opponents, distrust of existing political and social institutions, ideological rigidity, and a rededication to individualism and

personal freedom" (116). Not surprisingly, this mindset was soon reflected in practically all fields of life in the US. Trump's politics, which, according to its critics, "undermin[ed] the rights of women and sexual minorities," has been linked to "privileging Judeo-Cristian values" and "the injection of [such] values into foreign policy" (Haynes 15). This interrelatedness is embodied by the fundamentalist Bev Keane in *Midnight Mass*.

The first Trump presidency, in addition, gave way to "the enshrinement of individualism as a paramount value" (Westermeyer 126), which, as Rick Perlstein underlines in his 2000 article on the Trump administration's failure to battle the Covid-19 pandemic, prevented making collective sacrifices (qtd in Westermeyer 126) that would be dictated by science. It is, perhaps, not by chance that one of the most emblematic opponents of Bev Keane's fundamentalism is the only scientist on the island, the lesbian doctor, embodying in one character most of what may be seen as the consciously constructed enemy of right-wing, radical politics: women, non-heterosexuality, and science (while the "missing" aspect of foreignness is given to the Arab American sheriff).

Bev's religious fundamentalism that clearly divides her environment into the righteous and the sinners is in perfect harmony with Trump's right-wing demagogy, which, as Walter Ötsch and Stephan Pühringer argue, "is reshaping US politics follow[ing] an inner logic of a dual world picture that has an immanent tendency to radicalization. Since a dual world cannot be proved by empirical facts (the classification of phenomena into only two possibilities is arbitrary), no event or fact can disprove it" (10). Trump's fake-news/post-truth politics (especially combined with a strong belief in sacred individualism) is inherently in opposition with fact-based reasoning and accepting scientific data, which results not "only" in monsterizing various groups of people but, in the end, also in abusing our very ecosystem and inducing an apocalyptic crisis. Accordingly, *Midnight Mass*, despite its very clear Christian (Catholic) context, addresses the connection between ignorance and inhuman behavior on a more general level, too. As Mike Flanagan explains, "[t]he angel doesn't represent vampirism or horror but corruption in *any* belief system. . . . It represents fundamentalism and fanaticism" (qtd. in Bojalad, emphasis mine). The corruption, as we could see, comes from a limited perspective. In the series, interpreting everything according to a memorized Bible verse points to a complete inability to apply any system that one is not allied with by way of faith. Ignorance seals these people's fate, while knowing mythology or trusting science may have saved them from turning into vampires.

Fanaticism (often religious but not exclusively so) burns the world and makes it uninhabitable when it shapes societies built on ignorance and fake news, which inevitably denies scientific facts, such as climate change. The ending of the narrative is thus ambiguous, to say the least. Paralysis heralds a new beginning; a world burnt into ashes is the new, man-made (or, rather: man-ruined) Eden. What chances does this arrangement give to humanity? Are we to realize, as Monsignor Pruitt was, that it is too late to have a new beginning unless we secure a "miracle"?

"The monster always escapes" (Cohen 4), and Flanagan knows this. The "angel" with mutilated wings, therefore, falls into the sea and is prevented from reaching the mainland, but what it embodies does not die with this one body. "You might send it off to the sunrise and hope that that corrupting ideology will disappear. But it won't. And the show could never show the angel die for that reason" (Flanagan qtd. in Bojalad). The world we are left with stays under constant threats even if the most imminent-looking one is averted. But the burnt-down world is suggestive of another very real threat linked to ignorance—or, more precisely, the denial of scientific facts. The unstoppable climate change calls for humanity's repentance for hypocrisy and acting against nature (an analogue to inviting the unnatural vampirism to Crockett Island's community) and demands heroism to fight against the impending apocalypse. For "[t]hat last moment of the next generation looking out at the ashes of what the grown-ups made—that's what my kids are gonna get no matter what . . .. That's what all of our kids are gonna get. . . . We're never going to be able to explain adequately to our children what happened to the planet they inherited," concludes Flanagan (qtd. in Bojalad).

Looking at this religio-philosophical thriller from the burning inferno of the Anthropocene thus underlines the connection between a lost (or never acquired) ability of reading signs properly and an apocalypse that is hindered by ignorance coupled with a corrupted, blind faith. The vampire in this narrative, then, signals the overall despiritualization of humanity in twofold measure. It directly addresses how even religions may become deprived of their spiritual contents in the hands of people who lack proper understanding, compassion, and empathy; and it indirectly points to humanity's distancing from the natural world. The Severing—the split between the anthropocentric, false reality that mankind acknowledges and the actual "ecological symbiosis of human and nonhuman parts of the biosphere" (Morton 2017) manifests the lack of a spiritual connectedness to one another as well as to the

biosphere, which mankind has treated as their subject, stinting their empathy and compassion from it and not recognizing their oneness with it.[7]

Erin's moving death-monologue expresses the longing for the perfect place that is characterized by this oneness. Coming "to her fullest realization of God and faith" (Siegel qtd. in Maas, J.) while dying, Erin comprehends the interconnectedness of beings and things in the world:

> All things . . . a part. You, me and my little girl, and my mother and my father, everyone's who's ever been, every plant, every animal, every atom, every start, every galaxy, all of it . . . There is no time. There is no death. Life is a dream. It's a wish. Made again and again and again and again and again and again and on into eternity. And I am all of it. I am everything. I am all. I am that I am. ("Book VII: Revelation")

The way she renders her idea of God and heaven evokes various religions and philosophies beyond Christianity. It conjures up the spirit of "Song of Myself," written by Walt Whitman, who rejoiced in the Over-Soul "[f]or every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (line 3). It emphasizes the endlessness, circularity, and interconnectedness that constitute the basis of Hinduism and Buddhism, and it brings in the life as a dream motif we know primarily from the famous butterfly-dream teaching by Zhuangzi (or, alternately transcribed as Chuang Tzu) (Chuang Tzu). This inspired combination concludes with the statement "I am that I am," God's words from the Old Testament (Ex. 3:14) suggesting in this translation "the mystery of God, the impossibility of defining his nature, his 'Name'" (Schild 297).[8] Erin's uttering the words by which God defined Himself confirms her dissolution in this spiritual universe that is Over-Soul and God and Nirvana at the same time—a state of enlightenment, in which one understands and feels her belongingness to every atom of the universe, her oneness with whatever and whoever there is.

Conclusion

After a few decades in which the vampire's most homely space has been the supernatural romance, *Midnight Mass* brings back the focus on the importance of spirituality, a dominant theme in *Dracula*. But while in Stoker's novel the need for re-spiritualization comes from the fear of secularization or materialism,[9] and the consequent loosening of morals, what *Midnight Mass* denounces is religious fanaticism characterized by hypocrisy and/or the inability to think critically and understand and act according to the spirit of

religion—an attitude that appears as immoral and soulless as the Victorians saw the brave, new, materialist world that was emerging. The two different threats are defined by the cultural contexts they derive from; *Midnight Mass*, accordingly, uses a Catholic environment to address a more broadly understood fanaticism that defies logical thinking and deprives people of their humanity and implies that such a mindset is often rooted in religious fundamentalism.

The show's overall focus on the body is a reminder that what threatens the contemporary world is also inseparable from the influence of materialism. Presenting a diegesis about the status of the soul via documenting the status of the flesh proves to be an effective means of exposing a perverted spirituality and hypocrisy, which shows that even religiosity succumbs to the materialism of contemporary culture, privileging the body as the ultimate value in life. Such a religious fanaticism bitten by materialism also privileges "quick miracles," reducing the timespan one thinks ahead. It celebrates the flesh as the locus of miracle and, therefore, does not care about long-term consequences as long as the human body gets what it demands—especially as the planetary body may hardly be the locus of quick miracles and is thus relegated to the category of the dispensable. *Midnight Mass* demonstrates that fundamentalist logic, which believes in binarism, oppresses what is categorized as "Other" and is satisfied with self-justification instead of facts, fast-forwards the process of otherizing and damaging the very place mankind lives in. While contemporary zombie narratives tend to emphasize the fragmentation of the fallen world via the decomposing monster (Limpár, "'Able Zombies'" 230), the vampires in *Midnight Mass* embody humanity's avarice coupled with ignorance, which is capable of destroying the world.

The small island setting points to the domestic nature of the crises presented, but the emphasis on how the island relates to the mainland, that is, how the domestic threatens the global, accentuates the idea that this narrative goes well beyond criticizing religious extremism. The insular setting, furthermore, emphasizes the importance of borders: the island is a world in itself, referencing the very reality of closed communities in small settlements, the narrow-mindedness that comes from a symbolic isolation from the rest of the world, the detachment of humanity from the planetary body, as well as the literary utopian/dystopian tradition that emphasizes the isolation of the space of imagination in which the story is set.[10] And when the borders are crossed, the "mini apocalypse" generated by the dystopian space of fundamentalism may extend and grow global.

The isolation is reinforced by the final shots: the island is not suitable for habitation, the mainland is invisibly far, and in between the two spaces there is the very small space of the boat in the sea. The show, aptly, finishes on the multilayered display of the body: the body of the "angel," injured and falling into the abyss; the bodies of the vampirized community, burning in the sunlight; the body of the island, burnt and burning, shedding its layers of civilization, dying (yet, ironically, in a way de-aging, as if it were a vampiric body); and Leeza's body, which returns to its paralytic state.

The island in ashes is the reminder that we lost this Edenic state here on Earth but also that confronting the evil, the demonic carries precious knowledge. It makes us appreciate what we have: an imperfect, weak body that, nevertheless, hosts one's willing spirit; ashes, from which one may rise, like a phoenix; the knowledge of evil that allows one to know good from evil and have doubts, questions, and critical thinking—a glimpse of hope in the near-apocalyptic present.

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Notes

1. For a detailed overview on what kind of conceptions of soul are related to the vampire in folkloric imagination, see especially Chapter 18 ("The Soul after Death") and 19 ("Keeping Body and Soul Apart") of Paul Barber's monograph *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* (Barber 178–194).

2. Paul—who was called Saul then—was a prosecutor of Christianity, but his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus converted him and became the "most staunch, fearless, and tireless advocate and herald [of Christianity], unflagging in his zeal and devotion" (Lilly 180).

3. St. Paul developed "a theology of the Resurrection of Christ, arguing from this fundamental doctrine of the gospel to the doctrine of general resurrection, about which some of the Christians of Corinth had evidently expressed doubt. To a gentile people certainly the idea of a literal resurrection of the human body must have been one of the most revolutionary of teachings of the new faith which they had adopted" (Vawter 11).

4. Shaping the vampire to evoke associations with the Antichrist is one of several ideas and motifs that link *Midnight Mass* to *Dracula,* the literary predecessor of the vampire that reflects on an age's spiritual crises, and was noted by, for instance, Edward Mordrake and Lucas Kwong (112).

5. The expression in Stoker's *Dracula* is used by the eponymous protagonist, referring to his own wolves howling in the night. In the novel the vampire is closely associated with the wolves and dogs, which appear in the narrative as "agents of Dracula, susceptible to his 'rabid' . . . control" (Chez 77) and are symbolically connected to darkness. Using the Victorian notion, documented in various encyclopedias, that a vampire may turn into a dog and other forms (Chez 78), Dracula himself is presented in Stoker's narrative as a supernatural creature who landed on the shores of England in the form of a dog and is claimed by Van Helsing to be able to transform into a wolf or a bat (Stoker 242).

6. This is very much in harmony with how the vampiric bite is often interpreted as standing for sexual perversion (Limpár, "Masculinity" 284, N4) and specifically for rape (Lorrah qtd. in Limpár, "Masculinity" 284, N4).

7. It is not by chance that the first ominous sign of the coming apocalypse on Crockett Island is something that looks like a natural catastrophe with all those wild cat bodies scattered on the seashore.

8. This best-known translation and many similar ones (see Schild 297) support the explanation for God's words that I quote in the essay. E. Schild proposes an alternate translation and exegesis, arguing that the statement is "a positive answer in which God defines himself as the One who Is, who exists, who is real" (301).

9. Victorian materialism triggered various counterreactions, such as spiritualism, occultism, but even a renewed interest in Roman Catholicism, and they were "in part motivated by attempts to reconcile science and spirit by finding empirical proofs for spiritual life or to refute materialism by expanding the boundaries of the real beyond the merely physical," claims Rosemary Jann (274).

10. Károly Pintér explains how the island provides a realistic and symbolic frame for early utopian narratives, and how the relationship between the island and the rest of the world changes in narratives written after the great geographical discoveries, which start to position the island in opposition to a bigger, better world (195).

11. The Vatican does not make the author's name available but reveals that "*The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has commissioned an expert to prepare the following study, which the Congregation strongly recommends as a sure foundation for the reaffirmation of the teaching of the Magisterium on the theme: Christian Faith and Demonology.*"

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Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 84-100
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/5

Here There Be Trees: Radical Otherness in Ursula K. Le Guin's "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow"

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ABSTRACT
Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction tends to remain within an anthropocentric and anthropomorphic universe, exploring the possibility of communication between familiar and Other across a cultural divide, but within the boundaries of a humanoid physiology. This study investigates how Le Guin's Hainish narratives explore the sublime encounter with the radical, vegetal Other in the short story "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow," touching upon the topics of communication and transgression, mutual intelligibility, neurodiversity, and empathy. (VB)

KEYWORDS: radical alterity, vegetal otherness, ecological sublime, neurodivergence, anthropocentrism

> "You can't trust planets. They're bound to be different, bound to be bad, bound to be out to get you, especially this far out, a billion miles from nowhere, so you get them first."
> Ray Bradbury, "Here There Be Tygers"

> "Let them not turn to the trees for death. If that is what they want to see, let them look into one another's eyes and see it there."
> Ursula K. Le Guin, "Direction of the Road"

The encounter with the alien, "the exploration of that which we perceive to be 'not-us'" (Schneekloth 246), is one of the most common tropes explored by science fiction (henceforth SF). The genre investigates the many faces of

alterity and the varied ways in which the familiar interacts with the Other. Applying techniques that are inaccessible to realistic storytelling allows for the defamiliarization of the Other into beings that are positively non-human. Variations on the theme include mechanical alterity like robots or artificial intelligence, posthuman modes of experience, or extraterrestrial otherness. Whatever form it takes, the "alien . . . is a significant if familiar cultural metaphor which marks the boundaries and limits of social identity" (Wolmark 27).

Critics like Gregory Benford or Carl Malmgren, among others, posit that alterity in SF most commonly manifests as "anthropocentric aliens" with basic functions like "a fresh enemy, an analog human, or a mirror for ourselves" (Benford 56). Repositioning the meeting with the Other from the human-to-human interaction to a human–alien encounter has a wide range of possible applications. One is to give shape to the individual and collective concerns that permeate a given moment within a certain culture, where the alien becomes "the site of difference and the repository of our fears and anxieties" (Rutherford 10). This use of the alien can, of course, simply "reproduce, rather than question, those divisions [of race and gender]" (Wolmark 27). Patrick Parrinder calls attention to the peculiarity inherent in this scenario, namely that by highlighting what we are afraid of, aliens also "seem to be designed to relieve the tensions caused by fear of the unknown, fear of violence, fear of the basic insecurity of the modem world-system, and by a pervasive xenophobia" (50). Taking this notion one step further, several authors, including Ursula K. Le Guin, use anthropocentric alterity to investigate the relativism of otherness, and through it the qualities that unite rather than those which divide.

Whereas anthropomorphic aliens, almost indistinguishable from humans, are at one end of the alterity spectrum, at the other extreme lies a type of alien much less frequent in SF, which Benford refers to as the "unknowable alien," embodying the "essential strangeness" (56) of meeting the Other. Of course, the question whether true Otherness can be represented remains debatable (Malmgren 16), since alienness is ultimately still communicated by and through a human conceptual framework, but there are a number of SF works that focus on these "speculative encounters involving unknowable aliens" (17). Examples include Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama*, Stanislav Lem's *Solaris*, James Tiptree Jr.'s "Love Is the Plan, the Plan Is Death," James Blish's "Common Time," and Ursula K. Le Guin's "Vaster than Empires, and More Slow." All of these narratives, to a lesser or greater extent, focus on instances of communicating with the radical

Other, and explore the extent to which this is possible. This study will investigate the intersections of Otherness, the sublime and monstrosity in Le Guin's short story, both within the human community of the spaceship's crew, and in relation to the plant sentience of World 4470; furthermore, it will explore how the speculative Other's monstrosity may be defused within the interactions between human and alien.

Ursula K. Le Guin's short story, "Vaster than Empires, and More Slow" (henceforth VE) was published in 1971, as part of the collection *New Dimensions 1*, edited by Robert Silverberg. The story is part of Le Guin's Hainish cycle—called so by scholars rather than Le Guin herself, who never intended to create a coherent series (Le Guin, "FAQ")—which, by this time, included several novels and short stories, among them her best-known work, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). The Hainish "universe"—a group of solar systems seeded with humanoid life by the inhabitants of the planet Hain hundreds of thousands of years ago—is immense, both in space and in time, and most narratives set in this world remain within its confines. Since the inhabitants of the Hainish planets are all anthropomorphic variations on the *homo sapiens sapiens* theme, most encounters with Otherness explore interactions with anthropocentric aliens, and concentrate on matters of political, cultural, and sometimes, gender difference. VE is one of the very few narratives which actually crosses the spatial and biological borders of the Hainish universe and investigates questions of radical alterity.

Le Guin's secondary world is predicated on the axiom that matter cannot surpass the speed of light, hence interstellar travel is only possible at NAFAL (nearly as fast as light) speeds.[1] This peculiarity introduces the concept of time dilation, which means that moving between worlds throws the personal time of the traveler and the universe around them into misalignment: during a high-speed space journey much less time passes for the spacefarer than for the rest of the galaxy outside. A voyage between planets may only take a few minutes in the subjective time for the traveler, while years or decades may have passed for everyone else. The significance of such a time jump is aptly pointed out by Mike Cadden: "the space journey warps time—it requires NAFAL flight, which will forever displace the characters from both their own worlds and their own generations" (52). This means not only spatial, but also total temporal and thus cultural isolation; the voyager, although physically able to return to their point of origin and complete a circle, will forever have lost the cultural and human factors that were the building blocks of their home surroundings, their *terra cognita*.

Embarking on a space voyage in Le Guin's Hainish stories in a sense means voluntary self-exile without a chance to return home.

Borrowing its title from Andrew Marvell's 17th century metaphysical love-poem "To His Coy Mistress," the short story draws on the couplet "My vegetable Love should grow / Vaster than Empires, and more slow" and alludes to the nature of the speculative encounter within the narrative. Time dilation assumes an extreme form in VE, as the spaceship called *Gum* is traveling beyond the borders of the Hainish system. A trip of this magnitude takes several centuries in objective time only to get there, "seeking for worlds which had not been seeded or settled by the Founders on Hain, truly alien worlds" (167). The irrevocability of the cultural dislocation, the utter isolation of the crew over this vast distance is further intensified by the impossibility to communicate with the Hainish system, as "the ansible [the device which enables instantaneous communication between any two given points within the system] . . . was reliable only within a range of 120 lightyears" (167). The diverse humanoid spaceship crew explores World 4470, a planet devoid of all animal life, covered only by alien vegetation. They first reject the possibility of self-aware life on the planet: the closed, anthropocentric system of the Hainish universe allows for a narrow definition of sentience, because it is founded on the principle of the "anthropocentric alien" (Benford 56), where encounters with alterity are restricted to variations on an underlying biological similarity. This is why the crew looks for sentience only in familiar places, assuming that conscious thought can only dwell in mobile animal bodies.

After spending some time on the planet's surface, they start to exhibit symptoms of extreme mental agitation, and the increasing fear, aggression, and anxiety the crew experiences are finally revealed to be a reaction to the planet's vegetal sentience, whose singular, static, and glacial existence—theorized to lack self-awareness in the human sense—has been disrupted by the arrival of the fast-paced, mobile humanoid entities. The confusion and the concomitant fear experienced by the planet at the encounter with the unknowable alien is broadcast as a telepathic background noise which the humanoids subconsciously pick up and react to. The two modes of sentient existence clash, prove incompatible, and result in the mental deterioration of the crew to such an extent that it threatens to crush and destroy the landing party. The situation is resolved by Osden, the autistic empath of the survey team, whose voluntary absorption into the planet mind produces an animal-plant hybrid sentience that can navigate the threshold—this "monstrous frontier" (Limpár 160)—between the two types of Otherness, and the rest of the crew is released to continue their journey.[2] The short story explores

questions of mental and affective proximity, of safe distance and interpersonal exchange, both through the anthropocentric alien—arguably Osden's position in relation to the rest of the crew—and the unknowable alien, World 4470.

World 4470 is not a standalone example in SF, as sentient planets are a recurrent, although rather rare topos, and one of the ways in which authors opt to explore the "unknowable alien" within the genre. The earliest examples come from the beginning of the twentieth century (R A Kennedy's *The Triuniverse* and Arthur Conan Doyle's "When the World Screamed"). They tap into the notion of the natural environment adding up to an entity that is greater than its parts combined, and the different complex emotional responses such a being might elicit, ranging from sublime awe through wonder to the utmost terror. Whatever the affective reactions, they most often carry an element of incomprehensible otherness, as demonstrated by Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*; as Carl Malmgren remarks,

> [Lem] emphasizes another aspect of the human response to the aliens—its limitations.. . . Lem systematically interrogates the frames of intelligibility that human beings . . . bring to the encounter; invariably he demonstrates how such frames are limited, or subjective, or emotionally colored, or simply inappropriate, hopelessly anthropomorphic. (Malmgren 28)

Other examples include Ray Bradbury's "Here There Be Tygers," or, more recently, N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy. Jemisin's books particularly draw on the Gaia hypothesis put forward by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, which postulates that the whole biosphere of Earth may function as a complex regulatory system, meaning that "the total ensemble of living organisms which constitute the biosphere can act as a single entity to regulate chemical composition, surface pH and possibly also climate" (Lovelock and Margulis 3). The planet-mind embodies radical alterity not only because of its vastness, or because of the complexity of interconnected organisms and networks that form a biosphere, but also because the processes that ensure their functioning as a holistic system are so different from how anthropocentric entities experience existence and imagine otherness.

On a metaphorical level, narratives involving vegetal sentience, especially when read against the political and ecological concerns and anxieties of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, may also function as sites to express postcolonial and ecocritical concerns, a subject

matter that forms an important part in Le Guin's oeuvre, as well. Chris Pak contends that "'Vaster Than empires and More Slow' is an important intervention into the proto-Gaian narrative for its reconceptualisation of the living world in terms of ecological principles" (111). VE is not the only narrative where Le Guin resorts to what Fröydi calls "vegetal storytelling" (130); she uses the complex interconnectivity within a biosphere in her novella *The Word for World Is Forest*, where the Forest combines fauna, flora, and sentient inhabitants into an intricate and quasi-sentient self-defense system against a largely Earth-based colonial force. Another short story, "Direction of the Road" relates the alien, vegetal viewpoint by telling the story through the "eyes" of an oak tree standing by the roadside but perceiving itself to be in motion against a human-animal world standing still.

Whenever the unknowable alien finds its expression on a planetary scale, in a natural environment, contact carries within it the potential to experience the sublime, "human beings' encounters with a nonhuman world whose power ultimately exceeds theirs" (Hitt 609–10). Affective responses to sublimity carry within them the anxiety induced by facing the incomprehensible, which in its defiance of cognition threatens "our sense of self" (614). In the Kantian system, describing the romantic sublime, this is resolved by the mind re-establishing "the balance of outer and inner by constituting a fresh relation between itself and the object" (Weiskel 24), which reasserts human dominance over nature by "the triumphant emergence of reason" (Hitt 608). Hitt explores the place and relevance of the sublime within the ecocritical tradition and concludes that "an ecological sublime would offer a new kind of transcendence which would resist the traditional reinscription of humankind's supremacy over nature" (609), essentially acknowledging and keeping the incomprehensibility of the radical Other intact. The radical otherness of the planet mind offers a site where this encounter with the sublime can be navigated in an ecological way, as the incomprehensibility in such narratives is rarely resolved.

World 4470 embodies all of the above—the sublimity of the monstrous frontier, the undertones of postcolonial criticism and the expression of ecological concerns—with the addition that, as an exclusively vegetal sentience, it has no experience of animal alterity, and hence no protocols or safeguards to fall back on when the meeting finally takes place. As hinted at earlier, there are two distinct alien encounters within the short story: the first oppositional set-up is the crew's problematic relationship with Osden, the Sensor set apart from the rest of the humanoids by his neurodivergence and his empathic ability. The second is the meeting between

the planet and the *Gum*'s crew. Both encounters are violent, and both carry a degree of unknowability, although, of course, the planet sentience is more emblematic as a true speculative encounter. Despite seeming fundamentally different, these two engagements with alterity exhibit similar patterns of transgression and similar reactions to Otherness, and hence both will be examined.

Othering and navigating marginalization lie at the center of VE from the beginning: the extreme survey crew is marked as a group of deviants, as "[w]hat sane person, after all, would go out to collect information that would not be received for five or ten centuries?" (167). The first three paragraphs of the short story revolve around establishing the insanity of the members of the survey crew: "they were of unsound mind . . . escapists, misfits. They were nuts" (167). The prominence of denouncing any kind of Otherness as abnormal is quite unusual for Le Guin, whose family background in anthropology and her sensitivity towards cultural relativism tends to produce narratives that explore communities where the taboo framework of Western societies is subverted, either by normalizing transgressive practices, or, on the contrary, by tabooing certain modes of conduct that contemporary human society perceives as normative practices. The emphasis placed on the divergent mental condition that is proclaimed to be the common denominator of the crew seems to reflect how the social system within the Hainish universe views those disengaging from its cultural and material continuum in such a radical way as mentally deficient. The voyagers embarking on a journey to the unknown are denounced as madmen setting out on a quixotic quest, a depiction that the narrative itself undermines since the crew's conduct, as it unfolds during their mission, at no time points to any innate instability beyond individual and cultural differences.

Osden stands apart even in this crew of marginalized individuals: he is an empath, and as Mannon, the Hainish scientist explains, "he's the first fully *cured* case of Render's Syndrome—a variety of infantile autism which was thought to be *incurable*" (VE 168, emphasis mine). Neurodivergence marks Osden as Other among the rest of the crew, supposedly all neurotypical humanoids. The emphasis on curing the condition—the word is used twice in different forms within the same sentence—clearly identifies neurodivergence as a disease within this community, and even more so, as a condition to be feared and repulsed by. Osden's empathic abilities are extensive and uncontrollable—"[n]o Off switch on empathy" (169)—as he continuously receives the emotions of his surroundings, without being able

to filter them, and without them being buffered by the conventions of courtesy that govern human(oid) interaction:

> "Well, you see," said Mannon . . . "the normal defensive-aggressive reaction between strangers meeting . . . is something you're scarcely aware of; habit, manners, inattention get you past it; you've learned to ignore it, to the point where you might even deny it exists. However, Mr. Osden, being an empath, feels it. Feels his feelings, and yours, and is hard put to say which is which. Let's say that there's a normal element of hostility towards any stranger in your emotional reaction to him when you meet him, plus a spontaneous dislike of his looks, or clothes, or handshake—it doesn't matter what. He feels that dislike. As his autistic defense has been unlearned, he resorts to an aggressive-defense mechanism, a response in kind to the aggression which you have unwittingly projected onto him." (VE 169)

Osden is not only a helpless observer of the emotional landscape around him, but he also acts as a mirror: "he cannot help but channel back to the crew. The affective feedback loop created by this exchange threatens to destroy the social existence of the humanoids on the ship, just as, on the planet, it produces reverberating waves of fear in humanoid and vegetal species alike" (Meeker and Szabari 185). Osden's negative experience of the emotional terrain surrounding him and his refractive response to it turns empathy, the "ability to imagine and share another person's feelings" (Cowie 394), from a generally positive and desirable capacity not only into a power that alienates, but also one that monsterizes its bearer. By the time the *Gum* arrives at World 4470, the crew is divided into us and him, and Osden has not only been marginalized, but monsterized as well. The short story seems to imply that unfiltered interpersonal interaction—extreme honesty, if we want to phrase it differently, as "nobody can emit a false empathic message" (VE 192)—has adverse and detrimental effects on the group. Emily Dickinson's advice to "Tell the truth but tell it slant—" (1053) seems to hold true for the Hainish universe, where too much interpersonal proximity can be just as alienating as too much distance, making extreme familiarity as unsettling as the unknowable alien. Osden's monstrous Othering also seems to function as the cohesive force that unites the diverse crew of the *Gum*, in line with Sara Ahmed's imaginary slogan "[*t*]*ogether we hate, and this hate is what makes us together*" (118, emphasis in the original).

Ahmed talks about the weaponized use of racial or ethnic difference as a monstrous threat, where the "ordinary becomes that which is already under threat by imagined others whose proximity becomes a crime against

person as well as place" (118) and the perceived danger is formulated as a "fantasy of violation . . . [where] mixed-race couplings and immigration become readable as (like) forms of rape or molestation" (118–19). Ahmed calls attention to how the fear of the migrant Other solidifies into fantasies of bodily violation, and her observation may be projected easily onto Le Guin's short story. Osden transgresses by invading his crewmates' emotional landscape against their will, even against his own will, constantly monitoring the affective output of the group. Surveillance and the violation of privacy delineate the position of the empath not only as a power position, but empathy is also coded as an act of rape, a clear and non-consensual violation of the borders of the emotional body, exposing the internal emotional landscape of the characters as vulnerable, since they are not in control of whom they allow in. This fear of rape may explain the intensely negative affective response of the crew towards Osden, a response that renders him almost abject, and construes him as monstrous threat. Porlock exclaims at one point: "He's evil . . . He's not fit to live with other people!" (VE 176). At the same time, Osden is also a victim of his uncontrollable empathic abilities; having to endure the constant fear, aggression and revulsion directed at him triggers defense reactions, and he mirrors back these emotions, creating a climate of hate. One could argue that since Osden's responses build a wall of incomprehensibility around him, he is effectively constructed as an "unknowable alien" in his own right.

Exploring Osden's relationship dynamics with the rest of the crew is important because it is reflected in the central speculative encounter with the sentient planet, as Meeker and Szabari also aptly point out (185). The situation is clearly modeled on the colonial encounter, with the Hainish explorers taking possession of World 4470 both physically and conceptually. Naming and mapping procedures when entering new territories are culturally coded imperial practices of appropriation, where the newly "discovered" terrain is reformulated and reconstructed in terms of the colonizing power. The *Gum*'s crew relies on its anthropocentric coding when assessing World 4470, and since the planet is exclusively covered by plant life, the surveyors reject any possibility of sentience. The crew's preconceptions about intelligence and self-awareness being exclusive to animal existence bias their search criteria: "There were no lights on nightside, on the continents none of the lines and clots made by animals who build . . . a pure phytosphere" (VE 173–74). The utter lack of fauna is interpreted as a deficiency, making the planet not only empty, but incomplete: "[a] warm, sad world, sad and serene" (VE 175). The confrontation with the sublimity of the planet initially remains within the

framework of the romantic sublime experience, trying to uphold the integrity of the self by asserting the superiority of the humanoid mind over the radical otherness of (alien) nature.

They unwittingly fail, although there is no sign of the unknowable alien yet, nor is the crew aware of the speculative encounter, but the perceived serenity of the planet starts to show cracks, and the peaceful calm first turns into an uncanny quiet and then into an outright menacing Gothic silence, which starts to unravel the minds of the explorers. The sublime resists the anthropocentric renegotiation within the confines of "reason and language" (Hitt 617), which could resolve the tension between the need to understand and the unattainability of the radical other. Psychological deterioration is inevitable as the "blockage in which conceptualization fails" (614) is not cleared. As time goes on, the crew realizes and articulates that something is there, as an alien presence intruding into their emotional landscape, but their cognitive bias makes it impossible for them to entertain the possibility of a vegetal sentience. Beyond that, they are also unable to transform the encounter into a meeting with the ecological sublime, where incomprehensibility can be upheld without it remaining a threat to the humanoid self. Instead, the crew's minds frantically try to construct what they feel to be there into something anthropocentric: shapes lurking among the trees, a spectral figure always behind them. The peaceful green world turns into a haunted forest inhabited by monsters, and the humanoids trapped in it cannot comprehend that it is the forest itself where the emotions they feel originate. There is no interface at their disposal where meaning-making between the vastly different forms of sentience could happen, all that remains is the anxiety induced by something beyond comprehension.

The speculative encounter in VE is governed by varying degrees of fear, starting out as uneasiness and ending in terror, to which the landing party reacts with emotions ranging from catatonic withdrawal to physical aggression. The crew's acceptance that the planet is "one big green thought" (194) needs repeated affirmation from Osden, whose empathic (dis)ability puts him at an advantage, as he is more used to perceiving the Other not only via sensory information gathered from his surroundings, or through the process of interpersonal communication, but also by involuntarily trespassing the emotional landscape of alterity. Osden is also better equipped to handle and process unfiltered emotional transmissions, while the rest of the crew is caught off guard by "feeling" otherness. Hence Osden is also more willing to let go of his prejudiced projections, more attuned to trust his empathic skills, and ready to accept the alien in its utter, incomprehensible otherness. He is

the person who can navigate the sublime without having to assert his dominance as self over the Other.

Just like the crew's interaction with Osden, this central speculative encounter is also predicated on the real and projected transgression of boundaries. In the case of World 4470, the planet sentience experiences an invasion of its physical body as the explorers land on its surface. The short story features interesting incursions of the vegetal viewpoint into the narration, and one of these switches describes Jenny, Porlock, and Olleroo as "three viruses twitching minutely on the hide of an unmoving giant" (VE 176). This analogical depiction encodes the crew members as not only infinitesimally small in comparison to the celestial body, but also as parasitic, malevolent entities that invade the host body, as potential harbingers of disease and death. The ontological threat presented by the humanoids is insignificant in terms of the physical danger they pose, but on a conceptual level the peril they bring is real: they represent the unknowable Other to an entity that beforehand had no concept of alterity at all.

In this sense the short story manifests in true Le Guinean fashion the interchangeability of the familiar and the Other, but as opposed to her various explorations of alterity within the confines of the Hainish universe, where difference is resolved through the intercultural and interpersonal exchange between humanoid entities, this does not suffice here, as the barriers between the animal and vegetal sentience seem insurmountable in terms of the traditional, physical exchange of information. Meeting happens on a completely different level, on the emotional terrain of the entities involved. This presents a situation that echoes Osden's monsterization as the perceived invader of the affective privacy of his crewmates: the unconscious exchange of anxiety between consciousnesses unaware of each other's existence amplifies the feeling of threat experienced by both parties involved. Here the reader is left in the dark regarding how the planet's vegetal sentience perceives the animal threat, but the humanoids' viewpoint is presented as an almost obsessive meaning-making process, trying to project a familiar form of cognition into the unknowable alien terrain, as remarked earlier. The endeavor, of course, proves fruitless, and projections remain just what they are: ghosts in an increasingly Gothic landscape of fear, as the humanoids are repositioned from "picknickers over sunny plains" (VE 175) to prey hunted by an invisible monster. Rutherford's insights are quite fitting here: "The centre invests the Other with its terrors. It is the threat of the dissolution of self that ignites the irrational hatred and hostility as the centre struggles to assert and secure its boundaries, that construct self from not-self" (11).

Referring back to the interchange between Osden and the crew, the same principle holds true here, as well: the unmediated, unfiltered emotional landscape of the Other, whether that alterity is anthropocentric or unknowable, carries within it the fear of the violation, and in extreme cases the annihilation of the self, an encounter which Tomiko describes as the "intolerable experience of the immortal mindless" (VE 199). The reasons for feeling threatened differ: the humanoids find the vegetal sentience inconceivable, and they are helpless in fending off the negative emotions it transmits. The planet, on the other hand, has to process the sheer fact that the Other exists: "'Isolated,' said Osden. 'That's it! That's the fear. It isn't that we're motile, or destructive. It's just that we are. We are other. There never has been any other'" (194). Yet again, the reader has to be aware that the motives of the vegetal sentience are translated into anthropocentric terms, and the meaning is ultimately a filtered and constructed one. Nevertheless, the meaning Osden makes through the shared experience with the crew suddenly gives him the words to explain his position of being the involuntary recipient of all the affective transmissions around him, and this moment of communication de-monsterizes the empath in the eyes of his colleagues. The realization that he and the crew finally tread on common ground enables Osden to let down his defenses and expose his vulnerable self, to voice his wishes and dreams, again through his perceptions of the planet:

> . . . and before it panicked it had a—there was a serenity. I couldn't take it in, then, I didn't realize how big it was. To know the whole daylight, after all, and the whole night. All the winds and lulls together. The winter stars and the summer stars at the same time. To have roots, and no enemies. To be entire. Do you see? No invasion. No others. To be whole. . . (VE 195)

Osden suddenly sees familiarity in the unknowable alien, and with it a potential to both save the crew and save himself, as the vastness and tranquility of the vegetal emotional landscape manifests as a possibility of a personal utopian existence for him, a site of healing. He senses the potential for complementarity, where instead of annihilating each other, the familiar and the unknowable alien may fuse into a hybrid that is both and neither. For this to happen he needs to surrender to the affective invasion and reframe the threat of annihilation as a willing meeting with the Other, letting go of expectations to resolve the sublime experience into a rational conceptualization of the radical alien. Osden takes the leap of faith, gives in to the vegetal fear, and transcending it, merges his consciousness with the

plant mind of the planet. The process is relayed by using the unconscious Eskwana as medium, and the messages show Osden's fading human consciousness, finally having found peace in the "infinite silences" of World 4470.

Meeker and Szabari point to this transformative process by remarking that "[t]he tale of World 4470 is not, generally speaking, a story of becoming, except in the case of one character: Osden. Yet for him, this becoming is the end of subjectivity and even of human life itself" (184). Meeker and Szabari's observation seems to carry some disappointment within it, as if the end of Osden's humanity deserves a measure of mourning. In this sense their analysis upholds the anthropocentric viewpoint that sentience is tied to a human experience of conscious existence, and that the meeting with radical alterity will lead to the self's annihilation. By inference this would point to Osden's disappearance as an act of suicide, even if his gesture is an act of self-sacrifice. The survey team believes Osden is still "there; for there was no fear anymore" (VE 198), and report, accordingly, that he had been "left as a colonist" (199). Their own conceptions of existence would not seem to allow them to think otherwise but to frame Osden's post-contact existence as a colonial narrative, which upholds the binary of humanoid and alien and interprets Osden's integration with the vegetal sentience as a successful repositioning of radical otherness into the realm of comprehensibility. This interpretation also allows for the encounter to be re-coded as experiencing the romantic sublime, where knowability is reasserted at the end of the process, ensuring the continued existence of the self.

But in reality, we do not know much about Osden's post-integration fate, or what he becomes after his melding with the vegetal sentience of World 4470, nor whether or how this experience affects the plant mind of the planet. VE is ambiguous in its assessment of whether true communication with the unknowable alien is possible, and even more so in terms of defining what true communication might mean. The crew, on the one hand, remains incompatible with World 4470, and leave the planet after their survey is completed, without ever eliciting an emotional response from the vegetal world again. Musing about what happened, Tomiko continuously bumps into walls when trying to rationalize the events, repeatedly arriving at words like "fear" and "love," and finally concluding that "this is not the vocabulary of reason" (199). In terms of the sublime encounter with the radical Other, Tomiko's attempts at reconfiguring the unattainable within the framework of language fails, but relocating meaning-making into the affective landscape allows her to maintain a solid sense of self in the face of the collapse of

anthropocentric projection. In other words, VE may be interpreted as pointing at the possibility of Hitt's ecological sublime, when the meeting ground is repositioned fully into an affective framework, and the frontier is demonsterized despite maintaining its unattainability.

On the other hand, not being empaths, the crew have little skill with successfully navigating such a meeting fully in terms of affect. Beyond the insufficient experience, the empathic connection in VE is also closely linked to involuntary vulnerability and a lack of consent, and hence involves concepts like trespassing, violence, even rape; the perceived invasion triggers the defensive mechanism of the entity intruded upon, leading to the above-mentioned negative "affective feedback loop." The shared experience of unintentionally violating the boundaries of the vegetal sentience and the resulting emotional backlash, however, create an affective rapport between the crew and Osden, finally enabling the crew to feel what, until then, they were only able to articulate in rational terms. Shared affect makes room for understanding between them and dispels the aura of monstrosity and unknowability around Osden, and he is seen as a familiar being for the first time. In this sense, the encounter with the unknowable alien facilitates communication between the anthropocentric aliens, not only on the intellectual, but also on the emotional level. Voluntary vulnerability in encountering the Other seems to be the formula towards a successful meeting, as far as VE goes, and Osden's disabling of his defensive mechanisms brings about the pacification of the planet mind of World 4470. Crossing the boundary between anthropocentric and unknowable nonetheless entails a price, rendering Osden, and what he has become, invisible and inaccessible to the *Gum*'s surviving crew.

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Notes

1. As opposed to this, information exchange can be instantaneous through a device called *ansible*, and certain Hainish narratives published after 1990 explore the possibility of space travel without interval via the *churten* technology. While *ansible* becomes an integral part of the Hainish universe, *churten* remains an anomaly, resulting in a system where communication between far points is possible, but the movement of matter is restricted by a speed limit.

2. Ildikó Limpár introduces the term "monstrous frontier" in her analysis of Patrick Ness's *Chaos Walking* trilogy, where the telepathic communication on the alien planet is carried as an airborne viral agent, which infects the human colonizers and drives them insane. Although the two narratives are quite different, Ness's trilogy also explores the possibility of emotional proximity, telepathy/empathy as transgression and vulnerability, and hybridization as the solution to the human–alien encounter.

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Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 101-115
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/6

The Wood Within: The Deathless Vegetal as a Component of Posthuman Corporeality in Robert Holdstock's Mythago Novels

Mónika Rusvai

ABSTRACT
The global environmental challenges we face today necessitate a reconciliation between man and all beings that he once labeled monstrous: women, animals, plants. Modern fantasy literature is a potential contact zone with these culturally constructed Others. The paper argues that Robert Holdstock's Mythago novels offer a redefinition of the human through a corporeal reintegration of the vegetal. Based on Dawn Keetley's theses of plant horror, vegetal "deathlessness" is defined as a plant's ability to blur the anthropocentric dichotomy of life and death. Holdstock heavily relies on vegetal deathlessness throughout the Mythago texts: the vegetal physically enters the protagonist's body, stretching and transforming it beyond the limits of human time and space. The result is a hybrid entity enriched by the more-than-human experience. Through the close reading of the Mythago novels, the paper intends to reveal that despite this mutual trespassing, humans and plants are interdependent in their endeavor to maintain the landscape. (MR)

KEYWORDS: critical plant studies, nonhuman, plant horror, vegetal monstrosity

Introduction: The deathless vegetal

Plant blindness, the common practice of humans through which we ignore plants as harmless parts of the background, greatly hinders us from staying in touch with the plant kingdom.[1] Within the current ecological crisis, however, this blissful ignorance is unforgiveable—or, to use the catchphrase of the Anthropocene: plant blindness is *unsustainable*. One way of making vegetal life visible in various forms of media is to unveil the unknown, fearful, monstrous side of plants. In everyday situations, plant blindness makes us ignore plants as harmless components of the background, but speculative fiction may cast light on the vegetal monstrosity that lurks in the shadows. Contemporary fantasy is a common playground for the nonhuman Other, and it contains

spaces that are apt to harbor the uncanny vegetal, which often appears as the Gothic forest trope. This paper wishes to focus on how the monstrosity of plants is used to unravel deep knowledge about both plants and people in Robert Holdstock's Mythago-novels.

The absolute alterity of plants compared to the human species is rooted in the bodily alterity of the vegetal. Through the anthropocentric gaze, plants are defined by their limitations in comparison to the human body. Consequently, this gaze construes the vegetal Other as immobile, insensitive, physically weak, and more importantly, unable to defend itself against (human) force. All these perceived deficits of the plant body are used, up to this day, to justify the abuse and objectification of the plant kingdom. As Michael Marder argues, "non-human, non-animal living beings, such as plants, have populated the margin of the margin, the zone of absolute obscurity undetectable on the radars of our conceptualities" (2).

No wonder we have this limited perception of plants as we only ever get in touch with them through watching, using or consuming their *bodies*. The vegetal mind was unknown for centuries and only recently have natural sciences and eco-philosophy developed interest in it.[2] For our present consideration, the most interesting assumption of plant philosophy is that a plant's meaning is closely intertwined with its corporeality. Since ancient times, Western thinkers have devalued plants and placed them at the bottom of the hierarchy of species based on their perceived lack of reason. Despite the recent philosophic and scientific interest in plant intelligence,[3] Emanuele Coccia's observations are still legitimate: "Plants are the always open wound of the metaphysical snobbery that defines our culture. The return of the repressed, of which we must rid ourselves in order to consider ourselves as 'different': rational humans, spiritual beings" (I Prologue). The inseparable nature of plant mind and plant body appears to be one of the most important reasons for humans' failure to perceive and acknowledge plant intelligence. For trees, unlike for humans, bodily growth is a lifelong process, and they speak "through shaping their own matter" (Irigaray 129). Plant meaning is thus, quite literally, embodied meaning. In comparison, starting out from the construed hegemony of the mind over the body, humans seem to have gradually separated their corporeal being from their meaning; so, by the time the Anthropocene began, they had practically forgotten about (or suppressed?) their corporeality. Nevertheless, confronting vegetal otherness within the safe settings of fiction may aid us in the re-discovery of our own embodied identity so that we can heal our artificial separation from the more-than-human world.

In all its differences, the nonhuman plant body is perceived by humans as monstrous and as such, it is a boundary-crosser and a "harbinger of category crisis" (Cohen 6). However, it is not only the body–mind dichotomy that collapses in vegetal corporeality: the human perception of the divide between life and death is also blurred by the perceived otherness and consequent monstrosity of the plant body. The end of a plant's life is less clearly demarcated than ours. You may cut down a tree, but its stump will be covered with new sprouts the next spring, a carefully chosen twig sets roots into the ground—and there are a hundred other ways through which plants seem to outlive themselves. As Marder points out, "[t]he life of plants is situated on the brink of death, in the zone of indeterminacy between the living and the dead" (53). I would not call them immortal in their stubborn defiance against death; instead, I propose to use the term *deathless*, suggesting that vegetal beings have a significantly different death experience than we do due to their bodily construction. I argue that fantasy literature offers multiple tools to lay bare this abject, undead quality of the vegetal.

Speculative fiction often applies the method of displaying monsters to show the frightening side of nature, yet in innovative fantasies, the significance of the monstrous runs deeper. As Arasu and Thornton highlight,

> [t]he monster is a figure in fantasy whose existence suggests the possibility of other modes of being, perceiving, and communicating—ways which challenge anthropocentrism and the teleological hierarchy that places humans as the end-point of evolution. Associated with queerness, liminality, and Otherness, the monster becomes a powerful metonymy for exploring the socially constructed boundaries of normality. (153)

Thus, in its role as a boundary crosser, the monster becomes a potential partner in the renegotiation of the human–nature relationship.

British author Robert Holdstock's (1948–2009) *Mythago Cycle* consists of six novels—*Mythago Wood* (1984); *Lavondyss* (1988); *The Hollowing* (1993); *Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn* (1997); *Merlin's Wood* (1994); and *Avilion* (2009)—and several short stories, which also rely on the concept of a semi-sentient woodland. Except for *Merlin's Wood,* which portrays Brocéliande, a wood in Brittany, the novels of the *Cycle* focus on Ryhope Wood: a small patch of ancient woodland located in the English countryside. Its vegetation, however, possesses a supernatural skill, as trees are able to connect to the human intruders' minds. When a mythago-genesis occurs, these unusual trees use the contents of the human collective unconscious to physically manifest mythic

heroes and landscapes within the immense inner realm of Ryhope. Thus, the ancient narratives embedded in human minds are constantly re-enacted within the wood, and the vegetation changes all the time so that it can accommodate these stories.

Mythagos, the mythic heroes and creatures that are the products of the mytho-genetic process, can be seen as plant–human hybrids that have a unique bodily complexity. First, they are made up of human *and* vegetal components: the narratives sucked out of human minds give purpose to mythagos, whilst their physical body is created from "leaf and woodland matter" (*Merlin's Wood* 345). As one mythago, Guiwenneth explains her form of existence, "I am wood and rock, not flesh and bone" (*Mythago Wood* 161). Secondly, even though their body is made of woodland matter, it has the appearance and functions of a normal human body. Depending on the characteristics of the mythic figure they were modeled on, most mythagos consume human food and drink, they are able to copulate with ordinary humans, they bleed when hurt and are able to feel pain. The true nature of mythago bodies is only revealed after death: when they die, what appears to be their bones turns into deteriorated wood. Throughout the *Mythago Cycle*, Holdstock provides graphic accounts of this process. The description of the dead body of Tallis's infant son in the second novel, *Lavondyss,* is a dramatic example. Tallis enters Ryhope as a teenager, and later she becomes the lover of Scathach, a half-mythago man. They have a son, who only lives for five months. Holdstock describes the baby's remains as follows: "The bones of her son lay exposed at last, the sad wood which they had become crushed and broken after many years of being dragged through the forest and buried beneath her other goods" (*Lavondyss* 226). In his next novel, *The Hollowing*, Holdstock depicts hundreds of mythago corpses who fell victim to the protective field around Old Stone Hollow (the main station of the researchers who wish to uncover the secrets of Ryhope): "It was as if a graveyard had been unearthed and scattered. Leaves sprouted on drooping jaws. What appeared to be piles of firewood were hunched, agonized figures, their ribs returning to the earth" (*The Hollowing* 84).

Yet no bodies are wasted in Ryhope, as this uncanny woodland is deathless on two levels: on the one hand, it is deathless as a superorganism that manages to continuously rejuvenate, and on the other hand, it is deathless on the level of individual mythagos that are also cyclically reborn so that they can continue re-enacting their own narratives.[4] Through this extensive reliance on vegetal deathlessness in his depiction of Ryhope, Holdstock consciously brings the plant body into focus and offers a revised definition

of the human through the corporeal re-integration of the monstrous vegetal. As it will be further explored, it also poses the question whether language as a product of anthropocentric human reality can ever become a sufficient tool in subverting plant blindness, or it may merely succeed in restating the limitations of the Anthropocene condition.

A darker shade of reenchantment

Traumatic fissure from the more-than-human world is key to the definition of the human in the Anthropocene. In this section, I focus on the relationship of humans with the plant kingdom as an embodied encounter and argue that despite the frightening components of vegetal otherness, seeing plants for what they are in their corporeality entails a form of re-enchantment that helps us gain a new perspective on our role within the biosphere.

Tolkienian fantasy literature is generally associated with nostalgic, pastoral, peaceful landscapes as starting points. Tolkien himself said in his lecture "On Fairy-Stories": "To the elvish craft, Enchantment, Fantasy aspires, and when it is successful of all forms of human art most nearly approaches" (64). There is, however, a different meaning of the so-called "green country" in heroic fantasy that brings into view a disturbing combination of eco-philia and eco-phobia. To explain this interrelation, let us first consider two observations made by Ursula K. Le Guin. She claims that "Tolkien's Middle Earth is not just pre-industrial. It is also pre-human and non-human" (86). Then she points out that this non-human setting "reminds us of what we have denied, what we have exiled ourselves from" (86). Through these assumptions, Le Guin brings into focus the ambivalent nature of our relationship to the more-than-human world. The major problem with the disenchantment of the modern world is that it simplifies this complexity and mutes the longing for a natural world that we humans can truly participate in. For Jane Bennett, "the question is not whether disenchantment is a regrettable or a progressive historical development. It is, rather, whether the very characterization of the world as disenchanted ignores and then discourages affective attachment to that world. The question is important because the mood of enchantment may be valuable for ethical life" (3).

In my view, the re-enchantment of the world may become a way to regain this "affective attachment to the world," while bearing in mind that facing the vastness of the "pre-human" world is a belittling or even frightening experience. *Rewilding* is a term extensively used in connection with

projects that work on increasing local biodiversity through human intervention.[5] Similarly, if we wish to reposition humans in relation to nature in an attempt to weaken the constraints of the Anthropocene, the discourse about the more-than-human world could also make use of some rewilding: the conscious inclusion of nature's fearsome and repulsive side. And rewilding the analysis of modern fantasy would also require more focus on the monstrous plant body.

Plant horror is the subfield of critical plant studies that focuses on the abject qualities of plant bodies. Dawn Keetley summarizes plant horror in six theses, three of which are closely related to plant corporeality. The first one is that "[p]lants embody an absolute alterity" (6). In the physical sense, the plant body is indeed the farthest away from the human in its limited mobility, muteness, and lack of organs. No wonder that from our human perspective plants mark an "absolute rupture of the known," as Keetley contends in her sixth thesis (22). But the most interesting questions are raised by the fourth thesis, which states that "[t]he human harbors an uncanny constitutive vegetal" (16). For the plant-conscious analysis of fantasy, these three statements bring great potential, as they point in the direction that despite their alterity, plant bodies are in fact closer to human bodies than we ever imagined—or ever feared. As Marder observes, "[w]e cannot help but feel a tinge of the uncanny in the demand that we discern the constitutive vegetal otherness in ourselves" (36). Fantasy, however, does not stop at the point of generating fear. Colin Manlove points out that in horror fiction "the supernatural is left entirely alien, for the point is the shock, the 'frisson of the supernatural', that is experienced both by the characters and the reader" (164). As opposed to this, familiarity with the Other is central to fantasy texts (Manlove 165). In fact, many fantasy texts, the *Mythago Cycle* amongst them, are centered on the construction of the familiarity with the Other. Thus, these texts manage to draw a more complex picture of humans' place within the more-than-human world.

As described, the mythagos have a plant–human hybrid body. This is how Christian Huxley defines them in *Mythago Wood*: "myth imago, the image of the idealized form of a myth creature. The image takes on substance in a natural environment" (40). The latter observation about substance plays a significant role in my arguments concerning human–mythago encounters. For humans, interacting with a mythago is an uncanny experience in many ways. A mythago is a hybrid creature in two respects: it is guided by a narrative taken from the human mind, yet its body is made from woodland matter.

Additionally, despite being made of woodland matter, it has a human shape and human bodily functions.

This complexity of the mythago body is achieved through the mythogenetic process, whereby the trees of Ryhope Wood suck out the contents of the human mind and materialize them. Thus, a non-material human component is incorporated into a vegetal body, which could readily be considered an instance of plant horror. Nevertheless, the reverse process occurs on a daily basis in the primary world: plant bodies get transformed into human bodies (and thoughts) and all this goes by the name of human metabolism. Through the consumption of vegetal bodies, we are eventually made of plant life. Mythagos thus confront us with the inherent hybridity of all kinds of living bodies within the biosphere. And just as the body–mind dichotomy collapses in vegetal corporeality, it does so in the case of mythagos. These mythic figures generated by Ryhope transcend the limitations of the Cartesian dualism of mind and body as they exist in holistic *bodyminds*: the very shape of their body is defined by the narrative that was taken from the human mind that participated in their creation, and this non-material inner component is literally inseparable from mythago corporeality. This apparent negation of the body–mind dichotomy points towards horizons beyond the anthropocentric conceptual paradigms.

These qualities of mythagos are decisive in the human–mythago encounters described throughout the *Mythago Cycle*. As Bennett points out, cross-species encounters can be a source of enchantment (17) and inspire wonder (31). However, the situation is more complex when someone is faced with the monstrous. In such cases, Bennett argues, we should consider the "context of the encounter and the significance of the categorical boundary that they confuse, not to mention the particular body and sensibility that have been affected" (30). The monstrosity of the mythago body is rooted in the uncanny human–plant hybridity that makes these creatures both attractive and repulsive in the eyes of the human protagonists. Crossing the human–plant boundary can be frightening in both directions.

In the *Mythago Cycle* it is clearly revealed that the human components of mythagos can induce as much fear as the radical alterity of the plant body, while at times even vegetal Otherness can create wonder and awe. On the one hand, the human side of mythagos also harbors components of disturbing Otherness. The free will of mythagos is severely limited because they are compelled to fulfill their individual quests prescribed by the mythic narratives that they participate in. This inner drive is so powerful that it overwrites their moral codes, and very often they are ready to ruin their own

lives so that they can re-enact the story sequence they were born with. All this becomes deeply unsettling when Holdstock reminds his reader again and again that this compulsion to repeat the (harmful) patterns of their ancestors is also deeply embedded in the human protagonists—and into every single human being. On the other hand, the vegetal side of mythagos can also amaze human protagonists and readers. Daurogs, manifestations of the green man archetype, appear in several novels of the Cycle, and in their summer forms they are ready to aid human protagonists. By appearance, daurogs are anthropomorphized trees that can walk around on long limbs and can talk in weird chatter. On certain occasions they are ready to communicate with humans. For instance, in *The Hollowing*, the teenage protagonist, Alex, is taken care of by a female daurog. While the boy is trapped inside the creations of his own mind, she helps him travel through the rootweb, and this is how Alex is eventually located by the researchers who team up with Alex's father to find him.

This complexity of the mythagos is further enhanced through the relationship between the mythago and the human whose mind was used in its creation. From the human character's perspective, such a mythago is quite literally an uncanny being: it is made partly of hidden components from the human's Self (more specifically, from the personal *and* the collective unconscious in the Jungian sense), yet it is materialized as the (vegetal) Other. Due to this intricate connection between the two, human and mythago are attracted to each other. For the human protagonists, this attraction often results in the objectification of the mythago in a creator–creature scenario, where the creator is overwhelmed by the desire to possess its creature. The problem is, however, that no human has full agency in the mytho-genetic process. Throughout the *Mythago Cycle*, Holdstock shows on multiple occasions how human protagonists deceive themselves into believing that they are the true creators of mythagos, but in truth, Ryhope always keeps the upper hand. It is a shocking experience when human characters recognize their own powerlessness and vulnerability in the face of the Other. "They [the mythagos] *take* from us," George Huxley bursts out in *Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn*, "I should have known that. They reflect us, and they *take* from us. We are them. They are us. Mythagos! Two shadows of the same mind. I was curious; therefore, so was she. I was angry. Therefore, so was she" (chap. 2). Even though this realization of the Wood's far-reaching agency is perceived by the characters as frightening and overwhelming, Holdstock always offers opportunities to learn from the vegetal Other.

The (vegetal) Other incorporated

Confrontation with vegetal deathlessness—the most abject quality of the mythagos' human yet nonhuman body—is brought into the forefront in human–mythago relationships throughout the *Mythago Cycle*. In the first novel, *Mythago Wood*, George Huxley and his two sons, Christian and Steven, obsessively wish to possess the object of their desire, the mythago Guiwenneth. Conflict arises because each of these three men believes that the wood used *his* mind to manifest the Celtic warrior princess. The question of Guiwenneth's true identity becomes even more complicated when the two brothers are faced with the vegetal deathlessness of mythagos. At the beginning of the novel, Steven travels back to England after he has recovered from a war injury and learns that his older brother has fallen in love with a strange woman from the nearby woodland. At this point, Steven is blissfully unaware of the fact that Guiwenneth is a mythago. To his horror, he finds out that the woman has died, and Christian has buried her in the garden by the chicken huts. Steven then plucks up courage to uncover the grave and finds the decaying body. Later on, when he confronts his brother with what he has learned, Christian explains to him that Guiwenneth has probably already come back to life within the wood. He says: "She's lived a thousand times, and she's never lived at all. But I still fell in love with her . . . and I shall find her again in the woods; she's in there somewhere" (*Mythago Wood* 32). And soon enough, Guiwenneth returns, but this time Steven believes that her image sprang from *his* mind. The rebirth of the mythago marks only the beginning of Christian's and Steven's long chase after the beloved woman. Even though Guiwenneth has two children with Steven in the last Mythago novel, *Avilion*, she eventually slips away to fulfill her own quest as a mythic character, leaving a desperate Steven behind. Despite its almost intimate connection with a human's mind and its ability to rejuvenate, the mythago body is not there to be claimed and used by its human originator. Thus, the Huxleys' initial anthropocentric and colonial position is challenged by the gradual disobjectification of the deathless mythago body.

In *The Hollowing*, the ultimate Otherness of vegetal decay is brought into question when characters mistake a dead mythago for a human corpse. When the teenage protagonist, Alex, looks through a magic wooden mask (the Moondream mask that Tallis lost in *Lavondyss*), his dreams are sucked out, and the boy falls severely ill. He is taken to hospital but escapes from it and gets lost. His body is found a year later but in such a state of decomposition that proper identification is impossible: "The skull had been so badly crushed, by two or three blows, that precise dental association was

impossible, but from the size of the bones, the male features of the pelvis, scraps of clothing in the same grave, and the fact that it was found so close to Shadoxhurst, the conclusion at the inquest was that the remains were those of Alex Bradley" (*The Hollowing* 31). Six years later, a team of researchers working in Ryhope Wood contact the boy's father, Richard, to inform him that they have found his son inside the forest. Overwhelmed by a surge of hope, Richard now remembers that the bones were not just decayed but *rotten*. When the researcher Helen asks him what he means by that, Richard says:

> "They were woody."
> "They weren't bones," Helen said dogmatically, her eyes alive with certainty. "It wasn't Alex. We have a word for what it was. A *mythago*. A false thing. And the boy we've located *is* Alex. Believe me." (*The Hollowing* 49)

Even though the dead mythago is visibly composed of wood matter, the fact that he was made through the boy's mind and shaped in his resemblance proved enough to turn absolute vegetal alterity into confusing similarity, which questions the assumption that plant corporeality is truly that different from human corporeality. This connection between the two may suggest that there is an uncanny fluidity between human and nonhuman corporeality and among the right circumstances the two might transform into one another. One may even suspect that the right circumstance is death, or more precisely, the deathlessness of the vegetal body that seems to propel this flux of human and nonhuman, living, and nonliving matter.

The most interesting inquiry into this issue may be found in the second novel, *Lavondyss*. When the young female protagonist, Tallis, reaches the innermost region of Ryhope, she embarks on a spiritual journey. First, her human body is literally torn apart by the vegetal in a manner that evokes the medieval green man imagery: "She stretched open her mouth, screamed, then spewed out the great twisting branch. It came like a hard, brown snake. It flowed from her. It divided into two, then curled back on each side of her head, bursting into bud, then leaf, to wrap around her skull" (304). Tallis is thus transformed into a giant tree, and after she observes the wood for a while from this arboreal perspective, tree-Tallis finds herself in the Ice Age version of the same myth that her own life is a re-enactment of. In this ancient form of the narrative, tree-Tallis is cut down, and her carved trunk is used as a monument to commemorate a deceased grandmother. As a result of this process, tree-Tallis gets in contact with the old woman's body: "Below her was the corpse of a woman. Tallis had seen the grimacing features as she was

carried to the grave. Now, as she impacted with the body, she felt the bones stir. A sap rose in her, human warmth in the veins of the wood" (307). The description shows the human and vegetal body as physically intermingled. Later on, the grandson replaces the grandmother's image with the wood, and turns to her in his despair: "He called on Grandmother Asha through the oak statue that was Tallis. 'You are a part of the first forest. You have seen all things. You have lived through all times. You are bone and wood, Grandmother, so you must know how to save us. Please send us food'" (308). Similarly to Guiwenneth in *Mythago Wood*, who looks human but is "wood and rock, not flesh and bone" (*Mythago Wood* 161), tree-Tallis as a magical replacement for the dead grandmother becomes a vegetal–human hybrid entity that is associated with the ability to intervene in the events inside the wood and send birds to the starving family. With regard to corporeality, this is the point in Tallis's journey where the vegetal and the human are the most closely intertwined, and this is the deepest the girl ever gets inside the wooden realm. On her way back, as the human component in her body increases, Tallis first metamorphoses into a daurog, then she finally returns into a human body. But to her shock, the journey to the first forest has taken its toll and she is now an old woman.

Conclusion

Through the magic of Ryhope Wood, mythagos like Guiwenneth and even humans like Tallis can partake in vegetal deathlessness. In the wooden realm, all bodies are revived in one way or another, so that they can re-enact the mythic narratives that keep this uncanny ecosystem in motion. To achieve this, Ryhope relies on hybrid corporeality: there is no body within the wood that is not intruded upon by the vegetal Other; however, this general hybridity is not as fictional as we might think. Ecocriticism has already begun to deconstruct human corporeality as something entirely separate from its nonhuman environment. For instance, Stacy Alaimo argues that we should imagine "human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" and thus it becomes "ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (2).

Since the vegetal Other in Ryhope blurs the body–mind dichotomy, I suggest that trans-corporeality should be extended to denote the intermeshing of different *bodyminds* that exchange both material and immaterial components. Revival and repetition are natural characteristics of plant life in the primary world, but they are also natural processes carried out by the human psyche. Narratives rooted in the collective unconscious are

ready to sprout new leaves each time they are retold, and even when individual storytellers die, the story is kept alive. Relying on Holdstock's depiction of plant–human relationships, we can redefine the human as a creature that is inseparably linked to the more-than-human world. First, the human as an embodied creature is intermeshed with nature through trans-corporeality. Secondly, the human as a psychic being resonates with the processes that keep the entire ecosystem in motion.

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Notes

1. The term plant blindness was originally coined by James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler in 1999. The authors intended to combat the evident consequences of zoocentric thinking that very often borders on anthropo- and zoochauvinism. In 2020, Kathryn M. Parsley coined a new term for the phenomenon: plant awareness disparity (PAD), which is supposed to relieve plant blindness from its ableist undertones. Nevertheless, it is yet to be seen whether PAD makes its way into general usage within critical plant studies. Under any name, however, the issue of plant blindness has to be addressed shortly, as the phenomenon leads to harmful consequences in cultural production, scientific research as well as in environmental policy. The immobility and muteness of plants might serve as an explanation for our limited ability to notice them, simply because our nervous system focuses on potential threats from the environment. Yet, as Matthew Hall warns in his book *Plants as Persons* (2011), it is problematic to present the zoocentric attitude as "inevitable for all human beings" (6).

2. Even in the natural sciences there is an ongoing debate about what terminology should be applied in describing the plant mind. Can we talk about a nervous system in the absence of neurons? Is there such a thing as plant intelligence? Anthony Trewavas's *Plant Behaviour and Intelligence* (2014), Richard Karban's *Plant Sensing and Communication* (2015), and the anthology *Communication in Plants: Neuronal Aspects of Plant Life* (2006), edited by František Baluška, Stefano Mancuso, and Dieter Volkmann, are among the many recent books that address these issues. Current eco-philosophy appears to be bolder in talking about the workings of the plant mind. Recent examples include Michael Marder's *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013) and Emanuele Coccia's *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (2018).

3. For some recent input into plant intelligence research, see Paco Calvo et al, literature review, "Plants Are Intelligent, Here's How." By now most authors admit that a new term is needed to explain plant behavior, but in place of plant intelligence, some support plant cognition (such as Jonny Lee's recent article: "What Is Cognitive about 'Plant Cognition'?"). For a concise discussion of plant senses, see Daniel Chamowitz's book *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (2013).

4. In this respect, the two levels of mythago deathlessness clearly resonate with the two levels of the Jungian unconscious (personal and collective). As Ildikó Limpár points out, "Ryhope Wood, as a mental landscape, performs both aspects of the unconscious: the mythagos strongly connect to their 'owners,' who, thanks to Holdstock's careful design, are of various ethnicities of the world, and, as a consequence of that, the variety of their mythagos reflects humanity's history as well as its diverse cultures, making the Wood indeed this store-house of archetypes" (146).

5. The well-known rewilding experiments around the world include the Pleistocene Park in Siberia and the reintroduction of wolves into the Yellowstone ecosystem. A recent monograph by Paul Jepson and Cain Blythe provides a scientific overview of rewilding attempts, identifying four types (trophic, Pleistocene, translocation, passive), while also formulating worries that a strict definition of rewilding might actually hinder these processes. As they argue, "[m]any practical rewilders worry that definitions of rewilding formulated by academic experts will constrain their ability to innovate and experiment with new approaches to conservation. They fear that international conservation policymakers will use such definitions to specify what rewilding should or shouldn't be, and how it should be practised" (4 Rewilding's Practical Origins).

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Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 116-136
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/7

The "Islams" of Muslims in Post-9/11 Fiction: Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish*

Priyadarshini Gupta

ABSTRACT

The attacks on the Twin Towers have politically categorized Muslims as "good," "bad," or "moderate" in post-9/11 United States. These categories are reductive when it comes to understanding complex Muslim formations in a post-9/11 world as they impose a politicized ideal of what it means to be a Muslim. The "ideal" American Muslim is supposedly an American first and a Muslim second. While there is significant scholarship against such reductive categorizations, what remains largely unnoticed is a Muslim's subjectivity in relation to Islam in everyday life: the ways in which a Muslim interacts with Islam on a day-to-day basis are often idiosyncratic in nature. This paper introduces the concept of "everyday Islam" as a key tool to resist Muslim essentialism. Drawing on the works of Saba Mahmood, Santiago Sia, and Nadia Fadil among others, it analyzes Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish* (2013) and argues that the novel displays different sensibilities that Muslims bring to their interactions with Islam on a daily basis. By focusing on the character of Mina, Akhtar's female protagonist, this paper examines how an interplay of moments, situations, and contexts shapes her day-to-day practices of Islam. In doing so, it challenges the reductive political categorizations of Muslims as "good," "bad," or "moderate," and expands our understanding of the diverse ways in which Muslims make sense of Islam in often incongruous ways. (PG)

KEYWORDS: Muslim subjectivity, Muslim identity, Muslim-American, 9/11, Islam, Other

Introduction

What makes a good Muslim or a bad Muslim? This question remains relevant in the United States even twenty years after the World Trade Centre attacks, which encouraged academic and non-academic debates on the nature and the spirit of Islam. Muslim lives became over-politicized—their relationship with the United States, issues of immigration and citizenship, and the racialization of Islam became a part of American life.[1] While some Muslims embraced Islam to protest against Muslim discrimination, others succumbed to the

pressure of proving their loyalty to the American creed, a dynamic that Steven George Salaita argues forces Arabs and Muslims to perform what he calls "imperative patriotism." Speaking against the foreign policies of the United States is considered unpatriotic and is subjected to governmental suspicion. As Salaita observes, "[i]mperative patriotism assumes (or demands) that dissent in matters of governance and foreign affairs is unpatriotic and therefore unsavory" (154). At the same time, the racialization of Islam has created what Baljit Nagra calls "reactive ethnicity," a Muslim's coping mechanism when experiencing racism (148). She identifies a few types of "reactive ethnicity": Muslims are either scared to acknowledge their religion publicly, or they openly embrace their religion as a protest against discrimination, or develop a strong sense of Islamic faith in an Islamophobic America (Nagra 160). Nagra concludes that such a myriad "reactive ethnicit[ies]" have complicated a Muslim's identity in relation to the American essentialism of Islam: "Both personal and *political* motivations play a part in their decisions as well, making reactive identity formation a complex social process, involving both societal and self-ascription" (Nagra 170, emphasis added). Therefore, self-affirmations of Muslimness further complicate the understandings of a "good," "bad," or "moderate" Muslim.

While there is significant scholarship against such reductive categorizations, what remains largely unnoticed is a Muslim's subjectivity in relation to Islam in everyday life: the ways in which a Muslim interacts with Islam on a day-to-day basis are often idiosyncratic in nature.

This paper introduces the concept of "everyday Islam" as a key tool to resist Muslim essentialism. Drawing on the works of Saba Mahmood, Santiago Sia, and Nadia Fadil among others, it analyzes Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish* (2013) and argues that the novel displays different sensibilities that Muslims bring to their interactions with Islam on a daily basis. By focusing on the character of Mina, Akhtar's female protagonist, this article examines how an interplay of moments, situations, and contexts shapes her day-to-day practices of Islam. In doing so, it challenges the reductive political categorizations of Muslims as "good," "bad," or "moderate" and expands our understanding of the diverse ways in which Muslims make sense of Islam in often incongruous ways.

The "good," the "bad," and the "moderate"

A week after the Twin Tower attacks, George W. Bush addressed the nation politicizing what Mahmood Mamdani critiques as **"**good**"** Muslims and "bad" Muslims. In an overarching sense, a "good" Muslim is a "loyal"

American who contributes to American welfare by speaking against Muslim terrorists and sees Western human rights violations in the Middle East as acts of righteous warfare. A "good" Muslim also believes that Muslims need to be liberated from their oppressive, tribalistic, and anti-democratic governments (24). Mamdani elaborates:

> "Bad Muslims" were clearly responsible for terrorism. At the same time, the president seemed to assure Americans that "good Muslims" were anxious to clear their names and consciences of this horrible crime and undoubtedly support "us" [non-Muslim Americans] in a war against "them." . . . But this could not hide the central message of such discourse: unless proved to be "good," every Muslim was presumed to be "bad." (Mamdani 15)

Bush's post-9/11 America popularizes a pluralist and liberal American Islam. American Muslims are expected to align themselves with the American version of an "acceptable" Islam. The American version of "acceptable" or progressive Islam advocates embracing diversity in Islamic discourses, pluralism of ideas, and goes against dogmatic faith and injustice around the world. Sunaina Maira calls the idea of a "good" Muslim a part of the imperial liberal order in which a Muslim American has to prove their "good citizenship" and practice "acceptable Islam". Therefore, according to Maira "acceptable Islam" adjudicates American totalitarianism against Muslims. It is compatible with American liberal democracy that relies on Islamic faith and tolerance, and resists, as Maira would have it, "surveillance and repression of political speech [for Muslims] in the Patriot Act Era" (634).

Building on this, the quest to define Muslim identity is the primary literary trope in post-9/11 fiction. These novels focus on Muslims adapting to a "fallen" America. As Tim Gauthier argues, the United States can fall—hence US self-sufficiency is false (16). Post-9/11 novels, therefore, call for empathy to understand complex situations, incidents, and dynamics which supersede simplistic portrayals of a perpetrator and a victim in a tense cultural milieu: "The attainability of any cosmopolitan engagement is contingent upon our abilities to understand the other, knowing always that the otherness of the other remains beyond our grasp, and the best we can do is to imagine some version of it. It is primarily in this capacity that the novel has a role to play" (2). Therefore, as Gauthier notes, individual tales of tragedy and heroism are both pertinent to "us" and "them" characters, which, in turn, invites the recognition of each other's suffering (16). Post-9/11 fiction creates conditions of similarity between the "self" and the "other" that are polarized

in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. We should not forget that a "fallen" America has led to the estrangement of a Muslim other within an Islamophobic society. As a result, some novels, as Carol Fadda-Conrey argues, depict Arab American hardships with US assimilation politics. The heterogeneity of Arab-Americans in terms of nationality, class, educational, and religious backgrounds have problematized their relationship to US legal citizenship (Fadda-Conrey 536). Hence, fiction captures the racial, ethnic, and religious variability of Arab-Americans demonstrating how select individuals (that is, those with light skin and a Christian identity) are acceptable in a racially stratified America (540). The novels become anti-essentialist responses to public culture and paranoia about Arabs, and, by extension, Muslims.

The discursive strategies of writing back against Muslim vilification are varied when describing Muslims in fiction as perpetrators of violence. Md Abu Shahid Abdullah criticizes post-9/11 fiction's attempt to describe Muslim violence, noting that post-9/11 fiction has "denigrated Muslims and Easterners by portraying them as marginal and insignificant" (52). For Abdullah, even though Muslim fundamentalist masterminds caused the cataclysmic incident, ordinary "Muslims were the worst sufferers of the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers" (58). Anna Hartnell advances Abdullah's argument stating that even though post-9/11 fiction sympathizes with the discrimination of the Muslim other, it follows clichéd stereotypes of an innocent Western subject and a fanatic Islamist. Such novels, as Hartnell argues, attempt to make realistic portrayals of the terrorists and their bombings but in turn perpetuate the national trauma that the United States needs to heal from (483). Ahmed Gamal cuts through these simplistic understandings of Muslim violence arguing that the post-9/11 terrorist depiction is an intermesh of individual frailty, Islamic radicalism, and Western modernity. He notes that "religious radicals feel challenged by pluralistic creeds and norms, the most significant of which is the? secular rationality of modernity" (101), but he also argues that the depiction of terrorists supersedes Eastern backwardness and a debilitating Eastern cultural system (96). Terrorists, in Gamal's choice of fiction, come from middle-class families with degrees in architecture, urban planning, and engineering.[2] Hence, their depiction is neither uncivilized nor barbaric, as Said suggested—they are educated, have achieved academic prowess, and are capable of making a decent living. Therefore, these writings show a cultural ambivalence towards the Muslim other: the Western subject is traumatized but it is the ramification of the non-Western subject's consistent existential crisis. Gamal ultimately

concludes with a nuanced understanding of the terrorist, rather than a simplistic one.

American Dervish

This article, similarly, takes its starting point in a novel that refines generalized categorizations of Islam and, by extension, simplifies Muslim identities in a post-9/11 cultural milieu: Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish* is a Bildungsroman depicting a Pakistani-American boy, Hayat, growing up in a Milwaukee suburb, who is very fond of Mina Suhail née Ali, his mother's friend from Pakistan. The novel narrativizes Hayat's relation with Mina and the ways in which she shapes Hayat's understanding of Islam. Mina's Islam is different from Hayat's Islam, though: for the boy, being a true Muslim means practicing scriptural Islam. For Mina, however, personalizing Islam to meet her emotional and spiritual needs is necessary for being close to Allah. Therefore, although the novel is set in the 1980s, Mina in *American Dervish* brings forward a sense of "everyday Islam" or the day-to-day workings of Muslim lives in relation to Islam that is characteristic of post-9/11 sensibilities. In Milwaukee, Muslims practice doctrinal Islam: Adnan Souhef, the local imam of the Milwaukee Mosque, Ghaleb Chatha, the Pakistani local pharmacist, or Najat, Chatha's wife believe that piety lies in Islamic scripturalism. For Mina, it is Quranic scripturalism that is very much a part of her Muslimness. At the same time, she also believes that "everyday Islam" gives her a sense of self. Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando describe "everyday Islam" as the performativity of piety in doing different things every day that creates spaces of "flexibility, spontaneity, ambiguity, and ultimately secularity" for Muslims as compared to fixed assumptive constructs (76). The novel not only deals with complex Muslim identities, but it also sheds light on the ways in which a Muslim shares an idiosyncratic relation with Islam within the bounds of the religious rules of the *ummah*, a commonwealth of Muslim believers. Moreover, it argues against individualistic constructions of post-9/11 Muslim identity as products of American materialism. The novel takes into account the collectivism of ummah and the ways in which it converges with and diverges from the lived experiences of every Muslim individual.

In recent years, scholars have taken multiple approaches to this complex novel. Kyle Garton-Gundling, for instance, considers its relationship to a post-critical mode of literary analysis that privileges readerly experience—joy, frustration, pleasure—over skeptical reading practices (137). Garton-Gundling notes, however, that post-critical scholars remain

secular pluralists, and his study questions whether a post-critical reading practice can make space for stories about religious people who are truly committed to their religion. Meanwhile, Syrrina Haque suggests that the narrative "delineates the power dynamics of a South Asian community" (1), one in which people express multiple, overlapping identities. In other words, Haque claims that Muslims in Akhtar's novel are affiliated in variegated and complex ways. Finally, Anna Guttman posits that the key tension in Akhtar's work is central—specifically between Muslims and Jews (911). Each of these scholars has recognized in Akhtar's writing a profound attempt at the exploration of the complexity of Muslim experience in post-9/11 United States. However, none have considered at length how Akhtar offers a potent critique of the way in which American Muslims were categorized as good, bad, or moderate in the post-9/11 era. Akhtar's Muslims personalize Islam; their sensitivities toward it show the absurdity of such state categorizations.

When exploring the category of "moderate Islam" and, by extension, any taxonomies that typify Muslims, I suggest that Muslim subjectivity does not function within the entrenched parameters of moderation. Rather, as Akhtar's character, Mina demonstrates, Muslim subjectivity is often unique and dynamic, and it is shaped by individuals' day-to-day understanding, perception, and application of Islam. My view is informed by the works of philosophers of religion, such as Akeel Bilgrami, who claims that identity formations of any kind (liberal, moderate, conservative, or otherwise) adhere to a larger ideological value system that helps people accept "their inferences and transformations that the theory sanctions" (823). Therefore, categories help individuals to "embrace their locality with some methodological right" (Bilgrami 823). Bilgrami ultimately asserts that identity formation is a fluid process, hence categorizing religious experience with narrow ideological descriptions is myopic. His statement contravenes those of scholars such as Dilshod Achilov and Sedat Sen, Rosemary Corbett, and Marcia Hermansen, who propagate "moderation" as "acceptable" to a pluralist society. These views on Islam should be contrasted with an earlier line of criticism, associated with scholars such as Randa Abdel-Fattah and Mehal Krayem, Murat Somer, Tazul Islam, and Amina Khatun, who have explored the discussion surrounding "good" (secular, pluralistic, moderate) and "bad" (conservative, illiberal, fanatical) forms of Islam and, by extension, Muslims. I intend to further nuance these approaches by demonstrating that an individualist understanding of Islam goes beyond institutionalized versions of religious and political Islam, since individual Islam in *American Dervish* functions as a self-transformative, knowledgeable, and experiential

hermeneutics in everyday modes of living. I also suggest that the novel provides the ideal space for understanding how religious experience and identity formation are individual, contextual, and particularistic phenomena, and yet, they follow collective rules of piety without falling into binaries of good or bad, pluralist or fanatical. Finally, I argue that Akhtar's *American Dervish* illustrates how Islam in the United States is localized and contextualized, suggesting that the novel grapples with the lived experiences of American Muslims compared to a mythologized national understanding of Muslim identities.

Islam as a religious ideology

Before turning to the analysis of *American Dervish*, I would like to consider how previous scholarship on Akhtar's novel has treated its religious content. Garton-Gundling reads the novel from a post-secular lens, exploring the ways in which it has appealed to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. He argues that the novel treats the Quran as a source of enchantment accessible to both types of readers (138). Haque, on the other hand, contends that the novel simplifies Muslim subjectivity and sees Muslim subjectivities as part of a collective Muslim identity. She posits that the Muslims in the book enjoy the economic benefits of American society but do not see themselves as members of the larger American community. Haque, in a way, rebukes the characters of *American Dervish* as "bad" Americans who use Islamic "knowledge based on their ideological discourse" to distance themselves from the American society that they live in (535). Anna Guttman takes a different approach to Muslim identity politics by arguing that exploring Jewish–Muslim relationships is key to understanding Akhtar's novels (7). While Garton-Gundling, Haque, and Guttman discuss the complexity of Muslim identity politics, they also treat Muslim identity as an essentially religious phenomenon. Although their works respond to universally recognized principles of Islam, they do not engage with the individual Muslim experience that operates in tandem with these doctrinal rules. The constitutive elements of Muslim subjectivity—emotion, volition, habits, and tradition, among others—play an influential role in the performativity of Islam (both as a code of conduct and as a set of Islamic principles) that manifest in diverse ways across different locales and contexts.

Since 9/11, moderate Islam has been the "acceptable" version of American Islam which, in mainstream media, aligns with American identity; indeed, moderate Muslims are considered one of "us" in American society. However, what defines moderation and where it should be applied in

everyday Muslim life remains ambiguous: should Muslims be moderate in religious practices or in their political ideologies, in their cultural dispositions or in public practices? Achilov and Sen argue that politically moderate Muslims do not support sharia law or advocate for the superiority of religious identity in political leadership (1). On the other hand, some scholars believe that Sufism itself epitomizes moderation, which, Rosemary R. Corbett argues, is a key element of individual Sufi experience. Sufism not only stresses the centrality of personal experiences with God, but it also brings believers into contact with a "worldliness" that is inclusive of various racial, ethnic, and cultural perspectives (88). Sufism recognizes the legitimacy of the diversity of Muslims and non-Muslims (53). She explains that Sufis are less focused on Islamic Law and are open to a mode of transcendentalism that integrates spirit and matter (59). And yet, as it has been noted, Americans have often misunderstood Sufism, regarding it as more compatible with American culture than it actually is. Hermansen, for instance, observes that "religion in America is characterized as being individual rather than institutional, and shaped by voluntarism, individual choices of loyalty and allegiance" (38). According to Hermansen, "[t]he American preference for all things 'lite,' including religious demands," has led many Americans to misunderstand and commodify Sufism (39). Additionally, she also notes how Sufism has been marketed in the United States through the "extensive use of media such as computer networks, exploitation of radio and newspaper coverage, and Sufi dancing" (45). However, these have little or no relation with how Islam diversely manifests itself in the everyday life of Muslims. The manufacture, commodification, and representation of Sufism have become the antidote for the American demonization of Islam.

Islamic tradition, in short, contains moderate elements, yet this moderation is different from what secular Americans imagine when they describe Islam as "moderate." Tazul Islam and Amina Khatun, for instance, argue that moderation is a part of Islamic theology. Moderation—*wasatiyyah* in Arabic—has several shades of meaning, including "justice or balance (*al-adl*), merit or excellence (*al-fadl*), better (*al-khairriyah*), median (*al-bainiyyah*)" (quoted in Al-Sallabi, 1999). Abdel-Fattah and Krayem, however, argue that the idea of the moderate Muslim is a response to white anxiety. They contend that the call for moderate trends constitutes a radical attempt to silence Muslim voices of dissent that speak against white hegemony (430). They suggest that a moderate Muslim is conditioned to live a meaningless existence, emptied of their authentic ideology, voice, and religious inclination. Therefore, moderate Muslims are simply a cosmetic addition to the

democratic Western polity. They help construct "a normalcy around particular types of Islam whilst demonizing those who differ" (433). These scholars and others have suggested that the moderate Islam imagined by Western commentators is either entirely fictitious or at least profoundly different from the moderate forms of Islam envisioned by Islamic scholars.

Murat Somer amplifies this point by arguing that moderation is more than a Muslim's adaptation to the State's interest. It is a variable set of behaviors that depend on individual context and national policy. Somer sees moderation as an ideational concept, one that depends on the relation between the Muslim and what he calls the country's "centre" (247), an institutional body that makes national and international laws. While he sees the country's center as static, he sees individual responses to the country's policies as variegated methods of achieving moderation. He writes, "the crucial question is *which* ideas, norms and types of behaviour a moderating actor is adopting. These, I maintain, are significantly determined by the nature of a country's centre" (247). In other words, Somer regards moderate Islam not as a fantasy invented by westerners but as a set of contingent practices pragmatically adopted by Muslims themselves. These practices will vary by country and by context.

Such ideas of a moderate Muslim, however, belie an evolving Muslim selfdom. Islam is a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon that can be a central force in a Muslim's life, but the way in which it manifests itself in everyday corporeality is different from categorizations of Islamic discourse. In an interview with the Idaho public television program *Dialogue: Conversations that Matter*, Akhtar spoke against pigeonholing Muslims into particular categories. He told the host of the show, Marsha Franklin, that his work explores a Muslim's subjectivity in a particular given moment. He explained, "We know who a person is by what they do, not by the traits that we think they have. They come from here, they are woman, they are man, their IQ [is] this, that doesn't tell us who the person really is. What tells what a person really is what they actually do" ("Playwright Ayad Akthar on Dialogue," 00:21:14–00:21:34). In short, he suggests that actions define people more than ideology. Similarly, Akhtar's Mina shows multiple selves in different contexts and situations. I, therefore, read the character of Mina through the lens of everyday Islam and seek to answer two questions: 1) How does Mina's Islam help her make sense of her everyday life? 2) How does Mina's Islam challenge institutionalized categorizations of post-9/11 Muslim identities? The next section compares Mina's everyday Islam to Hayat's and Adnan Souhef's doctrinal Islam. Each comparison explores Mina's

subjectivity in relation to her religion: her ethical righteousness in treating Muslims and non-Muslims alike, her Sufi practices to experience the sacred in new ways, and her feminist interpretations of the Quran for an idiosyncratic pious self. The paper then concludes how everyday Islam should become an antidote for Muslim essentialism in post-9/11 America. In essence, Mina's everyday Islam challenges Milwaukee's understanding of Islamic life, and, by extension, the formulaic constructions of Islam.

Contesting categorization: Mina and her Islam

In the Milwaukee of *American Dervish*, Muslims have a polarized relationship with Islam. Hayat's parents, Naveed and Muneer are secular Muslims, while Hayat, like other Muslims in Milwaukee, follows scriptural Islam. Naveed believes that religion should be avoided in everyday conversations and tells Muneer to check her religious impulses because religion always disrupts life (Akhtar 49). Naveed also tells Hayat not to touch the Quran until he is eighteen (246) and threatens to burn the Quran should Hayat violate his orders. However, thanks to Mina, Hayat's interest in the Quran rises exponentially as it helps him navigate through the miseries of his everyday life. Raised by an alcoholic father who has a troubled conjugal relation with his mother, Hayat lives in an emotionally unstable environment. Contrary to his parents, following the scriptural Quran gives Hayat an order in an otherwise disordered life. He wants to become a *hafiz*, someone who knows the Quran by heart, as he believes that it would make him a true Muslim. Therefore, when he finds Mina dating Nathan, Naveed's Jewish friend from work, he telegrams Hamed, Mina's former husband in Pakistan apprising him of Mina's relationship with a Jew. In Hayat's Quran a Muslim and a Jew cannot be romantically involved—it is a sacrilegious act. Upon receiving the news, Hamed threatens to take away Imran, their son, from Mina. Hayat is then filled with remorse and asks Allah to not separate Mina from Imran (246). For each of his troubled questions, Hayat finds answers in the Quran and therefore memorizes a few Quranic verses every day (111). Scriptural Islam for Hayat is the answer to life's every question.

Other characters in the novel, including Mina, also rely on a theological interpretation of the Quran. So does Ghaleb Chatha, who is despised by Naveed because he cannot "bear Chatha's religiosity, announced not only by his appearance—a skullcap, box-form Islamic beard, a knee-length Nehru coat he never seemed to take off—but also his conversation" (Akhtar 85). Similarly, Chatha's wife, Najat believes that wearing the full burqa in public embodies Islamic modesty for women (80). Just like Souhef,

Chatha, and Najat, Mina follows Quranic rules as well: she is a devout Muslim who prays five times a day, observes Ramadan, takes pride in knowing stories about djinns from the Quran, and tells Hayat the stories about the Prophet (49). She remembers every little detail about the Prophet's encounters in life (49) and believes that learning the Quran should be the end goal of every Muslim. For her, following the doctrinal version of the Quran is a necessary part of her life, her route to piety, and her identity as a Muslim.

Mina may follow Islamic externalities of piety, but she also has an intimate connection with Allah. For Mina, being close to Allah, which is listening to her soul, gives purpose to her life. While she ardently follows institutionalized expectations of Islamic life as the ummah expects her to do, she also makes room within those rules to embrace religious self-actualization. She is a Sufi and she makes use of her emotional, psychological, and spiritual faculties to be close to Allah. Tanvir Anjum describes Sufism as a dual layered concept: overtly, it is a scholastic method of life, but covertly, it is the sentiment of one's heart and conscience. Anjum observes, "[t]he method involved in this quest for spiritual development is contemplative rather than scholastic. The core practices of Sufism lead to the purification of the self which seeks to regulate and direct the spiritual life of people" (228–29). Practicing Sufism gives her a spiritual power to accept life's difficulties without feeling alienated, lost, and defeated. Mina has a hard life. Since everything is decided for her, she uses Sufism to realize her religious selfdom. Mina's second husband, Sunil beats her, puts her under house arrest, and threatens to kill himself should she decide to leave him. Despite this abuse, Mina cannot go through another divorce because in doing so, she would be looked down on in her conservative society. Muneer asks Mina multiple times to leave Sunil, but she is adamant about not leaving him (Akhtar 336). Therefore, instead of fighting the pain, Mina submits to it, believing that Allah will guide her through. In a Sufi vein, she believes that the pain is Allah and in it the "divine is choosing to express Himself through [her]" (343).

A Sufi life of self-detachment helps her fixate less on her emotional and mental suffering. In this way, Mina distances herself from the pain by either succumbing to it or by making peace with it. For Mina, leaving Sunil is not an option—it falls outside of the boundaries of Islamic modesty. Therefore, letting go of her inner needs becomes a viable solution. Paul L. Heck notes that a Sufi attunes to Allah by being aware of Islamic rulings but letting go of their individual needs: "Sufism would wholeheartedly agree that moral action comes about not simply from knowledge of the outer life (the moral teachings of Islam as set down in doctrinal creed and legal ruling) but

most fully through refinement of the inner life whereby concern for self is no longer paramount" (253). In a Sufi fashion, Mina renounces her emotional needs, tolerating Sunil's relentless atrocities, be it laying a gun alongside silverware on the dinner table, pointing the gun at her should there be excess turmeric in the beef curry, or forbidding Mina to speak to Muneer again (Akhtar 334, 335). Mina makes sense of her suffering by comparing herself with Chishti, a famous Sufi saint. She strongly feels that Christi's bodily pain is similar to her physical pain—her cancer has metastasized to her bone, compounding her existing suffering. She thinks that this pain, too, is Allah's will: "What he meant is that everything, *everything*, is an expression of Allah's will. It is all His glory. Even the pain" (343). She also believes that a Sufi dervish is a true resemblance of God—one who is humble enough to understand that everything is a creation of Allah. She tells another story of a Sufi dervish who has been searching for God for days. After meeting with consistent failure, he sees two passers-by on his way. When he asks them for food, they throw orange peels at him. This humbles the dervish and he realizes one does not need to search for Allah. He is everywhere; be it a human being or an orange peel, everything is the same in Allah's eyes: "He thought he [the Sufi dervish] was different. But now he saw he was no different. He and Allah, and everything Allah created, it was all One" (104). Therefore, submitting to Allah's will helps Mina accept the pain inflicted in a world to which she desperately tries to belong.

Mina's autonomous interpretations of the Quran help her deal with her trials and tribulations. For her, having the right intentions when carrying out an action is as important as self-renunciation to Allah. The purity of intent is instrumental to becoming a good Muslim. She tells Hayat that without purity in intentions, one cannot live a good Muslim life: "With everything in life, Hayat, it's the *intention* that matters. As long as you respect the Prophet's memory, that's the important thing" (Akhtar 53). Notably, Mina's understanding of Islam is very idiosyncratic, regularized by her own motives, combining the mythologized understanding of Islamic piety with personal ways of making sense of her problems in a religious context. A lot of her interpretation embraces newer methods of understanding religion—the overlooked accounts of Islam that help her self-preservation. Her Islam pushes against patriarchal interpretations of the Quran.

Amina Wadud posits that Quranic interpretations from a feminist perspective in matters of family and society are often side-lined because male religious scholars ignore the necessity of reciprocity between a man and a woman. That, in turn, encourages the sexist notion that a woman must

continue making sacrifices in the family. She opines, "[i]n patriarchy, women's labours of love and caretaking in the family tend to be exploited, as though such labours flow from some biological predisposition of being female, rather than as reflections of an intense kind of agency" (106). Wadud emphasizes that both men and women need to serve each other in order to serve the Lord. Contrary to that, in Mina's world, psychologically abusive husbands, a scornful father, and hostile in-laws see her suffering as commonplace—they have no role in her emotional welfare. No wonder all her religious actions are self-explanatory: she relies on *ijtihad*, or her personal interpretation of the Quran, a practice considered illegitimate after the tenth century. *Ijtihad* gives her a purpose in life that bolsters her free spirit. Wadud highlights that specific verses of the Quran assert Allah as the ultimate judge of our actions, regardless of gender: "Judgement is on the basis of the individual's faith and actions on earth that follow from that faith, with regard to each other and to all humanity at large" (100). For Mina, faith is not only about exernal rules; it is about applying her *ijtihad*. She never wears a headscarf and she never fasts, despite having a difficult relationship with food. However, she still finds a way to observe Ramadan by depriving herself of the things she likes, specifically reading, to show the solidification of her will (Akhtar 66). Practicing outward manifestations of faith to be part of the Muslim society and practicing *ijtihad* for the soul are Mina's ways of a peaceful existence.

Since Mina is honest with herself, she can exercise her free will. Saba Mahmood calls this free will an ability to exercise "positive freedom," unencumbered by traditions, customs, and rituals but dictated by universal freedom and self-interest (11). Such freedom, says Mahmood, is a subject's protest against repressive social norms, enabling individual autonomy and agency: "In order for an individual to be free, her actions *must* be the consequences of her 'own will' rather than of custom, tradition or social coercion" (11). While Rafiq and Hamid do not allow Mina to work in Pakistan, Mina uses "positive freedom" to justify her salon work in the United States. She exercises her agency when she dresses more American than Pakistani: "[W]ithin weeks of starting her education, the habitual Pakistani garb—the loosely fitting *shalwar* pants, *kameez* tunics, and *dupatta* head coverings—gave way to not-so-loose fitting blouses and jeans" (Akhtar 68). She lives a life completely different from the life she had known in Pakistan; here, she pushes groceries through aisles in a supermarket, tries to understand the ways to make a meal out of frozen dinners, and picks up

magazines from *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* to *Cosmopolitan* that help her become a beauty professional (68).

However, Mina's free will and Islamic duty are often at odds—her free will brings her happiness but it also reminds her of her perceived failure as a married Muslim woman. Hence her self-actualization cannot exist without her self-detestation. This realization of free will may allow her to forgive herself, but it also reinforces her belief that God is the only source of forgiveness. She tells Hayat, "Allah will always forgive you, no matter what you do. *No matter what you do*" (Akhtar 57). Her free will is emotionally fulfilling, balancing the Islamic expectations she struggles to meet.

In Milwaukee, Muslims are prejudiced against Jews. Ghaleb Chatha thinks lending is a morally bankrupt Jewish invention (Akhtar 125), Mina may love Nathan, but she is also painfully aware that should they be romantically involved, "what will people back home say and what will their children be, Muslim or Jewish" (116). This anti-Semitism is bolstered by Adnan Souhef. As a traditionalist, Souhef uses Quranic revelations to keep generations connected over similar schools of thought and rules upholding the essentials of Muslim life. For Muslims in Milwaukee, Souhef is "Allah's greatest miracle" who has "the very sounds of reality itself" (187). He presents himself as a figure of religious purity, one who tries to teach people the rights and wrongs of practicing Islam. William A. Graham contends that Islamic traditionalists have become the bridge between the Prophet's revelations and the common mass: "with the cessation of active prophetic-revelatory activity at Muhammad's death, the 'recitation,' or Quran, remained the one impeccable source of authority in the world" (504). Therefore, Souhef's Quranic revelations about Jews at the mosque have become prescriptive in shaping the religious beliefs of Muslims in Milwaukee.

Not surprisingly, when Nathan goes to the mosque wishing to learn about Islam and to integrate into the community, he meets with embarrassment, hostility, and contempt. What is worse, Souhef weaponizes his position as an Imam and the mosque's pulpit to rationalize his discriminatory piety against Jews. Santiago Sia argues that one does not need to be religious to understand morality; in fact, morality and religion are not connected: "The crimes committed in the name of religion are too many to be ignored but too obvious to be mentioned" (703). Under the guise of traditional Islam, Souhef spews hatred against Jews (Akhtar 201) and uses the Quranic scriptures to promote his religious ideological agenda. Sia argues that the theist (in this case, Souhef) relates morality to God, suggesting that happiness can be found in God's rulings (Sia 704). Souhef, however, uses this

logic to sanctify anti-Semitism. He preaches that Jews betrayed Allah, they are fundamentally corrupt and are never satisfied because "They take and take!!" (Akhtar 200) and should not be trusted. Souhef uses the interplay of the Quranic text and the context of his anti-Semitic views to validate his interpretation of the Quran in social circles.

Compared to Souhef's unconscionable teachings against Jews, Mina's Islam is morally sacrosanct. Her Islam promotes benevolence to herself and to others: for Mina, treating a person right is more important than the Quran's exegetical narrations about their religion. Even though Mina knows that Muslims do not date, and marrying a Jew would be, as Hayat puts it, marrying a *kafir* (Akhtar 115, 240), she allows herself to fall for Nathan. The self-actualization in Mina's Islam resonates more with Edward Scribner Ames's doctrine of self-realization. He describes the concept as an individual's trial and error method of finding one's way in the world: "That which he desires and which he satisfies when obtained he considers 'good'; the bitter, disappointing, unrewarding things are 'bad'" (302). Mina's self-realization through Islam makes her vulnerable to a man who she thinks is "good": Nathan. She considers Nathan "good," and her "purity of intent" to judge someone based on character rather than religion helps her open up to Nathan. Unlike other religious Muslims in Milwaukee, she treats Nathan well. Nathan also responds to Mina's affections: when they begin dating, he agrees to learn more about Islam and is even willing to convert. They treat each other with kindness, care, and respect—a stark contrast to Souhef, whose derision towards Nathan stems from his scriptural dogmatism. Doing what is right rather than adhering to religious dogmas is important for Mina. Hence Mina, as Ames points out, relies on a moral compass that gives her emotional fulfillment: "Morality in this view is the criticized life, developing continually broader and finer ideals and finding means to their fuller realization. It is primarily the work of individuals in reflection upon their own problems of conduct in relation to their place in their social institutions to which they belong" (303). Mina's conservative upbringing would not allow her to date a Jew, but her ethical religion sees Nathan beyond a reductive understanding of the Quran. Mina asks Hayat if he sees Nathan as his uncle because "we're [Mina and Nathan] thinking of getting married" (Akhtar 155). Nathan goes to the mosque and reads the Quran because that makes Mina happy. They spend hours talking, sharing American holidays, and exchanging gifts with each other, but she eventually succumbs to the pressures of her traditional society and decides not to marry him. When Naveed confronts Mina about her decision, she says "he'll never be one of us"; her opinion about Nathan's

kindness does not matter in her Muslim community (234). Mina eventually marries Sunil but remains in touch with Nathan till the end of her life. She adheres to traditional norms but remains true to her own religious system as well.

Since Mina is true to her sensibility of piety, compared to Hayat, her Islam is self-transformative. Hayat's Islam is self-serving. He wants to become a *hafiz,* a Muslim who has memorized the Quran. This aspiration would not only gain him prominence in the Muslim community, but it would also make Mina like him more. He loves the tales of the Prophet and finds the vellum of the thick pages of the Quran "pleasing" (Akhtar 50, 52). Verses of the Quran provide answers to Hayat's relational situations: after accidentally seeing Mina naked, he believes that reciting Quranic verses will resolve his guilt and win back her affection: "I redoubled my Quranic efforts. It was now that I began to strive, in earnest, to become a *hafiz*. It seemed the only sure fire way to earn her love and attention once again" (78). For Hayat, the Quran is a sacred book that should be followed verbatim, without any ambiguous interpretations. He is confident that if Imran reads the Quran, he will be saved from hell: "You're a Muslim, and if you learn your *namaaz* and you learn your holy book, you'll never go into hell" (217). It is not surprising that when Naveed threatens to burn Hayat's Quran, he damns Naveed: "*You…are…go...ing…to…go…to…hell"* (249). Hayat's understanding of the Quran is thus scriptural, reductive, and often driven by personal necessity.

In contrast, Mina's faith performs a rightful duty and obligation to others. Since morality is rational will to Mina, she tells Hayat that her decision to stay with Sunil is her own, it was not influenced by Hayat's interference. Talking about her relationship to him, she says: "It doesn't change anything *behta* [son]. It was my choice. I made that choice. If I was going to make a different choice, I would have made it anyway" (Akhtar 341). Saba Mahmood argues that Islamic tradition often reflects a personal engagement with the sacred text, the "effect of which is the creation of sensibilities and embodied practices (of reason, affect, and volition) that in turn are the conditions for the tradition's reproduction" (115). For Mina the decision to stick with Sunil reflects a combination of her belief in Allah and societal expectations: "You could say it's who I am, Hayat. What I have experienced in my life, and that made me what I am. Or you could say it was Allah's will for me" (341). She cannot reject her traditional role as a wife but she rationalizes her pain as a part of the performance of piety. While the post-9/11 reader might interpret Mina's actions as advocating for liberal belief in individual rights and in pluralism, Mina's inner life and belief is too complex and varied to fit such

labels. Throughout the novel, Mina continuously rebalances her multiple identities to remain connected to her sense of Islam in an otherwise conservative, patriarchal, and anti-Semitic Muslim society.

Conclusion

Akhtar's *American Dervish* challenges the reductive categorization of Muslim people both in an American and a global context. In the post-9/11 era, American commentators and intellectuals have categorized Muslims according to their religious ideologies, using labels such as good, bad, moderate, liberal, secular, religious, fanatic, or political. Such taxonomies have alienated Islam in novel ways, delineating "acceptable" and "nonacceptable" Islams, which, in turn, perpetuates Muslim essentialism in contemporary times. In the context of American secular democracy, the category of "moderate Islam" has become romanticized, as moderation refrains from a fundamentalist vision of Islam while safeguarding the American belief that religion is a private and individual practice. While the performance of moderate Islam in public and private spheres is debated in intellectual and public circles, the expression of piety differs from the abstract rules that determine the categorizations of Islam. Everyday Islam is filled with abstractions, contradictions, and ambiguities, and Akhtar's depiction of Mina's character is an example of such manifold visions of Muslim subjectivity: in describing her, Akhtar explores the limits of understanding Muslims as liberal or illiberal, pluralist or devout. Mina cannot be understood through any of these sharply drawn distinctions; she is a true Muslim in her own way.

Her Islam makes sense of her trials and tribulations in everyday life. Just like Ghaleb Chatha, Sunil, Najat, and the other characters in the novel, Mina is a pious woman. She practices institutional religion and upholds conservative values in her life. But the need to have a sense of self is necessary for her to uphold her Islamic modesty. Hence her Islam is a combination of her idiosyncratic sensibilities: a Sufi sense of self detachment, a feminist approach to Quranic revelations, practicing moral piety with oneself and others, and finding an identity in a distinctly conservative world. On the outside, she struggles to fit into traditional paradigms of Islamic modesty, but covertly, she navigates her way from "hypervisible" forms of institutional religion to less apparent forms of faith. Throughout this process, we see her imagination, creativity, empathy, openness, and adaptability help her cut through state-prescribed religious convictions. Her Islam determines her

place in the Milwaukee community and, most importantly, provides her with a sense of self in everyday life.

While scholars have either critiqued the categorization of Muslims or have shown the complexity of various religious practices, Mina's multiple approaches to Islam can be read as her constructs of resistance: the Islam of everyday life makes political categorizations obsolete. While political categorizations are constructed on a Muslim's beliefs and ideology, Muslim subjectivity talks about an everyday Islam that relies heavily on a Muslim's epistemological construct that interacts with a local and a global understanding of Islam. Mina finds the recognition of being a "good" Muslim through her traditional category, but she also finds a cathartic release of what a "good" Muslim means to her through her ethical self. Understanding the Muslim self requires acknowledging the inherent complexity of its architecture and its resistance to confinement within rigid political, social, or cultural categories.

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Notes

1. Major US government institutions, political propaganda, and intellectual debates promoted a public understanding that Muslims are inherently violent in nature. Hence American nativism encouraged Muslim discrimination in the name of national security. Racism such as hijab-pulling, spitting, removal from planes, ethnic slurs, incarceration without a proper trial, creating an atmosphere of fear through illegal monitoring and coercive policies to find terrorist sleeper cells in Arab communities became commonplace in post-9/11 America. See Louise A. Cainkar's *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience After 9/11* (2009), Gregorio Betizza's "Constructing Civilizations: Embedding and Reproducing the 'Muslim World' in American Foreign Policy Practices and Institutions since 9/11" (2015), and Iqbal Akhtar's "Race and Religion in the Political Problematization of the American Muslim" (2011) for more details.

2. Ahmed Gamal scholarship analyzes John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and Don De Lillo's *Falling Man* (2007).

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Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 137-167
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/8

"Asiatic Black Man": W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes in Soviet Asia, Part II—The Consolidation of Hughes's Brown Afro-American Eurasianism in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the concept of the "Asiatic Black Man" as mapped out by African American intellectuals from Langston Hughes's perspective. Challenging the extant academic interpretation of Hughes's Central Asian narrative as "Black Atlantic," this essay proposes "Brown Afro-American Eurasianism" as a new theoretical framework for analyzing Hughes's extraordinary adventures in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Through his Brown odyssey in the Uzbek SSR, witnessing Soviet progress in transforming the Turkestani gender patterns, Hughes perceived communism as an empowering ideology for African Americans to dismantle the power dynamics sustained by religious patriarchy. On the other hand, Turkmen SSR communicated the promising image of how a socialist nation state could be as modern as it was raceless to Hughes. Grounded in his impressions of these Central Asian union republics, Hughes conceived the vision of the "United Soviet States of America" as a revolutionary thesis to address the nation's racial injustice. Despite Hughes carefully burying this intellectual past after his return to the US, McCarthyism brought it to the open. Nevertheless, Hughes's role as the intellectual accessory to Joseph Stalin's persecution of Uzbek literary figure Sanjar Siddiq remains a skeleton in the closet—a suspended case in the Afro-American-Eurasian encounter that this essay also seeks to reveal. As Hughes and W. E. B. Du Bois share narrative themes in their discovery of Soviet Asia, it can also be argued that Afro-American Eurasianism testifies to a transfigured "double-consciousness" of the "Asiatic Black Man"—poetically inviting while politically fragile. (YZ)

KEYWORDS: Brown Afro-American Eurasianism, Asiatic Black Man, Langston Hughes, Soviet Asia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan

"Brown"—Hughes's identity denominator with Soviet Central Asians and the emergence of a Brown Afro-American Eurasian narrative[1]

De-Stalinization vouchsafed the Soviet vision of a soft world revolution, maximizing its cultural spheres of influence by captivating the Asiatic Black Men in the refined intricacy of the Eurasian world of literature and art. In the 1950s, the Soviet Afro–Asian Solidarity Committee (SKSSAA) worked to reshape Central Asia's history as the cultural synthesis between East and West. It also strategically employed regional intellectuals to revitalize the spirit of Bandung and to downplay the "European" nature of a Soviet apparatchik (Jansen 196, 202, 207). Spellbound by these efforts, sociologist-activist W. E. B. Du Bois's participation in the Afro-Asian Writers Conference intellectually bolstered the Afro-American Eurasian connection in world culture. This was echoed by Paul Robeson's inaugural concert at the Pakhtakor Central Stadium of Tashkent, celebrating Afro-Asian camaraderie and Soviet progress in Uzbekistan during the 1958 International Festival of Films of African and Asian Peoples (Bogelsack 261–62).

As the Soviets compromised their ideologically red elements, Eurasia turned Brown. Notably, Du Bois's impression of Uzbekistan as racially inclusive and culturally non-Russian distinguished his renewed interest in Central Asia from his previous ruminations about Soviet Eurasian citizens: "Over seven million brunette and curly-haired folk of Asiatic descent live here speaking a language differing from the Russian, and inheriting an old culture" (*Autobiography* 40). As such, Du Bois's phraseology of "brunette" prompted him to embrace "Brown" in the final years of his life—in reconciliation with his prior Black radicalism.

Intriguingly, Du Bois's turn to "Brown" echoed profoundly with the poet Langston Hughes, who received an invitation in 1932 to work as a screenwriter in Moscow for a propaganda film about racial issues in the United States. Although the film project was eventually abandoned, Hughes spent months in the Soviet Union between 1932 and 1933 and visited two Central Asian socialist republics (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan)—an experience he documented in *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia*, a monograph published in the USSR in 1934, as well as in his autobiography *I Wonder As I Wander*, originally published in 1956, making him the first known African American to visit Central Asia. Just as Du Bois's "brunette" obscured the chill of Soviet Cold War cultural prolongation of world revolution by encapsulating the physical features of the African Americans and Uzbeks as "Asiatic," Hughes's work revealed how "Brown" could serve as a purposeful identity denominator for the Asiatic Black Men to wrap up in their Afro-

American Euarsian narrative while during the Soviet strategic retrenchment of "socialism in one country."

David Chioni Moore in his paper "Local Color, Global 'Color,'" reasons that Hughes's extensive cultural connections with Africa, the African Caribbean, and Paris, where the *Négritude* movement was in its heyday, had formed a broad "Black Atlantic" narrative. Arguably, it was through the "Black Atlantic" lens that Hughes enthusiastically discovered the shared anti-racist spirit with "colored" people in Central and East Asia. However, it should be noted that Hughes kept a critical distance from the term "Black," and the "Negro" in his book title carries a different connotation from the Du Boisian one. This might be attributed to Hughes's complex ancestral background. His mixed European, African, and Native American heritage endowed him with brown skin and likely a cosmopolitan character. He recognized his "Negro" identity simply because at the moment "in the United States, the word 'Negro' is used to mean anyone who has *any* Negro blood at all in his veins" (*Big Sea* 36, emphasis in the original).

Nevertheless, during his time in Africa, where colonial racial structures differed from American pigmentocracy, Hughes tried to convince locals that he was a "Negro" to draw a parallel between the Black struggle in the American South and that in Africa in an effort to forge solidarity between Africans and African Americans against the global white colonial order. Instead, he was met with laughter and treated by his African hosts as a "white man," since foreign "colored" people were typically seen as agents of the white colonial government—and thus were considered as politically "white" (*Big Sea* 96).

This awkward moment in his transcontinental racial encounter compelled Hughes to realize that "in Africa, the word ["Negro"] is more pure. It means *all* Negro, therefore *black*" (*Big Sea* 36, emphasis in the original). Consequently, he identified himself as a "brown" being—"You see, unfortunately, I am not black . . . I am brown" (36). His early enthusiasm for anything *African* and *Black,* zealously intertwined with his creative involvement in the Harlem Renaissance, quickly evolved into a quest for an alternative racial identity. Rather than exclusively aligning with Black identity, he sought a broader position based on a composite color, aiming to connect with "colored" people in different parts of the world and enact a solidary global South shaded by a subtle "Brown" hue, while maintaining a critical awareness of his roots.

Hughes certainly took an aesthetic delight in "Brown" and made it one of the leitmotifs in his work—with the poem "Fascination" as a notable

example: "And because her skin is the brown of an oak leaf in autumn, / but a softer color, / I want to kiss her" (*Collected Poems* 39). However, his appreciation of "Brown" failed to transform the perception of "colored Americans" as authentic Americans in the eyes of foreigners. When Hughes was invited to teach English in Toluca, Mexico, the inviter forgot to mention that he was an "*americano de color*, brown as a Mexican," leading him to be ignored by his fellow teacher who assumed that Hughes—as an American—would be white (Hughes, *Big Sea* 81). This experience further placed Hughes within the Du Boisian "double-consciousness" as an "americano," yet "de color." Hughes's awareness of being an "americano de color" validated an inexorable tension of identity. It fractured his emotional attachment to Americanism, while also revealing how his skin color could function as a potential conduit for global racial solidarity— connecting him with "colored" people in "Negro" America, Brown Latin America, and Black Africa alike.

Therefore, Hughes opted to leverage his brown physical appearance to redefine the term "Negro" in the simile of "an oak leaf in autumn" with febrile imagination of racial justice worldwide as the new frame of reference—in sharp contrast to the parochial silhouette of Black nationalism. Central Asia thus entered his field of vision as he rounded the periphery of the Soviet empire in connection with his musings about Russia. To him, the Soviets were ideologically red, but ethnically, they might be as brown as a "Negro." In "Negroes in Moscow: In a Land Where There Is No Jim Crow" (1933), Hughes praised Alexander Pushkin as the "Pride of the Negroes," not because the poet "was pretty well mixed with the blood of the Slavs and Tartars," but because he "was dark enough to show, in hair and skin, traces of Africa," and for his mother, who was "a beautiful mulatto" (65–66). By identifying a Russian poet with African roots, Hughes sought the "Brown" complexion to unite transatlantic distance and ideological differences and located his ideal hero, who could actualize the "truer self" with a subtle flair of living with mixed heritages and comfortably overcome the identity crisis. Not coincidentally, Pushkin appealed to Hughes as much as Joseph Stalin did to Du Bois.[2]

With regard to the Central Asians, Hughes no doubt viewed them as sharing the same skin color as American mixed-race people, Caribbean mulattoes, Pushkin, and himself, as Central Asians—such as the Uzbeks and Turkmens—were principally described as "brown" or "yellow-brown" in his account. Accordingly, instead of the "Black Atlantic" narrative, it should be argued that his emphasis on "brown" indeed shapes his composite version of the "Asiatic Black Man"—with the interflow of Asiatic yellow and African

black complexions coalescing in the formation of the "Brown Central Asian" and "Brown Negro" identities so that their naturally constructed physiognomic affinity could be politically anchored in their Afro-Asiatic solidarity to affirm their transracial determination against the shared yoke of racism. Moreover, as the color brown typically contains undertones of yellow, black, and red, Hughes's intellectual disposition to socialism and communism might be equally suggested, albeit intentionally throttled later in *I Wonder As I Wander* to avoid the risk of being charged as a Communist. When Hughes—as a "Brown Negro"—"looks at Soviet Central Asia," the Lacanian split between the vision and the gaze is mediated through a red Eurasian empire, contributing to the emergence of a Brown Afro–American Eurasian narrative.[3]

Uzbekistan unveiled—The genesis of a Brown odyssey and the atheist crusade against Oriental gender patterns

Despite Du Bois's praise of the accomplishment of the Soviet autonomous republics, his observations were often misaligned with Soviet national delimitation and nation-building projects. Early on, he relied on pan-nationalistic labels—such as "Turks and Tartars"—to obscure the ethnic diversity of the Turkic peoples in his reflections. Later, his visit to the Uzbek SSR confirmed Uzbekistan's role as a "Eurasian" bridge for Afro-Asian solidarity, yet his remarks on the Uzbeks remained sketchy, concerning only their physical appearance and cultural exoticism. Additionally, he overlooked the Soviets' intention to modernize Central Asia by establishing socialist republics based on national and ethnic identities rather than racial, civilizational, or color-based ones.

By contrast, Hughes's field trip experience closely aligned with the Soviet model of ethnic nationalism and its civic-administrative capacity-building efforts in the Central Asian socialist states. His journey provided an assemblage of his attentive observation of Soviet ethnonationalistic experiments and his impromptu indulgence in woolgathering about communistic racial justice—all within the comprehensive outlook of Brown Afro-American Eurasianism.

Hughes's introduction to Central Asian elites in Moscow served as a prelude to his travels. By chance, he met the mayor of Bukhara, who was "as brown as I [Hughes] am" (*A Negro Looks* 7–8). The surprise of witnessing Brown power in a red regime prompted Hughes to wonder: "In the Soviet Union dark men are also the mayors of cities" (8). Even more striking was another piece of information provided by Kurbanov, an ethnic Uzbek and a

chairman of a Soviet city, that "Soviet Asia is a land of Before and After, and the Revolution is creating a new life that is changing the history of the East," especially in the Soviet South—"Russian and native, Jew and gentile, white and brown, live and work together" (9).

With curiosity aroused, Hughes thus stated his motives for visiting Soviet Central Asia in Chapter 1 "Going South" of *A Negro Looks*: "It is in the [American] South today that we suffer the worst forms of racial persecution and economic exploitation—segregation, peonage, and lynching" (5), but a "South under the red flag" promised a contrasting configuration, triggering his purpose "to study the life of these people in the Soviet Union, and write a book about them for the dark races of the capitalist world" (6). Along with a "colored" group from the Mezhrabpomfilm studio, he took the Moscow–Tashkent Express southward, initiating a Brown odyssey into a faraway land shrouded in the echoes of the past, against the cerulean sky lit by the red star as a replacement for the Islamic crescent.

The absence of railroad racial segregation among the passengers and crew on the train, who were "Soviet citizens, Asiatic or European" (*I Wonder* 158), attested to an imminent, coherent Eurasian space as a miniature of the Soviet project to merge Europe and Asia into a single transracial landmass. What shaped this illimitable space was Hughes's conversation with the crew members, which caused him to recognize the comparatively better working conditions in the USSR as well as the certitude that the Soviets "knew a great deal more about America than the average American knows about the Soviet Union" (*A Negro Looks* 10). The asymmetrical information flow between the two nations heightened his urgency to inform the American audience of the chiaroscuro of his perceived realities in the USSR and the US.

A familiar scene of high cotton caught Hughes's eye as he looked out from the train: "In the autumn, if you step off the train almost anywhere in the fertile parts of Central Asia, you step into a cotton field, or into a city or town whose streets are filled with evidences of cotton nearby," while "the same thing is true of the southern part of the United States" (*A Negro Looks* 12). Recalling his experience of visiting cotton plantations in Alabama two years before, he was indignant that even though the slavery system was formally abolished, the share-crop system, by underpaying Black labor, continued "getting free labour, white cotton, and culture" (14) and served as "a modern legal substitute slavery" (14–15). "How different are the cotton lands of Soviet Central Asia," Hughes marveled with a tincture of Marxist historical materialism, "the beys are gone—the landlords done with forever" (15).

Concomitant with the demise of feudal landlords was the Soviet commitment to gender equality, as evident in the empowerment of women through education and employment that directly challenged the complementarity of the European capitalist mode of production and Asiatic backwardness: "A woman peasant sat on the edge of the cotton field talking out of a book . . . Something to shout in the face of the capitalist world's colonial oppressors. Something to whisper over the borders of India and Persia" (*A Negro Looks* 16). Hughes recognized the dramatic advent of women in the labor force, as his interest in Uzbek and Turkmen plays, which portrayed "struggle against the counter-revolutionary forces," led him to discover the tea houses, wherein traditional Uzbek folk dance and music remained ongoing. He noted that dancing used to be a male-only profession sponsored by the beys' purchase of boy-dancers for entertainment, while female dancers—with the *ne plus ultra* of Tamara Khanum—sprang up after the revolution (40, 42).

Nevertheless, Hughes's joyful reception of female engagement in theatrical arts did not obstruct his unvarnished acclamation for the boy-dancers, or *bachi*, who "danced as women [and] put on wigs and dresses and cultivated the delicate gestures of rhythmic pantomime," satisfying male spectators' scrutiny ("Boy Dancers" 36). Still found in contemporary Afghanistan, the *bachi* have sparked controversies not for homosexual implications, but because of the alleged promotion of pederasty and child abuse (Borile). However, as Jennifer Wilson contends in her "Queer Harlem, Queer Tashkent," such appreciation by Hughes was context-specific, amounting to a subtle critique of Soviet modernization in Central Asia, which deliberately suppressed homosexual elements in local traditions by condemning them as leftovers of Eastern backwardness. Hughes's reference to the boy dancers hints at his support for a global queer visibility, aiming to decriminalize the queer desires censored both by Soviet authorities and African American communities, thereby cross-correlating Soviet internationalism and Harlem queer culture to identify an emerging translocal queer revolution (Wilson 643–46).

Hughes and his contemporary readers, however, could not have identified the "queerness" in the boy-dancers, either in its modern non-heteronormative understanding or the Harlem-specific gay sense. Rather, Hughes was clear in pointing out that "[t]o Western eyes nothing would have seemed unduly strange—except that the dancers with their long curls, smiling and beckoning with their eyes, were boys, not girls" ("Boy Dancers" 37). Still, his attention centered around the policy by which "[t]he Soviets forbid the

buying and selling of anybody, male or female," as well as the acknowledgment couched in his plain remark on the universal accessibility of civic professionalism in Soviet Central Asia—"the art of dancing in public is no longer limited to men, either as participants or spectators" (49–50).

As Kate A. Baldwin argues, Hughes praised women's participation in the traditionally "forbidden" professions as it functioned as a transformative revelation of self-consciousness. This self-consciousness gave confidence to "being 'colored' without being veiled" and to "being unveiled without being 'white.'" It invited revolutionary outbursts for racial and gender emancipation, pushing beyond the usual boundaries of heterosexual desire and challenging Du Bois's idea of "Negro consciousness" as the "life of the veil" (90). Indeed, the veiled Black life was soaked in the sentimentalism found in Hughes's poem "Mississippi":

> Lying low, unpublicized,
> Masked—with only Jaundiced eyes showing through the mask?
> What sorrow, pity, pain,
> That tears and blood
> Still mix like rain
> In Mississippi! (*Collected Poems* 452)

Nevertheless, Baldwin's analysis, while emphasizing the emergence of gender and racial awareness, evades how the imagination of the Orient and religious norms psychoanalytically shaped Hughes's strategy of transmuting the Soviet Central Asian context into the identity construction of political Brown Asianism.

In his *fait divers* "In an Emir's Harem," published in *Woman's Home Companion* in 1934, Hughes—with unchecked inventiveness in imagining the Orient—conjured up the scene of an Emir "gazing at the warm feminine loveliness just across the pool" (12). From a perspective different from the Lacanian gaze, the Emir's gaze fits sprucely with what Laura Mulvey calls the "voyeuristic-scopophilic" male gaze, wherein men derive pleasure from taking cloistered women as erotic objects, which underlies the male ego (843). The Emir's houris, whose skin colors envisioned by Hughes to be ranging from "milk-white and fair" to "a little golden like the grapes in the arbor, or like peaches in the fall," "brown as russet pears," and "dark as chocolate" substantiated the cynosure of female objectification. As the Emir "sat in his great soft chair and looked at this luxury of a hundred pretty wives moving up and down the steps of the sun-shiny pool" until he "beckoned to one"

("Emir's Harem" 91), the egoistic kernel of Oriental despotism was confirmed through his exercise of whimsical detachment as well as his judging power in favoritism, thereby mirroring the white supremacist order that Hughes faced, in which white society's selective promotion of "colored" agents reinforced the collusion between international colonialism and domestic pigmentocracy in veiling the subaltern voices.

While the Emir's unveiling of harems served to perpetuate female subordination to the "voyeuristic-scopophilic" male gaze in domestic settings, the practice of veiling was mandatory for sustaining the public image of women, endorsed by the Islamic patriarchal order. In traditional Central Asian context, according to English female traveler Annette M. B. Meakin who traveled to Russian Turkestan in the early 1900s, veiling was associated with masculine preferences for feminine beauty, embodied in the "performed shyness" of women, when they were in seclusion or interacting with strangers. The intricate relationship between modesty, aesthetics, societal hierarchy, and Islamic patriarchy was conveyed through the degree of bashfulness—with a greater level of bashfulness indicating a woman's higher social status (116–17). Therefore, "Mohammed's daughter wore a black veil" (107), displaying demureness to reproduce docility.

As Hughes came from the US, where Black Islam—exemplified by the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam—was advocating an Islamic patriarchal ideology to restore the perceived Black masculinity lost to Black Christianity (Curtis), he was sensitive to the social consequences of religious reconstructions of gender, fearing the fall of America under a potential Black Emir's policing gaze. Therefore, he celebrated that in Soviet Central Asia "the twisted turbans that once had a religious significance no longer mean anything" and that "women will stroll unveiled beneath the grape arbours where once they walked only in paranjas [traditional garments that cover the full body of women] guarded by eunuchs" (Hughes, *A Negro Looks* 25–26).

Despite Hughes's contrasting mentions of the sexually impotent eunuchs, the assertive sexist Emir, the boy dancers in women's clothing, as well as the unveiled Soviet Central Asian women, he illustrated how the old picture of castrated gender liminality and forced gender conformity was superseded by the Soviet confirmation of cisnormativity. While gender expansiveness was more or less tolerated, he persisted as an outsider to the altered Eurasian gender landscape by simply acknowledging equal gender rights, while leaving his sexuality connected to his discovery of the Brown aesthetics in the USSR. As Hughes was known for being "asexual, without

noticeable erotic feeling for either women or men" (Rampersad 20) and having "governed his sexual desires to an extent rare in a normal adult male" (69), his own sexual orientation quite fulfilled the syzygy of the Jungian archetypes of anima—the male unconscious yearning for values typically associated with femininity—such as beauty, goodness, and morals (Jung 37)—and animus—the personification of masculine thoughts in the female unconscious (371).

In this context, Hughes's profound appreciation of both Tamara Khanum and Alexander Pushkin represented his projection of asexuality not on the confirmation or transcendence of the gendered realm of professional achievement, but rather on the search for a union of anima and animus in establishing the aesthetic sanctity of Brownness for communicating Eurasia's eclectic charm to America. In this way, Hughes's version of the "Asiatic Black Man" is a proposition of a human being as a receptacle of masculine and feminine aspects, regardless of whether they are a man with his anima manifest in his profession. Such is the boy dancer or Pushkin, a woman who could articulate her animus in a traditionally male métier, like Khanum, or an asexual "Brown" Hughes in defiance of the androcentric "voyeuristic-scopophilic" gaze and religious patriarchy.

After his Central Asian trip in 1935, unsurprisingly, Hughes titled his expedition note in *Travel*—"Farewell to Mahomet," noting that "gradually veils came off and harem doors opened until today the majority are at least partially freed of the old male dominations of the past" (28). The formerly invisible "subaltern" voice, while restored with the advent of women taking on bachi dancing, had been promoted with the demise of religion—"Women gathering in a public tea house unveiled, drinking tea! By the head of the Prophet, NO!" (29). To be sure, "Farewell to Mahomet" was an onomastic reference to his poem "Goodbye Christ," written in Russia in 1932:

> "Jesus Lord God Jehova
> Beat it on away from here now.
> Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—
> A real guy named
> Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME— (*Collected Poems* 166).

This evokes his avowed association of atheism with communism. While Hughes's asexual outlook somewhat mirrored his atheist stance, he associated red ideology with certain masculine traits to empower the proletariat as well

as himself with the intrepidity and determination to subdue religion, thus completing the "Asiatic Black Man" as the Brown "real guy."

"South" in the USSR *versus* "South" in the US: Turkmenistan as the "colored" model of education, modernization, and nationhood

Cheering that "the great mosques of the once holy Bukhara are nearly empty of worshippers," Hughes's anti-religious inclination further led him to denounce religious elements in education, aligned with his observation of the declining popularity of madrasas (*A Negro Looks* 26). What replaced religious teachings was the Soviet education system that covered modern subjects and aimed to reduce illiteracy rates among the masses, irrespective of race, gender, and age (33). "Jewish, Uzbek and Russian children all went to the same schools" (*I Wonder* 152), thus Hughes echoed Du Bois's earlier praise of the multiethnic education environment in Soviet Asia.

Hughes's hope for education in bringing about positive change in the younger generation materialized in Turkmenistan, where he characterized the country as embodying "Youth and Learning" in Chapter 4 of *A Negro Looks*. According to him, "[w]ith the coming of the Soviets to Turkmenia, all forms of minority discriminations were abolished," and students dedicated themselves to studying, rather than being exploited as free labor (*I Wonder* 152). "During the cotton gathering season," Hughes was told, "children here in Soviet Asia stay in school," which reminded him that "black children remain in the fields when cotton needs picking" (*A Negro Looks* 35).

Indeed, there existed a historical connection between cotton cultivation in Central Asia and the American South. As Russian historiography contends, the American Civil War resulted in a drastic reduction in cotton exports from the US to Europe, thereby hindering Russian industrial progress and prompting the Russian Empire to accelerate its colonial project in Central Asia in the latter half of the nineteenth century, where a variety of crops could be nourished by the Syr Darya and sustained by a favorable climate (Duxovnyj and de Shutter 114–7). Despite Russian Turkestan having been found by Eugene Schuyler, the first American to visit Central Asia, to be the trial site of American Sea Island cotton seeds (*Turkistan 1* 296), Russia's introduction of the American upland variety to the region in the early 1880s (Pierce 164–65) ultimately contributed to Du Bois's observation in 1958 that "[t]heir fields were growing tall, long-staple cotton, which an American Negro from Tuskegee first planted" (*Autobiography* 40). The presence of American cotton in Soviet Central Asia thus contrasted with

the absence of child labor there to induce Hughes to grieve over the lost educational opportunities of young African American cotton pickers.

While Schuyler celebrated the Russian Tsarist rule in freeing the locals from "the unbridled rule of fanatical despots" (*Turkistan 2* 388), Hughes further reckoned that the Soviets struck interracial peace in Central Asia, as stories about "feuds, and tribal wars, Tsarist oppression, and mass misery" all became history within less than twenty years (*A Negro Looks* 17). Hughes believed that "[n]ot Russification, but modernization" ("Farewell" 47) was instrumental to such a Soviet success in Central Asia. Hughes's perspective, developed through his on-the-spot investigations, suggested that Soviet mechanization and irrigation, alongside the organization of kolkhoz and sovkhoz in transforming individualism into collectivism, marked the scientific management of cotton production in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (*A Negro Looks* 19).

In contrast, the Deep South of the US, the "Bible Belt," as H. L. Mencken called it, was burdened with race riots and forced labor (*A Negro Looks* 27). Thus, Hughes contrived a wincing response to the role of religious education in hindering modernization. Springing from Karl Marx's opinion that religion is "the opium of the people" (28), which also influenced Du Bois,[4] he lambasted the church schools for African Americans, where "most of the presidents . . . are ministers, and a large part of the education is religious" (32), while the curriculum only inculcated Black students with "meekness and humbleness" (28). Furthermore, since "modern and scientific attitudes of study are discouraged" (32), the American South to Hughes would lose its future potential for economic development.

As such, the six decades between Schuyler's and Hughes's visits marked how Imperial Russia's advancing cotton cultivation efforts in Central Asia had transitioned into the rapid transformation of the Asiatic South under Soviet modernization, leaving the US in stagnation; while Du Bois, a quarter-century afterward, expressed the same amazement for the blessed cotton as Hughes did in the Brown odyssey and crystallized the theme of cotton as a shared memory cue in the Afro-American Eurasian narrative.

Surely, Hughes's account may have faintly conformed to reality since there is historical evidence that Soviet minorities were mobilized massively for the cotton harvest when the Soviet cotton economy was experiencing a labor shortage in the 1930s (Blackburn), while instances of unequal treatment in educational and cultural institutions were reported by the Turkmen frequently (Edgar 82). All this should raise suspicions about the Soviets' adding a Potemkin façade to the local school visited by Hughes. Nevertheless,

it was not coincidental that he chose Turkmenistan as a model for Soviet education, modernization, and statehood because the Soviets dedicated substantial efforts to cultivating national consciousness and fostering a non-Russian statehood among the Turkmen population, who previously lacked common political institutions, a clearly defined territory, and a mass culture based on a unified national language (Edgar 2–3).

A glimpse into the Bolshevik approach to building nationhood could be found in Hughes's observation at a film institute in Ashgabad, according to which "[i]lliterate actors from the nomad tribes of the desert were being taught to read and write at the same time as they were being taught [by Russians] to act, to operate movie cameras, and to develop films," while in Hollywood "the union of motion-picture operators did not permit Negroes to operate projection machines" (*I Wonder* 135). Consequently, through the interethnic collaboration and distribution of cinematic projects, the Turkmen cultural identity was solidified, projecting internomadic integration into a coherent national awareness within the Soviet community of union republics. In contrast, Hollywood was not only advertizing stereotyped racial representations on screen, but also fading out African American exercise of film projection to reinforce segregationist ideologies.

However, despite Hughes's efforts to make Arthur Koestler, a Hungarian-born Jewish journalist and at the time a Communist member who traveled with him to Tashkent and Ashgabad, understand why he noticed these positive changes in Soviet Asia "with *Negro* eyes," the latter could not feel and experience the same thing in person. Educating the Turkmen in the Bolshevik language of nationhood, thus, meant two different things to Koestler and Hughes: "To Koestler, Turkmenistan was simply a *primitive* land moving into twentieth-century civilization. To me [Hughes] it was a *colored* land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites" (*I Wonder* 135).

Nothing could represent the microscale "colored land" better than the educational facilities where he witnessed the usage of both the Russian language and the Turkmen tongue in lower schools, the inclusive composition of "Turkmen, Russian, Tartar, and Tyurk nationalities" within the Commissariat of Education, and the representation of "[y]ellow, brown, white faces" in the student body (*A Negro Looks* 34, 38). Inspired by Ogul'gel'dy Dzhumaeva, a female Turkmen educator and Hero of Socialist Labor, "who learned to read after fifty and is now a member of the Party and the head of a Children's Garden" ("Farewell" 29) as a counterpart to Tamara Khanum, Hughes not only finalized his stroke of praise to the advancement of gender equality within the confluence of national consciousness and Soviet

identity, but also distinguished Turkmenistan as a nation of hope and prospect under the nurturing care of a dedicated gardener, who, by unveiling herself, unveiled the power of knowledge in demolishing the illusion of race. Therefore, witnessing a Russian boy and a Turkmen boy sharing playtime validated his belief in how speedily the Soviet government had abandoned racial segregation in education, propelling him to say that "I am glad that here, in the Soviet Union, all the ugly artificial barriers of race have been broken down" (*A Negro Looks* 18–19). No wonder Hughes identified "Moscow dental customs, the unveiling of the harem women in Turkestan, and the disappearance of the color line throughout Soviet Asia" as the three most unforgettable things in the USSR (*I Wonder* 233).

Moreover, Hughes's confidence in the conducive role of Soviet education in promoting cross-cultural understandings of global struggles was strengthened by finding that "young people [were] asking intelligent and penetrating questions about happenings in France, Cuba, Mexico, and other countries" (*A Negro Looks* 35–36). Before he left for the US, Central Asian students "gave [Hughes] their revolutionary greetings to carry back to the proletarian youth in the United States who still live under capitalism, and to the Negro students caught in the tangled web of religious philanthropy and racial oppression" (38). Hughes thus concludes his Brown odyssey with the assertion that "new times demand new people" (49), expecting a new generation of African Americans to be armed with a global vision, which would enable them to effectively communicate domestic struggles abroad and to build international liaisons. This way a cross-racial solidarity could be established against the unholy quaternity of racism, colonialism, capitalism, and religion, whose "philanthropy" masked its spiritual control, making them the "opium of the people."

As the 1954 case of Brown v. Board of Education ruled racial segregation unconstitutional in US education, it is understandable why Hughes put the following words in *I Wonder* to link the later American progress with his distant recollections of a remote land: "In ten short years, Jim Crow was gone on trams, or anywhere else in Central Asia" (184). Similarly to the creation of "Soviet citizens," which dialectically transcended the boundaries between the "Asiatic" and "European" and unified national statehood under a multiethnic union, Hughes envisioned that it was only when the distinction between the white and "colored" became blurred that the polemics of Black nationalism against white supremacy could be fully articulated within a shared "American" national identity that unites people of all races. This aspiration was voiced in Hughes's 1938 poem "Let America Be

America Again": "O, let America be America again / The land that never has been yet / And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free" (*Collected Poems* 191).

All that jazz: from the Brown odyssey to the United Soviet States of America

If the lyrics—"When hard luck overtakes you / Nothin' for you to do. / Gather up yo' fine clothes An' sell 'em to de Jew"—in the poem "Hard Luck" (1926) (*Collected Poems* 82) demonstrated Hughes's discontent with the Jewish pawnbrokers' exploitation of Black hardship in cementing Judeo-Black broyges, he believed that education for all without discrimination in Central Asia would overcome interracial feuding. However, as communism "brought about such a change for the better in the status of Jews," including the empowerment of Jewish students through the universal access to education in the Soviet Union, Hughes, inspired by Marxist–Leninist atheism, asked "why were not all Jews Communist Party members?" (*I Wonder* 152).

This question could have been raised in Moscow from the moment Hughes encountered Arthur Koestler, as the latter's identity as a Jewish Communist intrigued him. Learning from a young Jewish reporter that the older generation of Jews "put religion above social, political, or industrial progress" (*I Wonder* 153), Hughes stated, "I am afraid I found myself then taking much the same position toward Asiatic Jews in relation to Party membership as many Russians in Moscow took toward Negroes in that regard" (152). The context for his statement was that during his stay in Moscow, almost everyone of the "twenty-two Negroes," including Hughes, who had viewed Soviet propaganda "relative to the Negro's hard lot in America," "took for granted that all Negroes were, or eventually would be, Communist Party members," yet only one of them claimed Party membership (140–41). Thus, a more pertinent question emerged: should racial and ethnic minorities become Communists first in order to participate in the battle against the intersectionality of the capitalist oppressive system?

Even so, a conflict between Hughes and the Soviet authorities loomed when it came to the politicization of jazz. As a pioneer in "jazz poetry," Hughes believed that "Jazz seeps into words—spelled out words" ("Jazz as Communication" 369), regarding it as an audio medium to communicate "a montage of a dream deferred" (370). The syncopation of jazz further epitomizes "Negro" identity politics against the monotonous white life pattern, as he passionately expressed in the essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), "one of the inherent expressions of Negro

life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world" (35). To his chagrin, the Soviet government decried jazz as the *dernier cri* of bourgeois music and therefore failed to appreciate its implicit "deferred" dream of racial equality—channeled through the composite whole of jazz rhythms. Consequently, because he "did not believe political directives could be successfully applied to creative writing" (*I Wonder* 140), Hughes intimated to Koestler, "I gave as my reason for not joining the Party the fact jazz was officially taboo in Russia" (141).

As expected, Moscow's political judgment on music ended up positively facilitating Hughes's "Asiatic Black Man" moment, which took place in Central Asia where he noted that Uzbek folk musicians were as competent as African American jazz players in terms of performing the rhythmic variations that "white players somehow never master" (*A Negro Looks* 44). The dazzling Uzbek rhythms he referred to most likely fell within the classical Central Asian music genre *shashmaqām*, which borrows six (*shash*) matrices of Persian melodic modes (*maqām*) to sing out the praise of divine love in warranting universal spiritualism in life, though it was somewhat discouraged by the Soviets due to its heritage of "feudal aristocracy" (Bhattacharya 2142). Foregrounding the shared social repression of Central Asian music and jazz, both of which uphold complexities in their extemporarized musicality, Hughes's defense of artistic freedom thus launched a two-front cultural counteroffensive. It aimed, on the one hand, at undermining white/Soviet critics' judgment of the monotony/reactionariness of Oriental folk art and the vulgarities of jazz. On the other hand, it sought at mobilizing musical practice as a potential united front, merging the soulfully unpredictable rhythm of Black music with the Central Asian polyphony for the cosmopolitan harmony of Afro-American Eurasia—an imaginable euphonic future of a raceless world.

Although Hughes did not join the Communist Party and critiqued the Soviet state interference into the musical sphere, he still embraced the Soviet system as Soviet system as a viable and well-functioning form of governance. Upon Hughes's return from the Brown odyssey, his sharp comparative analysis of Soviet Central Asia and the American South propelled him to conceive the vision of the United Soviet States of America (USSA)—declared lyrically as the US under Soviet government in his poem "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." (1934):

Put one more s in the U.S.A.
To make it Soviet.
One more s in the U.S.A.
Oh, we'll live to see it yet.
When the land belongs to the farmers
And the factories to the working men
The U.S.A. when we take control
Will be the U.S.S.A. then.
. . .
By Texas, or Georgia, or Alabama led
Come together, fellow workers
Black and white can all be red:
Put one more S in the U.S.A. (*Collected Poems* 176–77)

Accordingly, what Hughes aspired for America was a scheme of communism-inspired governance not necessarily administered by the Communists, but shared by the people of all races, classes, and genders via their equal access to power. As such, adding an "S" to the USA and making it USSA would jazz up America's social configuration and cultural heritage, extending a subtle glissando from the USSR's Eurasian theme.

Lost in translation? The McCarthyist poetry trial, the cryptic poems of Hughes in Uzbekistan, and the extraordinary victimization of Sanjar Siddiq

Hughes's poems written between 1932 and 1938 have long been regarded as "radical," "disqualified as poetry," or even "un-American," due to his undernourished "self-referential" Black American identity, as charged by critics, which prompted the poet to shrink away from his own writing records in *The Big Sea* (1940) (Dawahare 21). Moreover, Hughes's attempt to downplay his involvement in the proletarian poetry movement corresponded with his doctoring the narration of the Soviet adventures. As Letitia Guran points out, there are numerous alternations in Hughes's retelling of his Soviet experiences in *I Wonder*, rendering the narrative less passionate about the Soviet cause, yet more factually neutral (51). David Chioni Moore further explains that Hughes's *I Wonder* was written at the time when Jim Crow was fading into history while McCarthyism was prevailing in society. These seismic transformations in the American socio-political landscape urged Hughes to tone down his critique of the US and his admiration for the USSR, but his approbation of the Soviet endeavors in promoting racial and gender equality in Central Asia remained unabated, albeit more discreet (61).

While these interpretations are all plausible, it warrants further attention that *A Negro Looks* was published in the USSR, where Hughes might have been pressured to conform to the Soviet publishing codes, leaving his true feelings as elusive as they were nebulous. Nevertheless, inconsistencies in Hughes's writings, even before the completion of *I Wonder* in 1956, already pointed to his ambiguous political identity and led him to be summoned before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations led by Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1953.

Checking the McCarthy hearing transcripts against Hughes's intellectual background, a certain degree of truthfulness shines in his testimony. For example, Hughes claimed to have abandoned his pro-Soviet stance when he "began to see social progress accelerating itself more rapidly, Supreme Court decisions, FEPC [Fair Employment Practices Committee]" in the early 1940s (Senate 991). As his literary works demonstrated a tendency towards becoming less "radical" after 1938, the early 1940s might indeed have changed his previous hostility toward the US government. However, the poem "Lenin," originally published in *New Masses* (1946), indicated the resurgence of his interest in the post-WWII Soviet global expansion:

> Lenin walks around the world.
> The sun sets like a scar.
> Between the darkness and the dawn
> There rises a red star. (*Collected Poems* 318)

Nevertheless, "Lenin" (1946) was not employed as a piece of evidence during the cross-examination conducted by Roy Cohn, who served as McCarthy's chief counsel and prosecutor. Instead, he presented the poem "Ballads of Lenin" (1933) as circumstantial evidence to question Hughes's political beliefs, resulting in Hughes's mention of its fictionality to explain away any potential poetic abracadabra in calling forth world revolution: "That is a poem. One can not state one believes every word of a poem" (Senate 978).

Indeed, Hughes's sophistry had rolled in from the outset of the hearing when Cohn began to inquire into his intellectual history:

> Mr. COHN. Have you ever been a believer in communism?
> Mr. HUGHES. I have never been a believer in communism or a Communist party member.
> Mr. COHN. Have you ever been a believer in socialism?

> Mr. HUGHES. My feeling, sir, is that I have believed in the entire philosophies of the left at one period in my life, including socialism, communism, Trotskyism. All isms have influenced me one way or another, and I can not answer to any specific ism, because I am not familiar with the details of them and have not read their literature.
> Mr. COHN. Are you not being a little modest?
> Mr. HUGHES. No, sir. (Senate 976)

It might be true that Hughes did not read the relevant literature in detail, but his Soviet Central Asian experience deepened his understanding of the "philosophies" in relation to their applications within the Soviet system. Hughes therefore downplayed how his adventures affected his acceptance of socialism and communism, which constituted the foundation of his revolutionary poems. As Hughes only covered his life stories up to 1931 in *The Big Sea* and the Soviet publication *A Negro Looks*, which did not circulate broadly in the US, his activities in Soviet Central Asia remained obscure to most Americans until the post-trial publication of *I Wonder*, which reconstructed his odyssey with a more neutral tone. Thus, without the information about Hughes's Soviet trip for reference, Cohn's legalistic casuistry yielded to Hughes's sophistry during the examination of evidence.

Seemingly, Senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois was apprised of the relationship between anti-religious sentiments and Marxist themes in Hughes's poems when he read the third stanza of "Goodbye Christ," including "A real guy named Marx communism, Lenin Peasant, Stalin worker, me," to suggest the poet's possible connection with communism (Senate 981)—with additional questions seeking to establish if Hughes's leftist thought had influenced the suspected Communist Paul Robeson, which Hughes denied (Senate 982).

Although Hughes might have had limited interactions with Robeson, his appreciation of Robeson's songs as "truly racial" ("The Negro Artist" 34) as well as his expectation of Robeson hosting a concert in Moscow in the fall of 1933 ("Negroes in Moscow" 70) revealed that he was well aware of the singer's political disposition. To be sure, Robeson did not come to Moscow in 1933, but he did visit the USSR at the invitation of Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein in December of the next year—to "study the Soviet national minority policy as it operates among the peoples of Central Asia" (qtd. in Duberman 186). Later in the spring of 1935, Robeson conveyed to the British newspaper *Observer* that "I am not interested in any European culture, not even the culture of Moscow—but I am interested in the culture of

Uzbekistan" (qtd. in Duberman 186). Robeson's interests in Central Asia—and more specifically Uzbek culture—could not have been kindled unless he carefully read Hughes's extensive publications concerning Soviet Central Asian policy and Uzbekistan in 1934. Evidently, Hughes and Robeson knew each other's projects quite well, at least in the early 1930s.

Given the witch-hunting atmosphere steeped in McCarthyist hysteria, the suspected Hughes–Robeson connection could be perceived as a musico-literary cue for sedition. When Cohn asked, "You want to tell us you have never been a believer in anything except our form of government?" Hughes, again, "denied ever having believed in anything else" (Senate 977). Since Cohn's interrogation took place with no prior knowledge of the USSR episode in Hughes's life trajectory, the prosecutor could only quote the poem "One More 'S' in the U.S.A." to further question if Hughes had indeed desired the Soviet system. Hughes quickly seized the opportunity to reemphasize the poem's fictional nature, while keeping the context of his comparison between the US South and the USSR South out of sight:

> Mr. COHN. "Put one more 'S' in the USA to make it Soviet. The USA, when we take control, will be USSA then."
> Mr. HUGHES. Will you read me the whole poem?
> Mr. COHN. I do not have the whole poem. Do you claim these words are out of context?
> Mr. HUGHES. It is a portion of a poem.
> Mr. COHN. Do you claim that these words distort the meaning?
> Mr. HUGHES. That is a portion of a poem and a bar of music out of context does not give you the idea of the whole thing. (989)

However, the poem's main idea was still conspicuous, compelling Cohn to explore the issue further:

> Mr. COHN. At any time in your life did you desire to make the United States of America Soviet?
> Mr. HUGHES. Not by violent means, sir.
> Mr. COHN. By any means.
> Mr. HUGHES. By the power of the ballot, I thought it might be a possibility at one time. (990)

Hughes was clearly demonstrating dishonesty, improvising a subterfuge to obscure his erstwhile pro-insurgent attitude, as the opening of his poem "Good Morning Revolution," first published in *New Masses* (1932), reads:

"Good-morning, Revolution: / You're the very best friend / I ever had" (*Collected Poems* 162). Cohn, knowing this poem, cited it to imply Hughes's proclivity for "violent means" of revolution, only to end up finding the author defending himself again, saying that the revolution "means a change like the industrial revolution" and the publication of these seemingly pro-Soviet poems was serviceable to the American parade of "freedom of press" against the Communists (Senate 991, 993).

However, evidence of Hughes's support for overthrowing the U.S. government by revolutionary means, in the spirit of the 1917 Russian Revolution, surfaced in 2002. It came in the form of six previously unknown poems that had only existed in a 1934 Uzbek translation of Hughes's work titled *Langston Hjuẓ Ṣi'rləri* ('The Poems of Langston Hughes') in pre-1934 Uzbek orthography (modern: *Langston Xyuẓ She'rlari*). These poems were translated back into English by Muhabbat Bakaeva and Kevin Young and published in *Callaloo*. Moore believes that Hughes wrote those poems in Uzbekistan; and Uzbek literary figure Sanjar Siddiq, who traveled with him and unfortunately disappeared in the Great Purge, translated them to Uzbek (Hughes, Young and Bakaeva 1101).

An analysis of these poems demonstrates that Hughes, like Du Bois, regarded the Russian Revolution as a pivotal moment in world history and supported the world revolution sanguinely, as his "October" reads:

> Then October
> Came to clean
> The world's shoes,
> To purify
> The mercenary minds.
> Look: here
> Is a country
> Where everyone shines,
> Stomachs full
> From their arms' toil.
> Under the Soviet sun,
> The land keeps on
> Growing and won't quit
> Till the Revolution
> Stops the world's turning. (Hughes, Young, and Bakaeva 1107)

The title of the poem—"A Negro Speaks of War"—evokes Hughes's more famous poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." The "War" here most likely

refers to WWI, as in another poem, "After War," Hughes mentions the post-WWI impact of the Bolshevik Revolution: "Above, / Only one flag remains, / Red / As life's blood /. . . The red banner will ban all naivete / So the world's workers can see" (1109). "A Negro Speaks of War" reflects the anti-war sentiments of African-Americans: "Now, I'm fed up / with all your wars— / I won't go" (1105). It further hints at the revolutionary war as the only war worth fighting for, since its purpose was to end racism: "but if ever I do, / it'll only be for freedom / for the Negro" (1105).

Apparently, the poem "Listen" was written to call Black proletarians' attention to the revolution: "Listen, / You hungry, unemployed, / Lend your ear" (Hughes, Young and Bakaeva 1111). More cogently, Hughes attempted to convey to his Black fellows that Soviet Russians would stand as allies in their struggle for racial and economic equality in the poem "Ballad of the Bootblack":

> I said to the "boy" from Alabam
> Do you know there's a land
> Called Russia, understand,
> Where rich folks can't
> Make you starve, or worse? (1110)

Amid international and domestic skepticism surrounding the socialist revolution, Hughes wrote "To the Unbelievers": "You don't have to believe me, / But we are stronger" (1113). Unequivocally, in the Uzbek version of his poems, Hughes revealed his genuine respect for the first socialist state in the world, while his Soviet Central Asian odyssey only served to reinforce his belief in the final victory of socialism.

On the other side of the story, Siddiq was indeed the ideal translator for Hughes's poems, at least for three reasons. First, Siddiq was familiar with different aspects of American literature. In his essay "Burung'i madaniyat qoldiqlari" ("The Remains of Ancient Civilization"), Siddiq introduced the American Indian lifestyle and civilization to the Uzbek audience, and he began to translate Hughes's poems as early as in 1931 (Irzayev). Secondly, Siddiq was renowned for his translatorial expertise in not only the works of Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Lev Tolstoy, but also those of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin (Rahimjonov 79). He was thereby sensitive enough to capture the pregnant resonance of Hughes's poetic themes in relation to his pro-Marxist and pro-revolutionary attitudes. Thirdly, Siddiq stuck to the method of word-for-word translation to ensure

the accuracy of the translated work, stating that "[t]ranslation is a complete copy of the work from another language" (qtd. in Xasanova 3). Consequently, Siddiq's knowledge of America, his experience in translating revolutionary literature, and translatorial methodology all guaranteed that the Uzbek version of Hughes's poems correspond exactly to his lost English ones in terms of content, style, sentiments, and intended meanings.

While Hughes was fortunate to survive the hearing as his far more radical poems remained undecipherable in Uzbek, Siddiq undertook the translation of Hughes's poems right before Joseph Stalin launched the Great Purge in 1936, which drastically curtailed political, economic, and cultural freedoms throughout the USSR. From the 1920s to the early 1930s, the USSR vigorously advanced the policy of *korenizatsiia*, or "indigenization," seeking to make the Soviet power appear "native," "intimate," "popular," and "comprehensible" to non-Russian masses and to disarm the minorities' anxieties associated with Russian rule through spreading publications and translated works in their native languages. Besides, they also promoted native cadres, who were familiar with the local sociocultural context, to administrative posts (Martin 12). This policy was duly observed in Hughes's letter to American concert singer Noël Sullivan in 1933, where he commended the relatively liberal literary and artistic environment in which ethnic minorities could access high culture and translated literature easily:

> This is the only place I've ever made enough to live on from writing. Poets and writers in the Soviet Union are highly regarded and paid awfully well; as a class, I judge, the best cared for literary people in the world . . .. Usually ten days after a new book has appeared, not a copy can be found . . .. And then come the translations into all the minorities' languages. (*Selected Letters* 182)

Hughes later noted in *I Wonder* that he was glad that there was even an Uzbek translated version of *The Weary Blues* (159). Supposedly, Siddiq was also a translator here and the first thirty poems in *Langston Hjuz Şi'rləri* were taken from this volume (Hughes, Young, and Bakaeva 1100).

Siddiq's translation must have struck a chord in Uzbek society. His literal translation of Hughes's works was indeed a response to the call of the cultural-ideological doctrine of socialist realism, which aimed to bring Marxism to the masses and inculcate the proletarians with optimism about class struggle through portrayals of the "heroic" working class in literature and art in the early 1930s (Kurennaya 24–25). As Lenin emphasized, the

capitalist exploitation of Central Asia epitomizes Russian imperialism as the "highest stage of capitalism" (Xalfin 226, 427). Therefore, the circulation of *The Weary Blues*, concerning the Black workers' struggle in the American South, could awaken Central Asians' memories of the oppression of the Russian Governor-Generalship of Turkestan, when, in Hughes's words—"they had been treated by the Russians as Negroes are treated in Mississippi" (*I Wonder* 159)—and helped to propagandize the superiority of the Soviet mode of production.

Central Asian people of all professions traditionally venerated poetry, and most people possessed some degree of poetic inclination (Thúry 6). To them, Hughes provided relatable source materials, while Siddiq's translation rightly rendered his Brown literature "Asiatic." The poem "Mason-Dixon Line," translated by Siddiq and likely composed by Hughes after his visit to the Central Asian cotton fields, shows the dire conditions of Black cotton workers in the American South and could potentially elicit empathy among Central Asians who shared a similarly tragic plight under landlord exploitation:

> over there stands Sir,
> owner
> of all you see before—
> cane, cotton, corn.
>
> And over here
> backs of Negroes bend
> to worn knees, picking,
> hands dirtied,
> empty. (Hughes, Young, and Bakaeva 1103)

However, as Soviet collectivization failed to raise the output of cotton and resulted in famine in Uzbekistan in 1933, the same translated poem would not fulfill the Soviet propaganda purpose of fostering Afro-Asian solidarity against capitalism and imperialism. Instead, it caused Central Asians to be less ideologically "red" and to share their emotional "weary blueness" with "Negro" Americans. Subsequently, the Soviet authorities grew concerned that the sweeping dissatisfaction among minorities with the first Five-Year Plan could turn *korenizatsiia* into a force abetting ethnic separatism rather than encourage loyalty in the region. This led Stalin to radically shift the native-friendly policy to partial Russification in the early 1930s, and eventually to the Great Purge in 1936, with the firm belief that foreign

capitalist powers had been sending spies under the cover of "political refugees" and recruiting ethnic minorities for espionage (Harris 138).

Consequently, Siddiq fell victim to the red terror and was put on trial in Tashkent on August 31, 1937. His Uzbek works were found to eulogize Ottoman military commander and political leader Enver Pasha as a Pan-Turkic hero in the Basmachi Movement with the help of nationalist resistance leader Ibrahim Bek, against the blue-eyed Bolsheviks. On September 10, 1937, various translated works of Siddiq in the repertoire of the Hamza National Theater were disclosed to the public to suggest his foreign connections, resulting in his being labeled as the *xalq dushmani* ("enemy of the people"), which then led to his mysterious death in 1938—he was only rehabilitated by the USSR Supreme Court on 26 July, 1956 (Irzayev).

Curiously, Hughes never mentioned the name "S. SьDDьQ," as appears on the cover of *Langston Hjuʒ Ṣi'rləri*, or "Sanjar Siddiq" in any of his works that touch upon the topic of Soviet Central Asia. The poet's omission of the name could be a deliberate erasure, aiming at concealing his accidental victimization of his translator, as Hughes was accused by Cohn of supporting Stalinism in the late 1930s. Meanwhile, Arthur Koestler became disillusioned with communism and also accused Hughes of complicity: "You have signed statements to the effect that the purge trials in the Soviet Union were justified and sound and democratic. You have signed statements denying that the Soviet Union is totalitarian. You have defended the current leaders of the Communist party" (Senate 990). In this sense, Siddiq became not only a victim of Stalin, but also a casualty of the left-wing intellectual movement set off by American intellectuals—such as Hughes and Du Bois—who voluntarily betrayed their critical thought toward charismatic authority in exchange for endorsing totalitarian ideology, with its dangers intentionally glossed over. Well before Nikita Khrushchev's rehabilitation policy, cynically speaking, the McCarthyist poetry trial had—by a stroke of serendipity—executed the delayed justice in Siddiq's favor, about which the complete works of Hughes remain unapologetic.

Conclusion: Afro-American Eurasianism as a transfigured "double-consciousness" of an "Asiatic Black Man"

Langston Hughes traveled to Soviet Central Asia when Joseph Stalin temporarily suspended the project of world revolution to focus on "socialism in one country" and to promote Soviet nation-building projects in Central Asia. Through the emphasis on the complexion he shared with Soviet Central Asians, Hughes developed his "Brown" Afro-American Eurasian narrative,

linking the "unveiled" dance and music with Uzbekistan to amplify the emerging voice of the subaltern South. Besides, he associated youth, nationhood, and education with Turkmenistan to indicate the developmental future for "colored" people in the world and highlighted the Soviet commitment to unite Asian and European fault zones into a racially indistinct Eurasian landmass. This model of Soviet Central Asia marked a departure from the region's history with the racist policies of Russian Turkestan and the despotic Emirate. The comparison of the USSR South and the US South further brought Hughes to sympathize with Stalin's totalitarianism in persecuting ethnic intellectuals, including Sanjar Siddiq, in the years of red terror and led him to advocate for the United Soviet States of America as the Afro-American version of "socialism in one country."

Unlike W. E. B. Du Bois, who welcomed the broader concept of Eurasia stretching along the west-east axis from Hungary to Manchuria as well as the north-south axis from Moscow to Yunnan, Hughes's Afro-American Eurasianism homed in on Soviet Central Asia. Despite the publication of a purported interview with Hughes in Japanese newspaper *Tokyo Nichi Nichi*, in which he praised Japan as "the destined savior of the darker races of the backward China where the armies of the Rising Sun were spreading culture," during his transit trip from the USSR to the US, he never sympathized with Japanese imperialism, stating that "[i]n Japan, Asiatics did so ['hurting and humiliating a group not one's own'] to Koreans. In America, whites did so to Negroes" (*I Wonder* 275–76). Additionally, what set Central Asia apart from East Asia to Hughes was the region's Brown liveliness, which could be interpreted in traditional folk music to echo with his spiritual attachment to the swing of jazz. Moscow's cultural restrictions thus prevented him from acquiring Party membership. Nevertheless, Hughes did fantasize about the USSA as the USSR's sister socialist republic.

As Du Bois's postulation of "double-consciousness" had contributed to the archetype of the "Asiatic Black Men," Hughes's narrative transfigured the Eurasian experience of African Americans by zooming in Du Bois's themes of critique of religion, secular education, modernization, socialism and communism, the search for a universal identity, as well as the narrative strategy to align themselves with Soviet Eurasia in containing or even revolutionizing the US, to articulate Afro-American Eurasianism through the nuances of "Brownness." However radical these themes may appear, they permeate the intersectionality of the "Asiatic Black Man" identity fantasy, transform the Eurasian landmass into an echoing geopolitical corridor, wherein voices from the industrialized North, rural South, culturally exotic

Orient, and economically rational Occident enhance each other for contentions over the "color-line" problem and negotiate the ideology of Eurasianism as an intellectually, interracially, and transcontinentally shareable project.

Through the red-filtered, translucent mirror of Soviet Asia, the Eurasian experience of Afro-American intellectuals converted the region into a psycho-geographical medium that fostered the two new "un-reconciled strivings" between "an Asiatic Black Man" and "a leftist/socialist/Communist," thus redirecting Jacques Lacan's "formula of fantasy" with an uncertain direction: Du Bois/Hughes/Robeson ◇ Soviet System/Communism → "Asiatic Black Man" oscillating between yellow/Brown Asia and red Moscow.[5]

While the intermezzo between Hughes's Soviet Asia odyssey and the McCarthy era shelved his Brown Afro-American Eurasian narrative, the censure of Senator McCarthy and the rise of the civil rights movement provided him with the opportunity to revisit his past in *I Wonder* in 1956. Its narrative legacy was continued by Du Bois and Paul Robeson in Tashkent, Uzbek SSR in 1958, and came to fruition in Muhammad Ali's conscious pronunciation of the "Asiatic Black Man" in 1966 as a fulmination against the Vietnam War.

The greatest irony is that Afro-American Eurasianism, as a transfigured "double-consciousness," fulfilled the idealistic expectations of communist internationalism of closing the divide in identity crisis and racial conflicts yet created a new dilemma by making people aware of both the stretch of individual cosmopolitanism and the practical limitations of ideology. Consequently, the Afro-American Eurasian narrative eventually faded into obscurity in the wake of communism's demise and shared the regrettable fate with those flowers kissed by the crisp fall breeze, as anticipated in Hughes's "Autumn Thought" (1921): "Dry and withered, / Their [Flowers'] petals dance on the wind / Like little brown butterflies" (*Collected Poems* 600).

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Notes

1. This train of thought continues my previous work "'Asiatic Black Man': W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes in Soviet Asia Part I—The Shifting 'Double-consciousness' of Du Bois." *HJEAS* 30.1 (2024): 134–38.

2. For Du Bois's appreciation of Stalin, see "'Asiatic Black Man' Part I," *HJEAS* 30.1 (2024): 126–27.

3. For the elaboration of the Lacanian split, see "'Asiatic Black Man' Part I," *HJEAS* 30.1 (2024): 117–18.

4. See "Asiatic Black Man Part I," *HJEAS* 30.1 (2024):135.

5. For the explanation of the Lacanian "formula of fantasy," see "'Asiatic Black Man' Part I," *HJEAS* 30.1 (2024): 126–27.

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sciendo

Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 168-195
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/9

Infecting a Body or Infecting on Screen: (Pre)mediating the Trauma of Pandemic Contagion in Filmic Narratives

Andrea Virginás

ABSTRACT

Based on a media historically informed interpretation of how disaster films (Yacowar) represent pandemic contagion and ensuing collective traumatization, this essay demonstrates a shift in the representation of infections on screens from the analogue media paradigm prevalent in the 1970s, through the post-analogue and early digital paradigm of the 1990s and, finally, up to the post-digital 2000s era. It argues that in this progression touching and infecting bodies are increasingly replaced by electronic screens showing contagion as technologically mediated in *The Andromeda Strain, The Cassandra Crossing, Alien, Twelve Monkeys, Contagion* and *Arrival*. This shift has consequences affecting the cultural processing of traumas in various media(l) environments, and its identification possibly refines our understanding of categories advanced in the twenty-first century such as premediation (Grusin) or compressed trauma (Demertzis, Eyerman). (AV)

KEYWORDS: disaster film, collective trauma, mediatized, analogue, digital

Contagion as collective trauma

Although collective traumas deemed worthy of being remembered are usually historical-political ones, the recent global pandemic showed us that biological threat can be just as formative as being endangered because of one's ethnic, national, religious, gendered, or classed background. This is an aspect that Jeffrey C. Alexander also reflects upon, suggesting that "political scandals are cause for indignation; . . . economic depressions are cause for despair; . . . lost wars create a sense of anger and aimlessness; . . . *disasters in the physical environment lead to panic; . . . assaults on the human body lead to intense anxiety; . . . technological disasters create concerns*, even phobias, about risk" (Alexander 8, emphasis mine). Direct life-threat through mass contagion can definitely become a stressful or even traumatic experience on both individual and collective levels. In his historically grounded monographic account of epidemics and pandemics, Andrew Price-Smith, drawing on the work of historian Richard Evans, notes that the appearance and persistence of cholera

in Europe in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries "produced psychological trauma among afflicted European populations," undermining "their assumptions of biological superiority" (Price-Smith 49). As for a more recent example, the first eruption of a Coronavirus-induced epidemic in the first years of the twenty-first century may be mentioned, as "SARS generated significant levels of fear and psychological trauma in affected populations, impeded international trade and migration flows, and resulted in minor to moderate economic damage to the economies of affected Pacific Rim countries" (139). Finally, summarizing the constant, perhaps even ahistorical features of mass contagious events in human history, Price-Smith observes that "[i]n the domain of psychology, contagion may generate significant negative effects, such as increasing uncertainty, suboptimal risk assessment, misperception, significant levels of affect (emotion), the construction of images of self and other, and the stigmatization of the ill" (18).

Real-world processes of threat on human life through mass contagion—often of an obscure origin, caused by a pathogen of unknown origin and by a procedure unknown of at the time of happenings—have therefore enduring effects on the biological and psychological build-up of individuals and collectivities. However, the process leading from what Jeffrey C. Alexander describes as "[t]he lives lost and pains experienced" (3) to "[e]xperiencing trauma . . . understood as a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences" (26) is an extremely complicated one, not the least because "shared trauma depends on collective processes of cultural interpretation" (3). In their article "Covid-19 as Cultural Trauma" published in the 2020 September issue of the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology,* Nicolas Demertzis and Ron Eyerman add another layer of difficulty to the study of mass contagious events in a framework of cultural trauma theory, which they name "the idea of compressed trauma" (428). Much dependent on the "compressed time-space continuum" (432) of the digitally interconnected post-globalization reality, compressed trauma means that instead of "a belated reaction to a triggering incident . . . a sense of crisis, with a trauma potential [emerges] immediately" (432) for the affected victims; meanwhile the analysts "studying the trauma process as it occurs [don't have] a clear notion of an underlying logic or an end in sight" (444–45).

Implicitly upholding and incorporating these diachronic-historical aspects and synchronic-ongoing specificities of cultural trauma formation, narrative fiction film has been acknowledged as a collective process of

cultural interpretation often in reference to collectively traumatic events, and in a loosely defined Euro-American cultural context (see for instance Erll, Elsaesser, Rigney, Walker). This paper joins the discussion by concentrating on the representation of mass contagion descending on local and/or global communities (with)in the framework of dystopic worlds construed in Euro-American narrative fiction films from the 1970s to the present. It introduces an angle of analysis hybridizing several perspectives: that of medical and environmental humanities when paying attention to contagion caused by a pathogen on a large scale; that of combining it with insights from cultural trauma theory when trying to understand its effects in a twenty-first century mediatized context; and, finally, the perspective of addressing the evolving history of film genres, specifically that of "disaster films" (Yacowar 2012), as also informed by the history of media (l) changes.

This endeavor aims to explore the mediatized understanding of newly emerging trauma types, contrasted with "the Enlightenment and psychoanalytic lay theory of trauma" (Alexander 8). Such efforts are most famously represented by Richard Grusin's concept of premediation,[1] which allows us to engage "with the things that mediation does rather than what media mean or represent" (Grusin 7) while analyzing collective traumas; or Demertzis and Eyerman's "compressed trauma" (428) with its addition of "the simultaneity of incidents without clear order or value" (445). Based on a media historically informed interpretation of how disaster films represent pandemic contagion and ensuing collective traumatization, this essay demonstrates a shift in the representation of infections on screens from the analogue media paradigm prevalent in the 1970s, through the post-analogue and early digital paradigm of the 1990s, up to the post-digital era of the 2000s. It argues that in this progression, touching and infecting bodies are increasingly replaced by electronic screens showing contagion as technologically mediated. Analyzing the process of "making trauma shareable" (Alexander 3) in this specific case involves the patterns through which the transmission of the mass contagious pathogens is arranged within the diegetic worlds. On the one hand, contagion and trauma are shared—and are shown as shared—through encounters of human bodies exchanging breaths, touches or fluids carrying the pathogen. On the other hand, both contagion and trauma are also transmitted through humans watching mass contagion as images projected in communal immersive situations and on cinematic screens, or on what Gaudreault and Marion call non-hegemonic screens comprising the more private contexts of the ubiquitous television screen in the 1960s–1980s, the computer screen becoming widespread in the

1990s, and the mobile screens from the late 2010s and early 2020s.[2] This feature was transformed into a topical one by the zoomification of our everyday lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, a clear example of how mass contagion, bodies, traumas, and screens intersected in a historically specific manner (Lewis, Golwender, Holland).

These two modes of representing the transmission of contagion and trauma(tization) on a collective level—distinguished as "infecting a body" and "infecting on screens" in the title—are correlated with the diversification and acceleration of traumatization sources. Spurred by the late twentieth-century Anthropocene threats and the simultaneous digitalization of art and everyday life, these sources culminate in what Grusin terms premediation and in what Demertzis and Eyerman call compressed trauma. It is the latter aspect—the diversification of sources of traumatization due to the Anthropocene and to the technological platform change—that is suggested to be congruous, within the examined diegetic worlds, with the representation of pathogen transmission through touching bodies and their fluids. This process is indexical when analyzed through Peircean semiotics, which defines an index as "a sign which represents its object by virtue of regularly co-occurring with it," as introduced in Peirce's *Logic Chapter I* (1866) (Lasersohn 2021). Furthermore, indexicality may be referred to as an important element of the analogue paradigm as demonstrated for example in Andre Bazin's film and photography theory.[3] Conversely, representing infection and ensuing collective traumatization as mediatized on (electronic) screens—emerging as indexes of the digital paradigm (Virginás 2020) within a "post-cinematic" regime of representation (Shaviro, qtd in Grusin 18)—matches with sources of collective traumatization including, once again after a historical hiatus, pandemic threats visualized through digital mobile interconnections.

These audiovisual formulations should not be considered simple aesthetic stereotypes but rather "mediators" in the Latourian sense that "are actively involved in changing whatever they mediate" (Grusin 6)—in this case our processing the collective trauma of pandemic contagion and disease, possibly influencing (our) conceptions of caring for the sick by close physical handling or through analyzing projected representations.

Contagion and disaster films

This study started from assembling a corpus of Euro-American disaster films that engage with the subject of mass contagion, are informed by the process of collective traumatization, and also show an interest for conceptualizing the roles the different mediatizing screens play throughout.[4]

Such examples include *The Andromeda Strain* (1971, dir. Robert Wise), *The Cassandra Crossing* (1976, dir. George P. Cosmatos), *Alien* (1979, dir. Ridley Scott), *Twelve Monkeys* (1995, dir. Terry Gilliam), or the more recent *28 Days Later* (2002, dir. Danny Boyle), *Contagion* (2011, dir. Steven Soderbergh), *Perfect Sense* (2011, dir. David MacKenzie), or *Arrival* (2016, dir. Denis Villeneuve).

These films show characteristics of the science-fiction genre[5]: one of these is a preoccupation with (moving image) technological changes, an affinity Susan Sontag wrote about in "The Imagination of Disaster" observing that "[s]cience fiction films invite a dispassionate, aesthetic view of destruction and violence—a *technological view*. Things, objects, machinery play a major role in these films" (151, emphasis in the original). Barry Langford also isolates this ingredient when formulating that one of the chief "abiding concern[s of science fiction] as genre" has been "with the—usually threatening—consequences of technological change on human society" (183). This is an aspect highlighted and somewhat generalized by Vivian Sobchack in *Screening Space* when suggesting that science fiction is "concern[ed] with social chaos, the disruption of man-made social order, the threat to the harmony of civilized society going about its business" (30). All of the mentioned films feature "technological views" (Sontag 151), including spaceships, complex weaponry, advanced communication tools, and laboratory or research equipment. These technologies, portrayed as drivers of technological change, are central to narratives that consistently culminate in the "disruption of man-made social order" (Sobchack 30).

However, Maurice Yacowar's proposal of the genre of disaster films—bordering on both science fiction and horror—is most fruitful in advancing with our present analysis of Euro-American films that represent mass contagion through pathogens invisible, non-perceptible to human sense organs, and, consequently, to the camera eye either.

> Disaster films constitute a sufficiently numerous, old, and conventionalized group to be considered a genre rather than a popular cycle that comes and goes. The disaster film is quite distinct from the science fiction genre Susan Sontag discusses in "The Imagination of Disaster," though like sci-fi, the disaster film exploits the spectacular potential of the screen and nourishes the audience's fascination with the vision of massive doom. (Yacowar 313)

Interestingly enough, although eight subtypes of the disaster film are enumerated in Yacowar's study, with overlaps acknowledged too (313–20), none of these can fully accommodate films that engage with "massive doom"

and disasters specifically represented as mass contagion narratives due to a pathogen dangerous for humans, and, possibly, for other creatures as well. So even at this level of film genre categorization, we can see that combining the medical/environmental humanities perspective with an interest in how cultural traumas are structured and shared already yields some modest results in what concerns the refined granularity of our understanding referring to disaster films. Thus, disaster films dramatizing the process of mass contagion evidently relate to what Yacowar describes as films about "natural attacks":

> The most common disaster type pits a human community against a destructive force of nature. The attack may be by an animal force, such as rats . . . It may be a rampage of natural monsters . . .. Or they can be fantasy monsters . . .. Or it may be an attack by elements [flood, volcano]. A third type of natural attack is by an atomic mutation, as the giant ants . . .. Or it may be the disaster of mutation or radioactive effect . . .. In all three types, the natural disaster film dramatizes people's helplessness against the forces of nature. (Yacowar 314)

Mass contagion is represented and understood as a destructive force of nature in disaster films, including the ones mentioned, while zoonotic pathogens, when involved, may be subsumed under the heading of "an animal force" as formulated by Yacowar. In pronouncedly science-fiction environments—like those in *The Andromeda Strain* or *Alien*—these pathogens causing the disaster of mass contagion might have a motivational subtext of "atomic mutation" or perhaps "radioactive effect." However, agents of mass contagion also need to be positioned within the disaster film subvariant named "The Monster" by Yacowar, where "the beast may come from the vast beyond," "can be a vegetable," a bacterium, or it can even be "constructed by human beings" like a computer—besides the stereotypical zombies, aliens, and vampires (317). Yet, viruses—the most frequent real-life and filmic causes of mass contagion—are neither vegetables nor bacteria, even though some of them might be "constructed by human beings" (Yacowar 317) like the pathogen in *Twelve Monkeys*. Finally, although the sample does not include films such as *Westworld, 2001,* or *Colossus: The Forbidden Project*, where computers literally cause disasters (Yacowar 317), this subcategory becomes particularly pertinent thanks to our angle of analysis focusing on the process of contagion and traumatization as mediatized through various screens.

Engaging with disaster films through Yacowar's film generic categorization foregrounds the already sketched interpretative framework

positing late twentieth and early twenty-first-century interdependencies of pandemics, collective traumatization, and mediatization. This is envisioned as a historical process in which sources of collective traumatization diversify to include phenomena linked to Anthropocene-era destabilizations (Behringer), further amplified by the shift from analogue, celluloid-based filmmaking to digitalized platformization and mobile technologies.[6] The selected corpus of films allows the construction of a scalar progression from the 1970s to the present day. The first stage, from the early 1970s, depicts a scenario when the analogue media paradigm was prevalent and it is demonstrated in the analyses below that it correlated with how mass contagion was envisaged as effective through "indexically" touching bodies and scarcely "migrating" to electronic screens (and represented in the corpus by *The Andromeda Strain, The Cassandra Crossing,* and *Alien*). The second, mixed stage of the 1990s is a period when the post-analogue and digital non-indexicality starts to make its presence felt through the infection appearing on electronic screens embedded in the diegetic worlds (*Twelve Monkeys*). Finally, the third stage, in the twenty-first century, witnesses the digitally interconnected real-time development of contagion processes as more and more represented on screens—even if, of course, bodily decay and death cannot be fully veiled by electronic screens (*Contagion*, *Arrival*).

The narrative fiction(al) films mentioned engage in representing such social negotiations, and—while analyzing in more detail selected and pertinent sequences within the composite framework of interpretation—the stake of this essay lies in the aspect formulated by Alexander: "[s]omething awful usually did occur, but how it is represented remains an open question, subject to whirling spirals of signification" (98). To answer "the open question," halting thus—at least momentarily—"the whirling spirals of signification" within the mediatized traumatic framework sketched beforehand, an apparently simple dichotomy shall guide the analysis. Namely: whether the mass contagion bursting into collective trauma(tization) is represented as happening through human bodies touching and thus infecting each other; or, somewhat on the contrary, it is represented as mediatized through electronic screens of various form(at)s.

Infecting a body: contagion as indexical-analogue trauma?

Andrew Price-Smith describes a few "laws" of how pandemics and contagious processes that cause diseases have affected societies since the start of written historical records. He states that the "infectious disease has long been perceived as a distinct threat to stability, to prosperity, to the material

interests of elite factions, and therefore to the security of the state" (7).[7] The complicity of the medical community may be described as a parallel and interrelated process, with its members "historically [having] downplayed" "the effects of the contagion" (63). It is in relation to the 1917–1918 Spanish influenza epidemic that Price-Smith presents a detailed analysis of the era's "Galenists,"[8] who were "acutely embarrassed by their impotence in the face of such an overwhelming epidemic" (63)—a reaction undoubtedly present in the case of later contagious events too. Incapacities of institutional and political reactivity are present in each of the currently analyzed titles, re-confirming Yacowar's observation with reference to the disaster film genre: "[a]ll systems fail in the disaster. Politicians are corrupt. . . . The church is usually absent, as irrelevant. The police are either absent or skeptical about anything beyond the familiar" (325).

In the 1970s European co-productional thriller directed by George P. Cosmatos, *The Cassandra Crossing*,[9] the political and health authorities are somewhat responsible for starting the pandemic. Eco-terrorists enter the WHO headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, by force, while the deadly pathogen—that will cause the mass contagion later on—is kept there by the very institution that should fight such entities by all means and at all costs: the WHO. Besides their initial part in offsetting the contagion, the authorities are shown as literally distant from the tragedy ongoing, thus occasionally they simply do not understand the basic chain of events and are unable to intervene in any meaningful way.

Figure 1.
White authorities and Black victims in *The Cassandra Crossing*

In Figure 1, a screenshot from the film, we see the hazmat suited representatives of the political and health authorities as if blended into the background. Meanwhile, the medical doctor, who happens to be traveling on the long-distance train together with his divorced wife, tries to understand and control the process of contagion; he is shown here dressed in black, emerging from the pale surroundings. The headquarters—where the American army officer in charge of the mass contagion management operation cooperates with the Swiss/European female scientist in order to identify the effective mechanism of the virus—is far away, safely delimited from the train that is destined to death, with the contagion not reaching its original point of outbreak in the WHO laboratories.

A contrasting example would be *Contagion,* a Hollywood production of corresponding proportions.[10] Steven Soderbergh's film may be described as springing from what Grusin defines as the era of premediation also in reference to post-9/11 collective traumatization. This is characterized by the prevalence of the digital platform, and due to premediation we have "become effectively accustomed to experiencing media terror" and also to "encounter[ing] . . . potentially traumatic events without collapsing" (18).

Figure 2.
The *screen*ed control room in *Contagion*

As seen in Figure 2, the authorities in *Contagion* are shown as being at a loss, also indicated by the huge and empty discussion room dominated by an electronic screen showing field images of the mass contagion. They happen to find solutions to halt the depicted pandemic by trial-and-error methods rather than by knowledge and strategy. The intertwining of biology/contagion (spreading) and technology/information (processing) has come full circle, with the authorities having their vast, well-equipped control room, yet not being in a position as safe as they were in *The Cassandra Crossing*: they cannot escape the virus, as it is unstoppable, no matter what boundaries there are. One chief conclusion to be drawn from watching these films is that of incompetent, even malevolent authorities, much too overwhelmed healthcare professionals, and civilians who need to fight the disorderly circumstances by themselves—provided they manage to circumvent contagion. All observations, therefore, are very much in line with how Price-Smith or Kristin Ostherr describe real, actual events, and how Yacowar, Bruce Kawin, and again, Ostherr summarize their representations in science-fiction disaster films.

The analogue filmic technologies dominant in the 1970s–1980s, with the slowly spreading video and digital technologies also present,[11] co-influenced the representation of contagion chains within the diegetic worlds. In the 1979 *Alien* directed by Ridley Scott,[12] we also encounter "the alien invasion narrative," in which "the oscillation between indexical and artificial representations of the invisible [pathogen causing contagion] shifts to an oscillation between stock footage and special effects enacting the same anxiety to visually fix the location of contagion" (Ostherr 15). Notable instances of non-mediated, "analogue" human activity through bodily interaction appear in Scott's film as the available surfaces, or indeed, methods to engage with pathogens and infections leading to collective traumatization.

The Nostromo commercial spaceship lands on a foreign planet looking for the source of an SOS signal, and an initial research team is sent out to explore a huge underground system of caves, populated by strange plant or mushroom-like entities that form a settlement. Dressed in space hazmat suits, the team's appearance recalls the "metonymic construction" of the discourse of world health (Ostherr) through objects that surround the eruption of a potentially threatening infection, of which, ironically, are enough even on a foreign planet. This visual element from *Alien* is reminiscent of Figure 1, with the hazmat suited army men positioned in a possibly infected train carriage in *The Cassandra Crossing;* a proof therefore to the cross-generic "iconography" that stories and representations of contagion

exhibit (Ostherr 12), even irrespectively of their genres as science fiction, thrillers, or apocalyptic (zombie) movies and pointing to the validity of the generic category of disaster films (Yacowar).

While on a mission, one of the team members is attacked and injured by a supposedly alien entity, therefore the officer in charge, Ellen Ripley suggests implementing a quarantine procedure to prevent greater danger appearing on the commercial spaceship. Recalling the centuries-old opposition that Price-Smith labels as the Quarantinist camp vs. the Galenic one—the two main strategies for when a society faces a new source of unknown infection (60–69)—Ripley's proposal for quarantining the injured colleague is voted down and thus ignored. Ripley's safety concerns are derided even after the alien body and entity appears as visibly thriving on the body of their colleague, undoubtedly supporting Ripley's warnings of a possible destructive infection. This scene from Ridley Scott's 1979 *Alien*—as seen in Figure 3—can be considered a famous actualization of Ostherr's observation that "[i]n many of the alien invasion films of this period, the effects of possession register imperceptibly within the victim's body, but usually a residual trace of the invasion is left on the body's surface" (104). This method of spectacularly signifying possession by aliens and probable infestation by a dangerous agent (unknown to humanity up to that point), through visible, residual traces connects this and other similar films to the analogue worldview and regime of representation in which the human body and physical contact are essential elements in achieving both contagion and its management. This aspect aligns with how Bruce Kawin describes the 1979 *Alien* as a horror film more invested in the human body instead of a more technologically oriented science-fiction piece. Kawin highlights how "the scientist . . . is a soulless robot rather than an authentic visionary," with "the humans . . . presented as trapped between an efficient monster and a monstrously efficient military-industry complex" (Kawin 372–73).

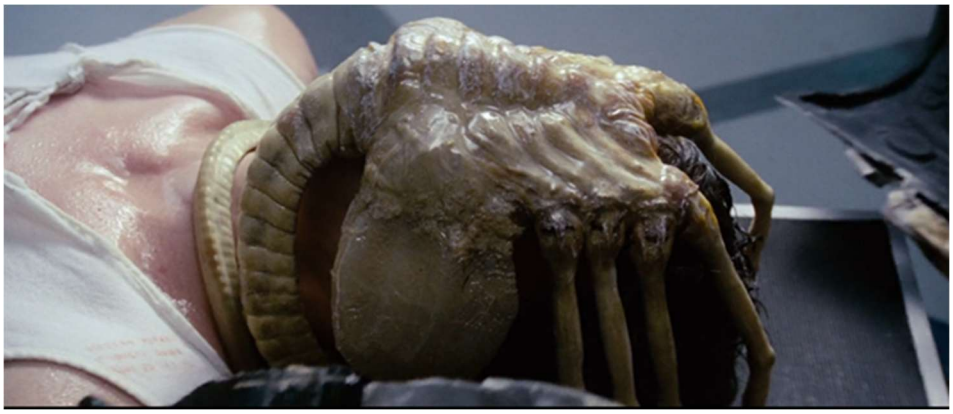

Figure 3.
The analogue touch of contagion in *Alien*

This requirement of human agency through manual handling of the mass contagion process—possibly bare-handed to ensure actual touching and explicit surfaces for infestation—while developing the story and the representation of the infecting agent may be re-confirmed on numerous occasions in *Alien*. While examining their attacked colleague, covered with the residue of the alien entity, the two scientists of the Nostromo spaceship are barely protected. Each wears a cloth mask, though: masks became the everyday protection pieces for civilians during the 2020–2021 Covid-19 pandemic. Here, however, they are deprived of their status as useful objects in dangerously infecting situations. When the alien infecting entity is removed from their colleague's face, and in line with their confident Galenic attitude—manifested in their ignoring the suggested rules of quarantine—the whole crew sit happily around the table having their dinner. Alas, this turns out to be the last supper they share on Nostromo. With the xenomorph alien creature multiplying while using their infested colleague as an entry point to the human bodies, the contagion represented by this alien lifeform spreads throughout the world of *Alien*.

Close bodily contact and constant human interaction is just as pronounced in *The Cassandra Crossing* (1976). In this case, the infecting agent is a bacterium spreading through an indexical, analogue-like transmission route. Ostherr presents the institutions established and strengthened after World War II as globally efficient in fighting destabilizations of world health and, consequently, contagion moments: the UN and the WHO. She argues that these "had been so rapidly assimilated into the postwar social imaginary that by simply invoking these institutions, a film could immediately frame its

particular disaster in the context of scientific realism and globalization" (86). This is evident in *The Cassandra Crossing,* where the WHO headquarters in Geneva appears as a significant building already in the first moments, as we can see it in the process of being attacked by Swedish eco-terrorists masked as a patient and a doctor. The proximity and the possibly contagious nature of human bodies is further highlighted by the high-angle shot that flattens the wide hygienic space of the WHO environment. The ecoterrorists accidentally break a container in a biohazard laboratory, initiating the outbreak as human bodies get into close, bodily and skin contact with the infecting liquid teeming with dangerous bacteria (Figure 4).

Figure 4.
The metonymic moment of contagion set loose in *The Cassandra Crossing*

One of the terrorists on the run embarks on the Geneva–Stockholm night train, full of passengers, most of them spreading rather than halting the chain of contagion. The film shows passengers mingling despite the disease symptoms fully developed, devoting considerable screen time and dramaturgically important moments to representing the process of contagion as dependent on visibly touching, interacting human bodies, such as those of the doctor, the train director, and various passengers, or family members unaware of the ongoing contagion process and thus actively participating in spreading the infection (Figure 5). The train is thus quickly transformed into a closed-circuit site with 1000 possible infections manifested, including severe

pneumonia rapidly leading to coma. Such a moment of origin and process of contagion depiction fits perfectly into Ostherr's categories of "metonymic trace" and the previously theorized "indexical" mode of representing contagion. Besides, it can also be considered a paradigmatic case of what I have called the "infecting [through] bodies" mode of representation and which I associate with the pre-digital, analogue regime of film, television, and video, influencing the mediatized representation of collective traumatization due to pandemic contagion. This leads to a heightened emphasis on the actors' bodily performances and interactions with their environment to represent the spreading of an infecting agent (Figure 5).

Figure 5.
Spreading the pathogen in *The Cassandra Crossing*

In the films examined, actual gestures and processes of (public health) care unfold and are represented as possible solutions to the mass contagion crises—in contrast to achieving detachment by situating the infecting agent within the abstract space of flat screens. However, while Ostherr argues that the indexical mode of representation is guided by the hope of inoculation, of making the moment of contagion visible, this paper suggests that in a post-digital era (Cramer) the computer-mediated visibility of the pathogen agent and of the pandemic advancing can be taken for granted—especially so within fictional worlds depicting probable scenarios.[13] The question, rather, is: what happens in a context when fewer human bodies are depicted in the

process of contagion, with infections most frequently represented on electronic screens? In the initiating moment of origin, throughout the process of development and in the possibilities of counteracting it, contagion is frequently shown without human bodily presence, thus evading, indeed, ignoring human bodily presence and ensuing indexicality altogether. This shift has consequences affecting the cultural processing of traumas in various media (l) environments, and its identification possibly refines our understanding of such categories as premediation (Grusin) or compressed trauma (Demertzis–Eyerman).

Infecting on screens: post-analogue disaster narratives?

Screens that display information on the infection process are present in these 1970s films as well. Interestingly, these displays are primarily used to duplicate the same living bodies in the process of contagion. For example, as the infected train of *The Cassandra Crossing* is being sealed on its way to the quarantine site in Poland, the ongoing diegetic process is also shown on flat televisual surfaces hung on walls behind captain Mackenzie. This parallel montage, akin to the split screen technique, aligns with how Ostherr sees "display of technological mastery over the visual field—a mastery accomplished not only through promotion of its own photographic relation to 'the real,' but also through a diegetic celebration of the new media that provide technologically enhanced visual access to the invisible contaminants under investigation" (156). Besides being a practical and highly effective method of condensing several lines of action/plot and locations, the enhancement through screenic representation serves to re-present the scientific efforts to isolate the bacteria/virus/infecting agent and understand its behavior. An infected dog extracted from the train in *The Cassandra Crossing* and transported to the Geneva headquarters for further examinations is shown several times (Figure 6).

Figure 6.
Screenic contagion I. in *The Cassandra Crossing*

Meanwhile, we also get long sequences of the actual dog in a "real," diegetically and hypothetically three-dimensional space as the process of contagion is advancing in its body. Such audiovisual structures have a narrative function of emphasis and explanation by re-ordering scientifically positioned information from both topical and temporal perspectives, suggesting spatial encaging and creating simultaneity within the diegetic world (Virginás 2019).

Figure 7 shows one of the very few images where the infecting agent is represented using scientific visualization techniques, suggesting that its reproduction and mutation patterns are signs of a behavior to be decoded by the eager scientists. An interesting comparison can be made to the 1971 film adaptation of *The Andromeda Strain,* based on Michael Crichton's famous novel and directed by Robert Wise. Here the infecting agent and the process of contagion are represented using cutting-edge analogue techniques of the era: telegrams, typewriters, heat images, bodypainting, and hologram-like visualizations, or actual scientific experiments shown as being filmed in the diegetic world. However, screenic "artificialities" (Ostherr 16) are infrequent in *The Andromeda Strain* too*,* affecting positively the possibility of agency that shall result in human-induced care, just like within the claustrophobic, sealed world of *The Cassandra Crossing.*

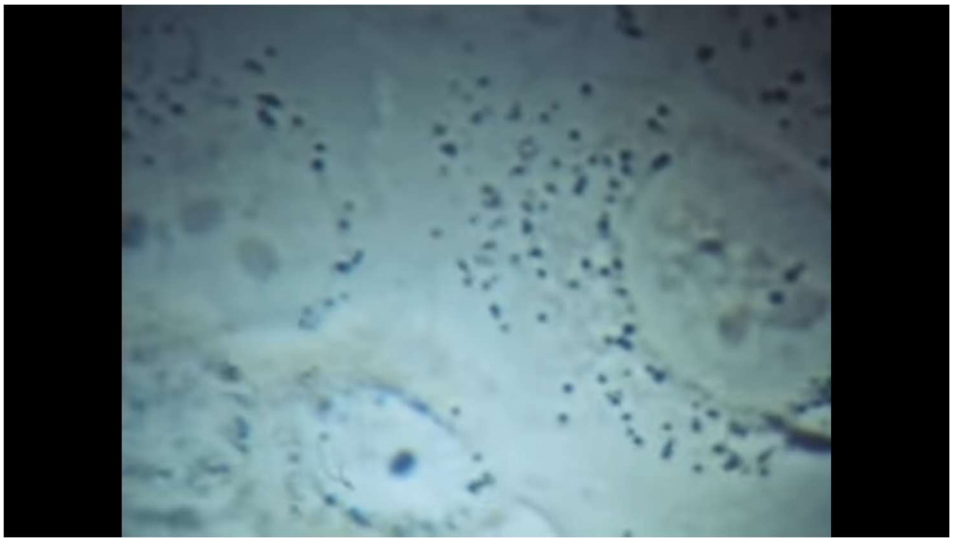

Figure 7.
Screenic contagion II. in *The Cassandra Crossing*

In the imagery framed by an analogue televisual or video screen, or through heat images and holograms, the "computer-experimental exploration" (Vehlken 165) of the contagious agent is not possible, only its two-dimensional representation, occasionally lagging behind real-world processes, and in accordance with the analogue paradigm's technological possibilities. These 1970s examples from the era of analogue television and video indicate a regime of representation different from real-time computer-generated imagery, which Vehlken describes as "[contributing] to the control of emergence by allowing for emergent phenomena to be computer-experimentally explored" (165). An earlier stage of this process may be seen in 1990s films, from the early digital era, where electronic screens take over from interacting human and animal bodies representing infecting agents and processes of mass contagion. This development has profoundly affected our habitual, and even specialized reactions to handling contagion on a mass scale, a locus of collective traumatization too.

Twelve Monkeys (1995, dir. Terry Gilliam)[14] presents a post-apocalyptic urban North America where mass contagion, starting from monkeys kept for medical experiments, contributes to the end of Western civilization as we know it. From the very first diegetic frame, the issue of the deadly pandemic appears in a multiply hypermediated form (Figure 8.).

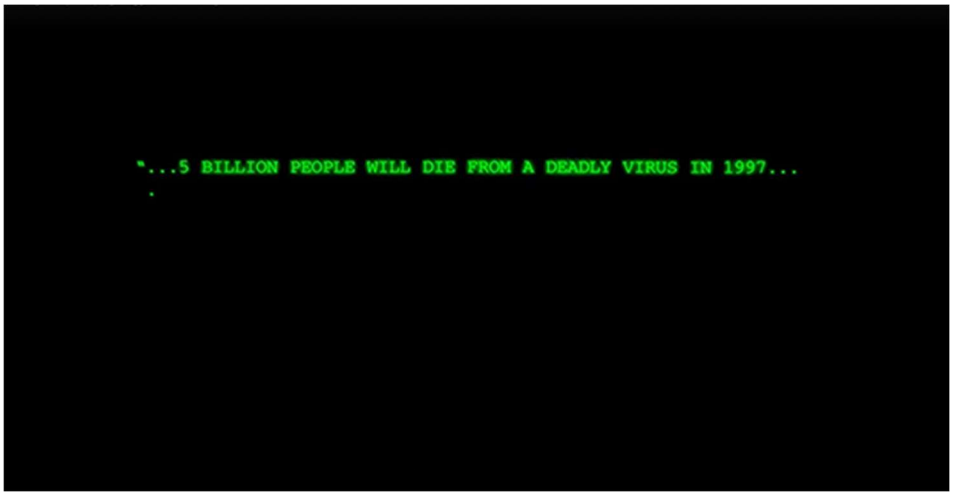

Figure 8.
Hypermediated contagion in *Twelve Monkeys*

The fact of contagion is communicated through neon-green letters appearing through digital animation on a black screen, prefiguring the aesthetics of *The Matrix* universe—the quintessential filmic allegory of the digital paradigm—that emerged a few years later. This exemplifies the decade when "[h]ypermediacy . . . was marked by the proliferation of mediation or by fragmentation and multiplicity" (Grusin 2).

The process of mass contagion being mediatized through electronic screens becomes even more pronounced in *Contagion* (2011). Ailing human bodies and spectacular outer symptoms are still present here, especially in the first third of the film, where the pandemic develops on buses or in the intimacy of homes. Moments of human agency and ensuing bodily touch and care in an analogue world are therefore not absent from the digital-era representation of mass contagion by various pathogens. However, such processes involving organic bodies are dwarfed by the suggested parallel process of "infecting on screen." This is often materialized as embedded pictures: in Figure 9, we see photographs of various infected locations examined by a WHO scientist representative, cueing contagion by Ostherr's "metonymic signifiers" such as hazmat suits, yellow gloves, and medical protection gears.

Figure 9.
Contagion on photo-screens

We are also offered an abundance of such moments and sequences that converge into what Steven Shaviro describes as the "post-cinematic regime" of "multiple, heterogeneous screens within the movie screen; . . . characters in the movie appearing on these screens, creating content for them, and watching them—often all at the same time" (Shaviro qtd. in Grusin 18). We have seen examples of such constructions in the 1976 disaster thriller analyzed previously, though actual doubling and content creation for electronic screens were scarce in the analogue regime of representation. With the onset of the digital paradigm, as heralded by the first narratively significant frame of the 1995 *Twelve Monkeys*, these aspects become routine proceedings within the diegesis as evidenced by further examples from the 2011 *Contagion* (Figure 10) or the 2016 *Arrival*.

Figure 10.
Infecting on screens (*Contagion* 2011)

Arrival[15] is the science fiction story of an alien civilization visiting Earth in twelve identical cone-shaped spaceships, with its narrative focalized by one of the scientists meant to decipher the aliens' communication/language while possibly getting infected by unknown pathogens. In both *Contagion* and *Arrival,* (computer) screens are employed abundantly to visualize an essentially non-visible process of human contagion by imperceptible, possibly alien entities. Unlike the earlier two-dimensional, flat images that barely incorporated the temporal and spatial advancement of contagion in the human world, these visualizations as "'[c]ontagious artificial agents' are thus assigned a key role in synthesizing not only biological and computational concepts, but also in convening the global level of modelling planetary-scale infection dynamics and the more local level of calculating scenarios for, e.g. crowd dynamics or infrastructure breakdowns" (Vehlken 160). Such processes of visualization as seen on Figure 10 lead to changes not only within the computational models as represented on the screens, but also in the real world, interconnected with mediatized platforms, especially in processes of (mass) contagion.[16]

With our analysis not being taken from biological-computational-epidemiological models as such, but from their fictional film diegetic representations performed on embedded (and usually) computer screens, we need to separate two theoretical and conceptual layers to accurately describe

the topos that I called "infecting on screens." We can identify Steven Soderbergh's 2011 *Contagion* as a filmic narrative presented after (and during) the period when "globalization aided and abetted the emergence of the SARS epidemic" with "[t]he psychological impacts of the contagion (fear, anxiety, stress) . . . greatly augmented by the actions of the global media, and by advances in telecommunications technology (such as the Internet and cell phones)" (Price-Smith 154–55). This outer, also conceptual layer of the actual contagious pandemic's effects "augmented by the actions of the global media" lead to "compressed trauma," (Demertzis, Eyerman) thanks to internet transmission enhancing the range of television programs or cell phones speeding up the spread of private, low-range information. This contagion-communication loop might have been perceivable to the fractions of the global population who were affected by the Coronavirus epidemics (SARS1, MERS) in the 2000s. Over time, this experience of "compressed trauma" became a template of representation for cinema audiences in the early 2010s, most of whom viewed *Contagion* as another disaster movie with no real-world effect.[17] Later, this information technological-epidemiological template, which morphed into a cinematic narrative, was recognized by the majority of Earth's inhabitants as a habitual experience in their reality during the 2020–21 SARS2/Covid-19 pandemic—leading, therefore, to a Grusinian premediated situation definitely dependent on the Eyermanian compressed trauma.

A further layer—not yet affecting the diegetic world of 2011 *Contagion*—can be described by what Vehlken, after Eugene Thacker media theorist, calls the "confluence of informatic and biological views of epidemics—which has led to a macro-level understanding of disease transmission" (161). This is beyond the simple drive to visualize contagion by what Ostherr names artificial methods—whether through the classical animation of hand-painted images, spectacular CGI-imagery, or the real rendition of computer programs as they unfold on screens. This is a "cultural confusion between contagion and transmission" (Thacker 161, qtd. in Vehlken) at the core of post-digital, twenty-first-century pandemic imagery, perhaps developing into post-compressed trauma, and it is rarely diegetized, even in filmic narratives about processes of (mass) contagion. Denis Villeneuve's 2016 *Arrival* is a rare exception. Louise Banks, the leading scientist tasked with communicating with the aliens, manages to start the process of transmission by deciphering the drawn and written language of the heptapod alien creatures. However, this also means that she needs to establish bodily contact with them, subjecting herself to biological contagion by the

alien mode of communication. This chain of processes alters her human perception of linear time, which then leads to a complicated narrative structure and also to her preventing a global-scale war with the alien entities.

Contagion across the analogue–digital divide

Even such a sketchy overview highlights the immense influence of media(l) processes and their cascading importance in the twenty-first century regarding epidemics and contagion. These processes affect the formation of shared, collective, and culturally codified traumas that ensue such mass-scale events. Jeffrey C. Alexander, similarly to a high number of trauma studies theorists, identifies mass media as a crucial factor in this process. He notes that "[w]hen the trauma process enters the mass media, it gains opportunities and at the same time becomes subject to distinctive kinds of restriction," with "[m]ediated mass communication allow[ing] traumas to be expressively dramatized and permit[ting] some of the competing interpretations to gain enormous persuasive power over others" (22). Hopefully, the contours of the media-historical context of interpretation have emerged by now, encompassing the analogue-to-digital shift while accounting for twenty-first-century technological developments within the digital realm. These changes co-evolve with more precise medical diagnostics and the increasing frequency of mass-scale contagious events in the Anthropocene era of climate change. Within this composite framework, the present argument has sought to suggest that the two (or four?) regimes of representation—Ostherr's "indexical and artificial" contagion, and the presently proposed "bodily and screenic" infection—can no longer be governed by the ideal of representing and locating the moment of contagion through indexicality. Instead, contagion through bodies and contagion through screens should be understood as two distinct modes of premediating the horror and trauma of future pandemic challenges, each reflecting the media-technological characteristics of their respective contexts and moments of production. This refinement, however, does not negate the initial intuitive observation about the prominent human agency evident in the 1970s examples—particularly when compared to the 2010s films, as demonstrated through a closer look at the films.

Ostherr's strongest argument calls for "an effort to pin the elusive contaminant to a concrete embodiment of 'otherness'" (47). This remains fully valid in the context of the pre-digital, pre-Anthropocene, pre-climate change twentieth century of analogue celluloid-based film and audiovisual imagining that upheld a serious "indexical possibility." My analyses, informed

by a different corpus, a composite framework of understanding and a later timeframe than that in Ostherr's 2005 monograph,[18] contend that with "screenic infection" becoming the dominant format of discussing contagion (Vehlken, Price-Smith), othering on the level of human agents now serves as a simple case of metonymically structured, yet global panorama of human diversity, without necessarily involving scapegoating mechanisms. Therefore, the analogue to digital to post-digital platform changes—as indexed by the "infection through bodies" panel being gradually replaced by the "infection through screens" panel in the examined disaster films—could be also credited with the seismic change that both Price-Smith and Ostherr attribute exclusively to scientific advancement. The former suggests that "[a]dvances in public health and biology (courtesy of John Snow and Robert Koch) reduced uncertainty about the nature and source of the pathogen and about its vectors of transmission, and thereby resulted in a corresponding decline in fear and violence" (Price-Smith 59). The latter observes in her 2005 monograph that "[t]his power to establish unambiguously the paths of contagion might have been the beginning of the end of the discursive linkage of disease and difference; scientific evidence could now prove that microbes without any national, ethnic, or class allegiances were the causes of disease, not their carriers" (52–53). Meanwhile, we cannot lose sight of Grusin's observation that in the twenty-first century and following 9/11 we have "become affectively accustomed to experiencing media terror so that if another terrorist attack occurs, we can, in Simpson's terms, 'encounter these potentially traumatic events without collapsing, we bear up, we carry on'" (18)—an essence of what Grusin defines as the era of premediation. Such a process is, by definition, without closure—at least at the moment of its analysis—and also in its capacity of "affecting collective identity," when and "where groups of individuals feel similarly affected by a fracturing of the existential security that a firm sense of identity affords" (Demertzis–Eyerman 429).

This analysis does not strive to be exhaustive—consequently, only a few filmic examples have been considered and analyzed—but it has sought to identify symptoms that might suggest a diagnostic reading of culturally and medially relevant collective trauma formation. Another question, signaled by Sebastian Vehlken, is "whether these contagious agents are capable of presenting relevant scenarios, or whether these always will limp after the social dynamics of 'real' people—like zombies, no matter fast or slow" (173). Even classical contagious agents, like the representation of contagion within fictional filmic discourse, can present relevant scenarios and thus influence

our real-life actions towards performing, or rather, avoiding care. Thus, the "recursive structure of biological contagion, computational transmission, premediated scenarios, and social feedback" described by Vehlken in its capacity "of a contemporary understanding of contagious agents" (172) is set off by a filmic audience seeing touching human bodies or encaged images of screenic infection too.

Given its closeness in time, with COVID-19 related news still making the headlines in mid-2024, discussing cultural-medial discourses on mass contagion differs from the paradigmatic analysis of cultural traumas, which "are usually studied in retrospect from a distant point in time, allowing one to isolate a point of origin . . . and then trace the ensuing meaning struggle through a range of forums and media," as Demertzis and Eyerman put it in their 2020 September analysis of the then debuting COVID-19 pandemic (429). The last question set off by the present research refers to how conceptions of care have been influenced by the newly emerging biological and medial foundations of collective traumatization. As suggested by the examined disaster filmic narratives, caring for bodies in the second part of the twentieth century has been replaced by watching screens in the twenty-first century. Our collectively shared, mediatized personal experiences of the 2020s SARS-induced pandemic most probably has affected this apparently neat interpretative result.

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Notes

This article was supported by a grant of the Ministry of Research, Innovation, and Digitization, CNCS—UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2021-0613, by the Bolyai János Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and the Affiliated Fellowship of the Institute of Advanced Study, Central European University.

1. Developed in close connection with the influential theory of remediation enabled by digital media (Bolter–Grusin), and as an "alternative to some of the leading assumptions of trauma theory in the humanities" thus "[d]rawing on '[Nigel Thrift's] non representational theory'" (Grusin 7).

2. See Virginás 2023 for more details.

3. "The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re*-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue

of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction" (Bazin 13–14, emphasis in the original).

4. The research ran parallel with the SARS COV-2/Covid-19 pandemic that started in February 2020 and was first presented at the 2021 June conference entitled *Crises of Care* organized at Debrecen University, Hungary, with the written output finalized throughout 2022–2024.

5. Film genres, and among them science fiction, not only have temporal, but also regional variants. In their co-edited volume *Red Alert: Marxist Approaches to Science Fiction Cinema,* Ewa Mazierska and Alfredo Suppia draw attention to the fact that "many countries developed their own idiom of science fiction" (8). Based on Mazierska and Suppia's selection, in the volume the major variations would be contemporary Hollywood, contemporary Western European, communist, and post-communist Eastern European, and contemporary Latin American science-fiction examples.

6. See Virginás 2019, 2023 for more details in this respect.

7. A striking subcase of this phenomena could be the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1917–1918, which, according to a high number of historians cited by Price-Smith, could be pinpointed as a strong factor that lead to Germany's losing WWI and to the dismantling of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: "Bessel has also noted that the rise of the influenza pandemic temporally coincides with the failure of the German military effort, the collapse of effective governance, and the advent of revolution" (Price-Smith 72). Also, "[t]he historical record indicates that the final viral wave of influenza (and the high synchronous wave of deaths from pneumonia) immediately preceded the fragmentation of the Empire. Specifically, within two weeks of the final wave of the virus' striking Vienna, the Austro-Hungarian Empire underwent utter political disintegration" (Price-Smith 76).

8. "Given that contagionist thought originated in northern Italy, and that the practices of those in Firenza were emulated across Europe, it is appropriate to refer to this school as the Firenza or Florentine school. Those who have adopted the contrasting position, holding that disease was not in fact contagious, but rather environmental and induced by poverty, I shall dub the Galenic school" (Price-Smith 234).

9. *The Cassandra Crossing* was written by Cosmatos together with Robert Katz and Tom Mankiewicz, was co-produced by star-producer Carlo Ponti, and it had Sophia Loren, Ava Gardner, Burt Lancaster, and Richard Harris as stars, among others, and was filmed on locations in Switzerland, France, and Italy.

10. Written by Scott Z. Burns, directed by Steven Soderbergh who was also director of photography, the film was shot on locations in Casablanca, Hong Kong, Chicago, and San Francisco, it was produced by Warner Bros Studios, and its star line-up included Kate Winslet, Gwyneth Paltrow, Laurence Fishburne, Matt Damon, and Jude Law.

11. The Sony Betamax video camera launched in June 1975 (Powers), the same year when the first computerized visual effects company, George Lucas's Industrial Lights and Magic ("About Us") was founded, and its creations shown off in the 1977 film installment in the Star Wars universe.

12. Written by Ronald Shusett and Dan O'Bannon, backed by Walt Disney and Twentieth Century Fox Studios, the film was basically shot at Shepperton Studios in the UK, starring Sigourney Weaver, John Hurt, and Harry Dean Stanton.

13. Florian Cramer observes of the post-digital era that "[i]t is an approach to digital media that no longer seeks technical innovation or improvement, but considers digitization something that already happened and can be played with" (Cramer).

14. Inspired by Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), the film was written by David Webb Peoples and Janet Peoples, it was produced by Universal Productions, filmed in Pennsylvania and Maryland, and it had Bruce Willis, Madeleine Stowe and Brad Pitt starring in the main roles.

15. Directed by Denis Villeneuve. The screenplay was written by Eric Heisserer based on the short story of Ted Chiang, starring Amy Adams, Jeremy Renner and Forest Whitaker. The film's visual effects became famous, with production locations in Québec, Canada.

16. Vehlken refers to "Thacker's account on the 'informatization' of biology—with epidemiology as an important connection point between computer science and biology . . .. Central to his approach is a multilayered enfolding of communication processes that intertwine biological and computational networks. As Thacker (2005) put it: Between the genetic code of a virus, the rate of epidemic growth, its demographic distribution, and the role of medical records, health insurance policies, and sales of pharmaceutical vaccines, there is an ambiguous continuum of informational processes that is informatic and yet thoroughly material" (Vehlken 162).

17. A not too successful film at the time of its debut, considered by many a non-expected turn in Soderbergh's career.

18. With the first publication of the research dated 2002, see the Acknowledgements section of Ostherr's work.

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sciendo

Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 196-221
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/10

Persisting Dualisms in Contemporary Digital Environments: Ethics and Aesthetics in *Minecraft*'s Pastoral Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines contemporary digital environments, specifically focusing on video games, to analyze enduring dualistic conceptual biases in the representations of the natural world. It emphasizes the ethical questions and the dualistic and anthropocentric implications prompted by—and entrenched in—a traditional understanding of pastoral imagery surfacing in contemporary video games' landscape construction, particularly in light of the human–nonhuman relational urges presented by the Anthropocene. The study adopts a transdisciplinary approach, encompassing literary and cultural studies, posthuman philosophy, and media studies, to investigate the challenges and opportunities presented by the pastoral aesthetics in the landscape design of *Minecraft*, especially as exhibited in the opening sequence of the video game. The research also encourages a critical perspective towards long-standing dichotomies underlying pastoral narratives and their paradoxes, which, beneath an apparent reliance on environmentalist values, often carry latent implications associated with issues such as resource exploitation and nonhuman objectification. (SR)

KEYWORDS: video games, pastoral, digital environments, *Minecraft*, landscape

Introduction: digital ethics and ethics in the digital

Taken the popularity and extensive scholarly interest in the Anthropocene in the past few decades, both within and outside academia, it is not surprising that attention towards the topic shows no signs of waning. On the contrary, ever-new frameworks and studies emerge to delve into the complexity of this notion, as well as its different material manifestations, in response to ongoing planetary changes.

Constant technological advancement is among the most apparent processes prompting these transformations, and its impact on current ecological crises offers at least two primary consequences in research. First, it introduces new ways of relating to the planet while raising new ethical

questions on the impact of (digital) technology on culture. Consider, for instance, Sean Cubitt's investigation of the environmental implications of digital technologies (2016) or Muhammad Zaffar Hashmi and Ajit Varma's discourse on electronic waste (2019), which illuminate the drawbacks of techno-progress in the present-day world. Or, one can think of Thomas Osburg and Christiane Lohrmann's observations (2020) that processes of digitalization offer "new possibilities and pathways of how to shape the future of living together" (3) in the context of sustainability. Secondly, technological development equips researchers with original conceptual and material tools to implement established scholarly practices in the field of Environmental Humanities. In this sense, the rise of Digital Environmental Humanities (DEH) stands as evidence of the evolving pattern of studies on current ecological emergencies, involving the blending of digital methodologies and ethical inquiries into human–nonhuman relationships.

Although still in its early stages, this field has already established itself as a prolific framework capable of encompassing different study trajectories, methodologies, and theoretical stances—even those traditionally considered distant from each other or idiosyncratic. Regarding the long-standing cultural separation between humanists' and scientists' work, Charles Travis, et al., and Arlene Crampsie underscore how, alternatively, "DEH provides a common, dialectical space to create an ascending methodological helix to synthesize both approaches in order to interpret, question, catalogue, address, formulate, and provide avenues and networks for practical solutions to the wicked problem of global warming beyond the limited imagination of the Western *Homo economicus*" (Travis et al. 6). This perspective underlines the updated approach that DEH embraces as a burgeoning, transdisciplinary field of studies, aiming to exceed long-standing, limiting, and sectoral theoretical frameworks that appear inadequate for exploring the complexity of the current time and its overlapping, intertwining crises. In addition, DEH appears to be characterized by a broad methodological creativity and intellectual freedom favoring the simultaneous tackling of an array of topics with a multi-perspective glance capable of reaching a critical evaluation of rooted cultural axioms.

This paper embraces this pluralism and research possibilities by adopting—and acknowledging the relevance of—a critical perspective that maintains a focus on human–nonhuman relational ethics raised in the Anthropocene while investigating the aesthetic of digital environment in one of the most popular video games of the last two decades, *Minecraft*. This observation will be conducted through a transdisciplinary dialogue between

literary and cultural studies, philosophy, and media studies. The research examines representations of the natural landscape in the game that reveal enduring dualistic conceptual biases rooted in the aesthetics of the traditional pastoral, where the natural world is framed through dichotomies underpinning current environmental crises (Ferrando 2019). This paper therefore scrutinizes how pastoral themes in *Minecraft*'s landscape raise ethical questions concerning the gaming experiences, especially for what concerns human-nonhuman relationality, given the widely discussed need to respond to the urgencies brought up by the Anthropocene. Specifically, it aims to do so by refiguring traditional, dichotomic, and anthropocentric understandings of the environment through alternative, non-hierarchical, non-dualistic possibilities.[1] As an enduring literary and cultural trope, the pastoral in fact remains problematic when one considers present-day concerns and ecological discourses since it perpetuates dichotomies like nature/culture, human/nature, country/city, and rural/urban (Williams; Gifford). The core theoretical background supporting this reflection is offered by critical posthumanism (Braidotti), which advocates for a renegotiation among (these and other) entrenched dualisms in western thought as a way to challenge the exclusivity and discriminatory patterns they sustain. Along this line, this paper highlights the importance of adopting a more critical view on digital pastoral narratives as a means of developing a more complex, ethical stance towards representations of environment in the digital age.

This study places a special emphasis on the opening sequence of *Minecraft*, a choice driven by both its pivotal role as the entry point of the game experience, as well as its significance in the dynamics of the demo version (where it serves as a gateway for potential players to consider purchasing the full product). Furthermore, the sequence under examination provides an especially useful opportunity to analyze the pastoral as visually constructed through traditional aesthetic traits, including the idealization of the countryside and *locus amoenus*.

Of primary interest is the aesthetics of the landscape utilizing the concept of "landscape-as-dwelling" (Ingold) to examine the relationship and mutual influence between the digital environment and the player, both within and beyond the dynamics of the game. The first section of this paper, in particular, offers a comprehensive overview of the concept of the pastoral and its evolution as both a literary and a cultural phenomenon, including its manifestation in video games. This discussion is approached critically by examining its traditional development within a dichotomous framework—an interpretation that this paper seeks to challenge by engaging with recent

ecocritical perspectives on the pastoral and posthumanist philosophy. The second part of this study focuses on the paradoxes inherent in the dualistic nature of the pastoral in *Minecraft*, particularly regarding the complexities of human–nonhuman interaction that the game presents. This exploration unfolds along three primary trajectories. The first examines the tension between environmental exploitation and the harmonious human–nonhuman coexistence traditionally evoked by the pastoral aesthetic of the *locus amoenus*. The second trajectory investigates the link between the pastoral and the notion of leisure, to which this aesthetics is also conventionally associated, but reinterpreted in relation to the survival mechanics embedded in the gameplay dynamics. The third and final trajectory discusses *Minecraft* as a distinctive digital environment that enables players to exercise different degrees of "free will" in their interactions with the virtual natural world. By examining the players' agency in adopting more or less ethical approaches toward nonhuman entities within the game's landscape, this paper argues that the critical engagement fostered by gameplay can potentially extend beyond the virtual realm, promoting a reflective approach to real-world ethical challenges of human–nonhuman relationships in the Anthropocene.

Long-standing pastoral dualisms through a posthumanist lens: from literature to video games

Terry Gifford has delineated the pastoral through four primary definitions, of which the first sees it as "an historical form with a long tradition which began in poetry . . . deriving from certain early Greek and Roman poems about life in the country, and about the life of the shepherd in particular" (Gifford 2). This long-standing aesthetic inclination towards the pastoral, which continues today, was in fact already evident in Theocritus's *Idylls* (3rd century BCE), a collection of poems featuring, among others, dialogues between shepherds, sheep and other nonhuman characters, which become iconic and clichéd elements of the pastoral landscape generally conceived as pristine, untouched natural settings.[2] The propagation of these motifs initially began in the Roman world, due to the popularity of Virgil's *Eclogues*,[3] a seminal poetry collection which subsequently permeated European culture and imagery starting with its neoclassical revival in the Renaissance. The success of his work paved the way for the establishment of the pastoral as "a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without" (Buell 32), manifesting across literature and the arts throughout centuries through core, recognizable tropes that have remained largely consistent.

However, the aesthetics of the pastoral is not immune to change, evolving in response to the cultural and historical contexts in which specific pastoral works are created. On this point, William Empson famously illustrated the existence of "some versions of pastoral" (1935), highlighting its adaptability in different cultural and aesthetic expressions. Gifford has further encapsulated these evolutions, identifying various manifestations of the pastoral, such as the "'Freudian pastoral' (Lawrence Lerner), 'the pastoral of childhood' (Peter Marinelli), 'revolutionary pastoralisms . . . like the lesbian-ecofeminist vision of Susan Griffin' (Lawrence Buell), and even 'proletarian pastoral' (William Empson)" (4), among others.

Regarding the persistence of certain pastoral motifs in spite of the transformations characterizing the pastoral aesthetics across centuries, as Leo Marx famously stated, "no shepherd, no pastoral" (45), emphasizing the importance of distinctive imagery such as shepherding and pastoral herding, in defining the genre. However, rather than focusing solely on the presence of specific entities or characters—which can vary widely across different pastoral versions (for instance, aquatic settings in the "pastoral piscatorial" or, as Gifford notes, "'urban pastoral' [Marshall Berman], where no sheep are in sight for miles," 4)—this study emphasizes the dualistic essence of the human–nonhuman relationship as a(nother) defining and persistent trait of traditional pastoral. This dualism is particularly relevant to the research question of this paper, especially in light of the Anthropocene, as it reflects long-standing conceptual frameworks that continue to shape perceptions of the environment and contribute to the crises arising from these enduring perspectives (Ferrando).

The topic of dualities in and around the pastoral is well-established in scholarly discussion. On this subject, Gifford provides another useful perspective defining the pastoral as "any literature that describes the country as providing an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban" (2). Gifford thus frames the pastoral not merely as an aesthetic form but as a broader cultural narrative reflecting representational modes of the environment, which are frequently shaped by the dualistic tension between rural and urban dynamics. This dichotomy, however, extends beyond the mere notions of country and city ways of life since it reveals deeper ontological assumptions about human–nonhuman relationships, often structured along dichotomous and anthropocentric parameters.

Raymond Williams's seminal work, *The Country and the City* (1973), further elucidates this point. Williams highlights the pastoral tendency to ascribe distinct, often opposing, values to the countryside and the city. To

him, the countryside symbolizes "the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue," while the city represents "a place of noise, worldliness, and ambition" (1). Following this logic, Williams also identifies these dichotomous representations across a variety of historical narratives, revealing their persistence in Western thought insomuch that they can be traced back to ancient times. For example, one can think of the *Golden Age*, originating in Greek mythology, which portrays a mythical time when humans and the nonhuman world coexisted in harmony, later disrupted by the corruption brought by civilization's advancement.

Similarly, the concept of *locus amoenus*—an archetype of an idealized landscape modeled on the Golden Age typical Edenic landscape in the Latin tradition—remains a cornerstone of pastoral aesthetics built on the same logic. Defined by three essential elements—"trees, grass, and water" (Ruff 92)—or as a setting featuring "trees and shade, a grassy meadow, running water, songbirds, and cool breezes" (Spawforth et al. 854), the notion originates with the Latin author Marcus Terentius Varro, who first described *loci amoenus* as "pleasant places [which] promote love only and draw to themselves things that ought to be loved," devoid of business or profit (Isidore 299).

These critical frameworks resonate with the environmental imagination inherent in pastoral representation, as well as enduring dualisms, which continue to surface in contemporary literature and culture, as ecocritics have largely assessed. This persistence underscores the relevance of reexamining these paradigms in light of contemporary environmental concerns and evolving human–nonhuman relationships. Gifford has reinforced the possibility to interpret the pastoral through a similar environmental perspective, particularly in his theorization of the concept of the "post-pastoral," which he describes as a "discourse that can both celebrate *and* take responsibility for nature without false consciousness" (148, emphasis in original). This concept is exemplified, according to Gifford, in numerous contemporary and historical literary and cultural works where, despite the dichotomous nature of the trope, a more ethical reflection on the interactions between humans and nature emerges. Following this line of thought, recent years have seen the emergence of multiple iterations of the pastoral informed by ecological perspectives, such as the *toxic pastoral* (Farrier), the *necro-pastoral* (McSweeney), and the *dark pastoral* (Sullivan). These variations, among others, reflect an increasing awareness of environmental concerns within artistic and cultural expressions that lead to the possibility of refiguring or reinterpreting traditional aesthetics in new, alternative, and

(eco)critical ways. However, simultaneously, the persistence of traditional dualistic traits within these new expressions of the pastoral—such as digital environments—raises pressing ethical questions, particularly in light of the challenges posed by the Anthropocene.

While this discussion has been made visible in the academic world since the rise of ecocriticism in the 1990s, especially in the study of literature and culture, a wider, philosophical perspective of this topic was offered by (critical) posthumanism: revolving around rethinking the axioms of dualism embedded in cultural representations, it advocates for a more integrated understanding of ontological and material interconnectedness. Such a shift is well summarized by Stefan Sorgner, who observes that critical posthumanism "is about thinking and acting in a non-dualistic, non-essentialist, non-anthropocentric, and non-hierarchical manner" (21). Rosi Braidotti exemplifies this approach, advocating the rethinking of human and nonhuman subjectivities through a posthuman logic that fundamentally reconfigures entrenched dualistic assumptions associated with anthropocentrism. She argues that these dualisms, which underpin binaries such as human/nature and nature/culture, have shaped cultural narratives and influenced socio-political and economic systems, ultimately contributing to the crises of the Anthropocene. By proposing alternative frameworks for narrating and conceptualizing these dynamics, Braidotti thereby highlights the potential of posthumanist thought as a response to the very crises created by such dichotomous thinking and its pervasive influence on multiple cultural dimensions.

Reflecting on the effects of this framework on culture, posthumanist philosopher Francesca Ferrando also notes how "[the Anthropocene] marks the extent of the impact of human activities on a planetary level [and thus] stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of pertaining to an ecosystem which, when damaged, negatively affects the human condition as well" (22). Consequently, negotiating dualistic conceptual binaries in comprehending the pastoral, both within literature and broader culture, represents a crucial critical operation for addressing the core of the ideological assumptions motivating an array of actions determining significant anthropogenic, biospherical alterations of Earth, such as resource depletion, intensive farming and agriculture, and toxic emissions.

These processes inherently entail the construction and reiteration of the "naturalizations"[4] of the nonhuman along conceptual dualisms manifested in many cultural texts, even in contemporary times, through a series of narratives among which the pastoral remains pivotal. And in light of

the pastoral's evolutionary trajectory, traversing multiple artistic expressions, including poetry, sculpture, cinema, until contemporary digital media, its aesthetics has come to represent a privileged case study for exploring the ramifications of these assumptions in contemporary, digital representations of the environment.

The pastoral in video games: an emerging topic and its trajectories

The exploration of the pastoral in contemporary digital environments, particularly in video game landscapes, is complicated by the implications tied to the depictions of the natural world within technologically mediated textualities. When discussing landscapes, I do not refer to a generalist understanding, such as "the background of scenery in a portrait or figure-painting" or as the setting for video game action, nor as simply "a view or prospect of natural inland scenery" (OED). Instead, I engage with a more dynamic conception that traces its etymological roots to the notion of *land-shaping*. This perspective emphasizes the constructed and performative dimensions of environmental representations and highlights their latent ethical implications, inviting a critical perspective on them.

Central to this approach is Tim Ingold's discussion, rooted in the phenomenological tradition of "landscape-as-dwelling," a framework which prioritizes the perception of one's being-in-the-world and challenges the understanding of the pastoral as a mere background for (human) activity. As Ingold explains, there is a "fundamental *indissolubility* of the connection between persons and landscape" (55, emphasis in original), referring to the overlapping of people's experiences, their practices, and the spaces they inhabit. This conceptualization is further enriched by scholars such as John Wylie, who clarifies how Ingold's description of landscape points to "a milieu of involvement: it is neither a known and represented environment in or upon which meaningful human practice takes place, nor simply that practice itself. Landscape is both—*both* performative sensorium *and* site and source of cultural meaning and symbolism" (161, emphasis in original). Such a perspective is particularly productive when applied to video games, where landscapes should not be considered as mere static backdrops but, rather, dynamic spaces of interaction, cultural engagement, and meaning making. In this context, the pastoral in video games can be analyzed as a performative element, actively shaping and being shaped by the player's interactions with the digital environment and thus serving as a lens through which to explore the ethical dimensions of human-nonhuman relationships in the Anthropocene.

In line with this approach is that of Sidney I. Dobrin, who highlights how digital environments exceed the representational since they are "themselves natures and environments in and with which humans and nonhumans forge relationships" (205). This emphasizes the connection between aesthetics and ethics, representation, and material embodiments of digital environments, as well as their capacity to influence understandings, behaviors, and attitudes of humans towards nonhumans in real life. On a similar note, Susanna Lindberg and Hanna-Riikka Roine observe how exploring the ethos of digital environments—conceived here as a virtual space shaped by technology for interactions and other activities—offers ever-new dilemmas that require critical approaches. Alternatively, one can consider Alenda Y. Chang's advocacy for a more nature-cultural, mature perspective on the study of environmental video games, "where maturity is defined not only by aesthetic development but also the capacity for sociopolitical relevance" (7), ingrained in the ethical relational dynamics that these games present. All these observations underscore the significance of seriously considering the traditionally dualistic heritage in video game representation of the natural world and their effects on real life.

Although the scholarship on the pastoral in video games remains limited, it has already delineated instances of these long-standing representations in several digital gaming environments. For instance, Laura op de Beke has identified the pastoral in different guises and in diverse types of games. While on some occasions this diversity strengthens the genre "with socially and ecologically insightful representations of rural life," it more often displays "complex pastorals whose ambivalent relationship to technology and industry remains unresolved" (199). Paul Martin, on the other hand, has examined the survival of traditional pastoral aesthetics in video games, such as *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006), through the lens of Leo Marx's concept of a "literary design" (1964, 130), which discusses pastoralism as the contrast between myth and naturalism. Echoing Marx's observation, Martin explains that in the analyzed video games, the pastoral "depicts an asylum bordered on one side by wilderness and on the other by civilization," thus prolonging dualistic figurations of the environment in the present-day world.

Interest in the pastoral within video games has also begun to emerge in students' theses, suggesting its potential as a growing area of study in the coming years. For example, Lucia Rago has conducted a comparative study analyzing Eastern and Western perceptions of pastoral themes in the video games *Stardew Valley* (2016) and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020). Her research highlights the distinct expressions, perceptions, and influences of

the pastoral on players, offering insights into the cultural and emotional dimensions of these themes. Similarly, Marina Janette Gallagher's investigation into pastoral and anti-pastoral landscapes and music in *Final Fantasy X, XII, XIII*, and *XV* (2001–2016) identifies connections between specific musical and visual elements and the emotional responses they evoke, such as relaxation and apprehension, through an empirical research framework (Gallagher).

As Holly Nielsen noted in *The Guardian*, "sentimental pastoral themes make perfect fodder for video games," and as we have seen, the topic has pervasive presence in video games of all genres. Hence I suggest a more critical perspective on this phenomenon, particularly to examine its dualistic implications for both cultural narratives and environmental understanding. The following analysis builds on this argument by examining a specific case of the pastoral in *Minecraft*, where the persistence of pastoral dualisms is particularly evident, illustrating how such representations contribute to shaping perceptions of the natural world and actions towards it within the video game digital environment.

Minecraft **and the pastoral: critical trajectories**

Minecraft,[5] initially released in 2009 by the independent studio Mojang and later acquired by Microsoft in 2014, is described on the official website as "a game made up of blocks, creatures, and community" where "[b]locks can be used to reshape the world or build fantastical creations" and where "there's no wrong way to play. Unless you're digging straight down" (Minecraft.net). This description emphasizes how interacting with the digital environment and the creative freedom it offers to users are central, along the gameplay dynamics of a "sandbox" video game, in which, in general terms, "the player is not constrained to achieving specific goals and has a large degree of freedom to explore, interact with, or modify the game environment" (Merriam-Webster).

Regarding the video game's distinctive and iconic pixelated aesthetics, Brandon T. L. Smith observes that *Minecraft* "makes no attempt in its aesthetic to realistically mimic a natural environment, choosing instead to construct its landscape entirely out of pixelated cubes of different colours and patterns, each representing a different material" (114). Despite its evidently artificial portrayal of the environment, echoing Dobrin's earlier discussed assertion, *Minecraft* exhibits several facets prompting a connection between the game's virtual landscape and real-world environments. In the opening sequence of the game—central in this study—one can consider how trees, animals,

weather conditions mirror actual natural settings. Our attention can be focused on how the relational dynamics between humans and nonhumans parallel those in real life,[6] such as animal behavior based on the player's interactions. For instance, animals can come closer or escape based on the kind of interactions employed by the player: when the player character approaches them, sheep tend to move away, just as they do when an attempt is made to strike them with a tool. Conversely, if one remains still, they exhibit a tendency to return. Further realistic representation is evident as the environment portrayed lacks abstract or fantastical elements, such as unusual colors in vegetation or unreal entities of flora and fauna. This seemingly paradoxical blend of realism within the artificiality of pixelated aesthetics and the pastoral setting not only exemplifies the complexity of *Minecraft*'s representation of the natural world, but also further highlights the dualistic logic underpinning the game's construction—namely, the coexistence of opposing concepts. This dualistic dynamic is particularly embedded within its pastoral aesthetics, as it will be explored in greater depth in the following paragraphs.

The game boasts various modes that allow for different game mechanics and player strategies—such as the creative mode with no enemies but infinite possibilities to build various items and the survival mode where limited resources must be used, for instance, to effectively fight monsters. This paper specifically focuses on traditional pastoral landscape dynamics that emerge in the survival mode of the game. Within this context, the discussion explores the ethical implications of players' decisions in relation to human–nonhuman interactions.

That *Minecraft*—with all its different game modes—carries environmental implications has already been noted by several ecocritics who examined the game. On the one hand, for instance, Víctor Navarro-Remesal discusses the environmental, ethical potential of *Minecraft* stressing that it can be "played without harming any living being" (15). However, violence towards animals is possible within the sandbox game. On the other hand, Smith sheds light on the utilitarian nature of *Minecraft*, where "nothing in the environment is not a resource to be extracted" (114). Along a similar line, Holmes posits that "resources are perhaps too infinite in Minecraft to the point where nature itself doesn't even matter anymore as part of the play space" (38).

In the context of resource management, Alenda Y. Chang observes a dual dimension in the ethical human–nonhuman relationship within *Minecraft*, as she critically examines the extractivist dynamics that underpin its gameplay.

However, Chang also highlights the possibility of pursuing alternative, non-exploitative playing strategies, offering a counterpoint to the dominant resource-extraction model. Building on this discussion, the ecological paradoxes inherent in *Minecraft* become particularly evident, especially when analyzing the pastoral aesthetics in the construction of the game's natural landscapes. This aesthetics, situated at the fault line of paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the dualistic nature of the pastoral, simultaneously evokes a sense of harmony with the natural world while highlighting tensions within human-nonhuman relationality, thereby adding complexity to the ethical dimension of the gameplay.

The exploitative *locus amoenus*

In the context of the demo of the version under examination, the player begins in survival mode with a randomly assigned avatar. By default, the player starts with 10 hearts (20 health points) and full drumsticks (20 hunger points), which allow for health regeneration. The inventory is initially empty. The avatar has 1 hour and 40 minutes of trial time to move and explore the environment, which, as a pop-up window explains, corresponds to 5 in-game days. This suggests that the player has the opportunity to explore not only various environments but also different conditions, including the transition between day and night. The latter, in particular, introduces specific challenges to survival, such as limited visibility and the emergence of hostile creatures (such as skeletons), that can harm the player—conditions that necessitate players to prepare their avatars for nightfall, such as constructing or seeking shelter.

Upon first entering the gameworld, during daytime, *Minecraft* presents players with a tranquil and sunlit landscape, characterized by slopes, verdant meadows adorned with flowers and punctuated by trees amidst which various animals, including white sheep, roam freely (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Sheep grazing. Courtesy of *Minecraft*

These elements readily align with the quintessential features of pastoral aesthetics, replete with entrenched clichés associated with the realm of pastoralism, including sheep, as well as specific natural elements, also along the principles of the *locus amoenus* (pleasant place), the idealized pastoral landscape systematized by Ancient Roman theorists.

While all these attributes manifest in the opening natural tableau of *Minecraft*, affirming pastoralism as its constitutive aesthetic, this scenic portrayal is not without contention, nor is it devoid of distinctive traits that render it peculiar (and potentially problematic), particularly in relation to contemporary environmental discourse. First, the persistence of the pastoral within a dualistic, traditional framework, as exemplified above, appears outdated and limited in the context of the emphasis of current environmental debates on the material and ontological connectedness among living beings, rather than rigid, confining categorizations. Nevertheless, even within the digital realm, the avatar and nonhuman entities that populate *Minecraft* serve as representatives of the dynamics of human–nonhuman interaction that transpire in the real world. In fact, the relationship between humans and nonhumans assumes a central role in this sequence, as also evident in the game's nature, where players navigate and relate with the space and the several nonhuman entities dwelling in it.

However, this interaction retains a significant degree of anthropocentrism. First, the user's visual experience caters solely to the human perspective, providing players with the opportunity to see through their avatars' eyes rather than through the viewpoint of other (nonhuman) entities. This condition exceeds the mere mechanics of user engagement with the game, as it becomes an expression of a wider employment of anthropocentrism in *Minecraft*. Secondly, the relationships available with nonhuman entities follow a strict subject-object logic: players determine their gameplay experience by manipulating the environment at their will and interest. For instance, these experiences include collecting resources (such as wood by cutting trees or food by killing animals) or mining. As for the interactions with animals, while they react to the player's movements, for instance by escaping or approaching, their agency in shaping the game's evolution is limited. Contrary to the avatar, the animals present in the game realm—just like human NPCs—do not have the same agency to modify the environment, while some animals, such as wolves may harm the player, affecting its life condition. Therefore, the pastoral essence of *Minecraft*'s world appears engrained in an anthropocentric, dualistic figuration of the environment which, by lacking vibrancy,[7] as Jane Bennett would observe, primarily functions as elements that contribute to the game experience of the human.

The human–nonhuman relationship portrayed in *Minecraft* is therefore skewed toward human dominance, embodied through the actions of player avatars, while nonhuman entities exist primarily to facilitate the construction of the game world according to human desires, adhering to a logic of "naturalization" (Braidotti), which is characterized by the objectification and exploitation of nonhumans. This dynamic reflects real-world issues such as resource depletion, land degradation, and capitalist practices that, along the same logic, have significantly contributed to the Anthropocene, underscoring the game's alignment with anthropocentric paradigms.

This observation resonates with Alenda Y. Chang's critique, noting that while *Minecraft* has "adopted the language and the structure of natural biomes," its anthropocentric representation and gameplay dynamics are more accurately described as "anthromes, given that their express purpose is to support player activity, and their complicated, even oxymoronic condition of natural artifice" (8). Engaging with Chang's perspective and extending it through the specific lens of pastoral dynamics, reveals how the pastoral in *Minecraft* serves to sustain, reinforce, and perpetuate entrenched

anthropocentric dualisms, further embedding these paradigms within its digital landscapes and gameplay mechanics.

Minecraft's pastoral qualities align with Raymond Williams's observation that seemingly idyllic and pristine scenarios often conceal underlying principles of exploitation and economic interests. Williams argues that the pastoral serves as a "literary elaboration [that] maintains its contact with the working year and with the real social conditions of country life" (16), revealing hidden narratives of rural labor struggles and the exploitation of peasants by the landed gentry. These narratives, though central, are often overshadowed by romanticized portrayals of the countryside. This dynamic finds a parallel in *Minecraft*, particularly in its depiction of non-player characters (NPCs) such as villagers, who are represented as tending farms and managing crops in a manner reminiscent of peasant labor in other sequences of the game.

However, shifting the focus from human–human to human–nonhuman interactions, at the center of this study, suggests how these exploitative frameworks extend to the game's representation of nonhuman entities within its constructed landscapes. The utilitarian nature of *Minecraft* becomes especially apparent in the pastoral landscape with which new players are greeted, as its virtual biomes are designed to fulfill human-centered objectives, as already discussed. *Minecraft*, therefore, amplifies the tensions inherent in traditional pastoral tropes, by illustrating the natural world as both idealized and objectified. These aspects equally complicate the *locus amoenus* ideal of harmonious coexistence between humans and nonhumans traditionally associated with the pastoral aesthetics, undermining it through the latent logics of nonhuman exploitation and objectification that it simultaneously reveals. The result is a digital environment that juxtaposes idyllic representations with mechanisms that perpetuate anthropocentric hierarchies, further complicating the ethical implications of human–nonhuman relationality in *Minecraft* gameplay.

Otium/negotium and pastoral *memento mori*

A second problematic aspect of the latent pastoral implications connected to exploitation and economic interests in *Minecraft*'s landscape regards the association of the pastoral with the concept of leisure. Leisure is frequently linked to the pastoral as a distinctive dimension, assessing the countryside as a relaxing space of rest in contrast with the stress and toil associated with urban settings. This aspect is expressed by a well-established dichotomy *otium/negotium* developed in the context of ancient Roman times.

As Ruff reminds us, this pastoral dichotomy entails the Roman practice of "*villeggiatura*," wherein people sought leisure (*otium*) in countryside villas, distinct from urban centers primarily designated for productivity and business, and more in general, labor (*negotium*) (44). This contrast between restful retreats and bustling urban locales laid the groundwork for the enduring connection of the pastoral aesthetics, and the idealization of the countryside, with moments of relaxation—time dedicated to the arts or education, typically as a privilege tied to social status. It is a privilege that is made possible only at the expense of individuals engaged in labor activities, following a mechanism that, in real cultural contexts, manifests as the exploitation of workers and farmers to sustain the leisure of the aristocratic class (Williams). Similar to the Roman concept of *villeggiatura*—which primarily served the interests of the aristocracy—the notion of *otium*, as Stefan L. Sorgner explains, became increasingly associated with (aristocratic) social class privileges across different, later periods (101). In this sense, the unequal distribution of leisure and labor is latently conveyed through the aesthetics of the pastoral, highlighting the extent to which the relaxation of one social group was contingent on the labor of another, thereby perpetuating social hierarchies and economic dependencies.

This expression of leisure can be understood as a form of play and disengagement from labor, alongside a general understanding of it as "exercise or action for enjoyment or recreation, and related senses" (OED 2025): conceived in this sense, leisure appears as following a dynamic that reflects a deliberate detachment of play from work and productivity. This detachment represents a critique that can be directed at video games as well, even though entertainment has been discussed by several scholars as linked to processes of well-being, therapy, and satisfaction (Oliver et al.; Rice). Moreover, studies have examined how games are embedded within systems and logics of productivity, as seen in the case of casual games (Wadhwa). Viewed through this lens, it becomes evident how the social implications of the pastoral intertwining of play and leisure emerged long before the advent of video games. Additionally, in the context of digital environments, ever-new forms of leisure associated with the pastoral develop, which continue to conceal longstanding, complex, and ethically fraught dynamics—not necessarily in terms of direct exploitation of people, but also in fostering a distorted environmental perception that, in turn, enables the exploitation of nonhuman entities.

The pastoral aesthetics presented in *Minecraft*, supported by the affordances of the sandbox game, accentuates pastoral themes along a similar

logic, given that the absence of a specific mission for the player character and their freedom to explore or modify the environment (beyond the very avatar's survival in survival mode).[8] Roger Caillois in his foundational work identified two approaches to play: *ludus* and *paidia*. *Ludus* is characterized by a tendency to "bind it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions" (13), as seen in the dynamics of strategy-based games. In contrast, *paidia* represents a more spontaneous and unstructured form of play, offering "a kind of uncontrolled fantasy" (13) that fosters creativity and improvisation. *Minecraft* integrates both forms of play: in survival mode, for instance, players must collect resources and develop strategies to endure, aligning with *ludus*. Conversely, creative mode corresponds to *paidia*, as it enables unrestricted exploration and interaction with the environment. This discussion is particularly significant for assessing the critical dimension of the pastoral in *Minecraft* considering how the survival mode not only influences gameplay mechanics but also shape associated worldviews and conceptions of the natural environment. This aspect is particularly evident in games such as *Minecraft* where the relationship with the natural environment is central to the possibility of survival.

Before proceeding further, it is crucial to recognize that the theme of death and survival has long been intertwined with the pastoral tradition. From its earliest expressions in literature, the pastoral landscape has in fact been marked by an engagement with mortality: this is evident, for instance, in *Idyll I* by Theocritus, where the shepherd Thyrsis laments the death of Daphnis (whose deep connection to the natural world is also underscored by the shared mourning of animals, shepherds, and nature itself). A similar motif resurfaces in Virgil's *Eclogue 5*, where Daphnis' premature death, once again, is portrayed and honored through the alternating songs of the shepherds Menalcas and Mopsus.

This association between death and the pastoral extends beyond literature into visual art, particularly in the early development of landscape painting. A pivotal example is the phrase "*et in Arcadia ego*," ("And I [am] in Arcadia") first appearing as an inscription on a funerary cippus topped with a skull in Giovanni Francesco Barbieri's (Guercino) painting of the same title, realized between 1618 and 1622. One might also consider the popular invocation of this expression in the painting by the French artist Nicolas Poussin**,** titled *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1637–38), and its significance in the cultural transmission of pastoral aesthetics in the evolution of landscape painting. This phrase (and visual details) has been widely interpreted as a *memento mori*, as assessing the personified presence of death in the pastoral realm,

subverting the idealized vision of the pastoral world as a place of untroubled harmony, often associated with the *locus amoenus* and the Golden Age (Panofsky and Panofsky).

The invocation of Arcadia, another central pastoral trope, is particularly significant: Virgil uses the term to evoke a mythical Greek region inhabited by shepherds, situating it as an archetype of pastoral existence. Yet, this idyllic portrayal is, once again, consistently problematized, reflecting the inherent paradoxes of the pastoral aesthetic discussed in this paper. Arcadia, as depicted in Guercino's work—which serves as a precursor to numerous subsequent artistic and literary interpretations of the celebrated phrase—simultaneously symbolizes an idealized harmony and critiques its own idealization, revealing underlying tensions and contradictions through its emphasis on mortality. The relevance of this expression and perspective has also been discussed in ecocritical terms by Glen A. Love, observing how "the pastoral middle landscape, in contemporary times, finds itself bearing the stigma of a human-caused and increasingly serious despoliation of the physical environment. Bright visions of progress through a humanized and mechanized natural world have been erased by the real" (204), thus assessing the complicacies, but also the significance, of the intertwining the aesthetics of pastoral and death in light of the challenges of the Anthropocene.

The reemergence of the theme of death within pastoral landscapes in contemporary digital environments—particularly within video games—signals new evolutionary steps of the pastoral in the present-day world. However, this process also invites a critical reflection on the new implications and meanings acquired by death since in these contexts; considering how video game worlds often employ survival among their gameplay dynamics, the player must ensure that the avatar consumes food and gathers resources to maintain sustenance while also protecting itself from potential threats. Failure to do so results in death and the end of the game.

Alenda Y. Chang offers useful insights on the topic of survival in video games, including *Minecraft*, illustrating how different game-ending experiences impact player engagement with resources. One such example is the mechanic of "permadeath," where the player character's death is permanent, and it is no longer possible to continue the game with that character or resume from a prior save point. As Chang observes, "[f]rom an ecological perspective, then there are important differences between games that employ failures as a temporary setback and those that attempt to impose permanent death or otherwise irrevocable material alterations, echoing games' treatment of natural resources as either unbounded or finite" (217).

Chang underlines that permadeath raises the possibility of a gameplay that reflects the reality of individual vulnerability in the Anthropocene, arguing that a parallel can be drawn between the dispassion towards environmental death in video games and the attitude toward player death. This is "either because the game environment is such a trivial veneer for resource distribution that you need not feel any remorse over destroying it, from loot crates to expendable furniture, or because there is no real scarcity" (220).

The contrast between the disregard for environmental destruction and the significance placed on player character death is evident in the hardcore variation of survival mode of *Minecraft*, where survival is founded on resource exploitation, as already observed. Consequently, the pastoral dynamics of leisure reemerges in video games as an experience that can be linked to real-world colonialist extractivism (Brazelton) and settler colonialism, particularly by framing the player's perspective as that of an individual occupying land and abusing its resources.[9]

However, within Chang's framework, alternative gameplay experiences that deviate from these exploitative dynamics are also possible, inviting a more affirmative vision of the pastoral in the case under examination. This possibility adds a further layer to the discussion of the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the pastoral, particularly regarding the player's agency as a potential resolution to the two contradictory points discussed so far: (a) the possibility of perceiving the pastoral environment in *Minecraft* in a more environmentally "mature" way (Buell) (that is, as an interactive and dynamic dimension based on the awareness that human and nonhuman are ontologically and materially connected, rather than a passive backdrop for human activity); and (b) the possibility of unmasking, negotiation, and rejection of the traditional association of leisure with the pastoral, which often imply dynamics of (resource) exploitation.

While it must be acknowledged that individual agency is constrained by the game's affordances and varies depending on whether the game is played in creative or survival mode, the emphasis on player choice suggested by Chang introduces an ethical dimension to the conversation on the pastoral in *Minecraft*. Specifically, in games such as *Minecraft*, this theme extends beyond human concerns and includes relationships with the nonhuman as well. Survival, then, is not limited to the avatar's well-being but also fosters an awareness of the nonhuman entities "dwelling" within the pastoral landscape (Ingold). Players, in fact, can adopt different degrees of environmental awareness in their gameplay. For example, they may choose to avoid killing animals for food and collect fruit instead, or refrain from cutting down trees

in favor of using rocks for construction. While it is important to acknowledge that exploitative and unsustainable practices are encouraged by the game's mechanics—largely due to the abundance of available resources that present themselves naturally as the avatar navigates the digital environment—the possibility of adopting more sustainable behaviors remains. This choice assumes a degree of responsibility for one's actions within the game world, shaping the player's engagement with the landscape as a form of "dwelling" within it. This possibility situates *Minecraft* within a broader framework that extends beyond mere entertainment, highlighting its potential to influence players' attitudes and behaviors, both in the virtual environment and, consequently, in real life.

This stance delineates a possible critical observation of the video game, which allows us to reframe the anthropocentric structure of the pastoral it contains. Echoing what has been articulated by Alenda Y. Chan, this approach to *Minecraft* allows for different interpretations of its spatial dynamics, since environmental considerations (can) become part of the player decision-making. In turn, this decision-making activity mirrors processes ongoing in real-life, which are fundamental to be taken into account to respond to the ethical challenges prompted by the Anthropocene.

A matter of agency: in the fault line of pastoral dichotomies

An instance illustrating the players' capacity to (potentially) engage in their gameplay dynamics pursuing an environmentally ethical logic emerges when considering the relationship between the user/avatar and arguably the most iconic pastoral characters—the sheep—that populate the landscape at the game's outset. It is worth noting that within the interspecies relational opportunities offered by the game, sheep not only interact among themselves or with other animals—they tend to gather while maintaining distance from wolves (also present in the game scenario), which can potentially harm them—but also engage with the player's avatar. The player can choose to approach this situation in a more ecological way, for instance by studying the interactions with other animals, either by getting closer or keeping a distance. Conversely, the player may opt for more aggressive actions, resorting to violence against the sheep. These actions extend, for instance, in the possibilities offered by the game, to both animals and plants: the former can be targeted with appropriate weaponry and transformed into a source of sustenance. In this context, the symbolism of the stake obtained through violent interaction with sheep is striking, reflecting how nonhuman living entities are subject to exploitative treatment along the critical ethical

perspectives advanced by anti-speciesism and vegan movements. Similarly, some plants can be harvested or destroyed, illustrating, once again, the predatory attitude toward natural resources the game is built on, as if they were inexhaustible (because in the game, they are unlimited). These aspects are also enhanced by the fact that, in survival mode, the avatar needs to eat or will have no energy to proceed with its activities; moreover, on hard setting they can even starve to death. "Exploiting" the environment for survival therefore becomes one of the basic goals of the game stressing even more the pastoral dualisms embedded in the landscape of the opening sequence of the game, under examination. This goal further emphasizes *Minecraft*'s nature as entrenched in anthropocentric and objectifying interactions, negating any mature ecological ethical stance.

Instead, once again, the player's freedom (within the game's limitations) to choose what to do or *how* to interact with nonhumans imbues the game with an ethical dimension revealing its alternative environmental potential: This could occur, for instance, by the possibility of avoiding harm against animals altogether and simply leaving them undisturbed—even if this option is more difficult than hunting for game. Therefore, the player's capacity for self-reflection and critical evaluation of their environmental impact within the game, based on their choices, cultivates an awareness of potential sustainability and responsible engagement. This awareness may, in turn, extend to broader reflections on both digital and real-world ecosystems. In fact, given the freedom that the video game grants players to explore digital environments and make virtually limitless choices in how they engage with them, players can choose either to reinforce the game's underlying exploitative tendencies toward nonhuman entities with whom they share the landscape or to foster dynamics of harmonious coexistence between humans and nonhumans. While it is undeniable that the game does encourage exploitative tendencies, it also permits the player to resist them, allowing for more conscientious and sustainable choices in gameplay. This is a possibility that highlights the dynamics of agency and intentionality that gain prominence within the game's mechanics, particularly when considered in relation to broader discussions about individual and collective behaviors and lifestyles as responses to the ongoing crises highlighted by current environmental discourse. In connection with this, Bettina Bódi highlights the increasing attention that game design and critique pay to players' actions and freedom of choice. Similarly, Gordon Calleja's seminal study on immersion emphasizes the importance of critically examining the player's experience while inhabiting digital spaces within a more intricate understanding of

incorporations. These perspectives, among others, prove instrumental in evaluating the significance of embracing player agency within ethical discussions in digital environments.

Within the context of *Minecraft*, all these aspects assume relevance since the ability to embrace or reject the effects of prolonged dualistic dynamics shaping the environment, rooted in traditional pastoralism, is key to expressing an ecological or anthropocentric direction within the game. Just as the survival of dualistic axioms in Western thought calls for critical engagement and recognition of the need to explore more nuanced perspectives on human (and nonhuman) subjectivity as a response to the Anthropocene, the gameplay dynamics in *Minecraft*, whether aligned or not with the implications of traditional pastoral aesthetics, require a more critical perspective for a potential refiguration along more ethical patterns.

Minecraft, therefore, serves as a valuable pathway for both action and reflection, illustrating the potential to challenge traditional dualistic assumptions inherent in pastoral aesthetics, while simultaneously re-evaluating the ecological possibilities that this very aesthetic offers—particularly in envisioning harmonious coexistence between humans and nonhumans. In this context, and in light of the challenges posed by the Anthropocene, the pastoral becomes visible as much more than simply a *locus amoenus*, but rather, a *locus* for the exploration of novel ethical relationships with the entities that dwell the landscape—with the environment within and beyond the video game. And while *Minecraft* maintains its stance of "there's no wrong way to play" (Minecraft.net), adopting an ethical perspective towards its human–nonhuman interaction prompts a distinct narrative, fostering inquiry into how people could or *should* engage with the nonhuman.

Conclusion

As this analysis hopes to have demonstrated, applying an ethical lens to pastoral representations in video game landscapes provides a critical framework for examining their complex and often contradictory dimensions, as well as their broader implications for material realities. In the case of the opening sequence of *Minecraft*, the pastoral extends in ways that both constrain and enrich environmental discourse. On the one hand, the traditional understanding of pastoral aesthetics exhibited in the video game—including elements like sheep and verdant meadows—reinforces a dualistic perspective that presents the game mechanics as exploitative, utilitarian, and anthropocentric: in this sense, the game appears to frame the natural world as an inexhaustible resource to be utilized for the player character's survival.

On the other hand, the interactive nature of the game—which leads to acknowledging the landscape as a context of human–nonhuman dwelling—allows players to engage with a more nuanced and "mature" conception of human–nonhuman relationality, one that moves beyond the environment as a mere idyllic backdrop; instead it fosters an understanding of the material and ontological connectedness of humans and nonhumans, which is also suggested by the traditional evaluation of the *locus amoenus*, in the dynamics of harmonic existence among living beings. This dynamic becomes evident when considering the player's individual agency within the survival mode, where choices regarding resource use and interaction with nonhuman entities shape the ethical dimensions of the game, allowing possible alternatives to mere exploitative dimensions of the environment.

Given the increasing relevance of digital environments in representing the pastoral, critical engagement with video games is essential for interrogating the ways in which they perpetuate or challenge the entrenched aesthetic and dualistic understandings of nature. By fostering greater attentiveness to possible alternative relational ethics allowed by the gameplay, it becomes possible to illuminate broad cultural attitudes toward ecological crises prompted by the Anthropocene.

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Notes

1. This discussion has been widely addressed by ecocriticism since its inception, focusing on "the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, xviii) in response to growing debates on environmental crises. One can also consider other disciplinary fields like posthumanism or new materialism, which recognize the importance of reshaping the traditional, dualistic understanding of the human into a more pluralistic framework that acknowledges its ontological and material interconnectedness with the nonhuman (Braidotti 2019).

2. For instance, *Idyll* 1 features a conversation between two shepherds, Thyrsis and the Goatherd, engaging in a friendly competition of song and music, showcasing the idyllic and leisurely life of shepherds. Furthermore, *Idyll* 7 contains the lament for the death of the shepherd Daphnis, set in a rural landscape, portraying the grief and sorrow of the fellow-shepherds over the loss of their friend.

3. Virgil's *Eclogues*, also known as the *Bucolics*, are a collection of ten pastoral poems composed between 37–30 BCE. These poems, considered foundational to western pastoral literature, drawing inspiration from Greek predecessors and providing an idealized portrayal

of rural life, often feature shepherds engaged in conversations, songs, and contests, while exploring themes of love, loss, politics, and the natural world.

4. On the process of "naturalization," see Rosi Braidotti's discussion on how this term refers to processes of othering "animals, insect, plants and the environment" by exposing the dynamics of anthropocentrism, which needs to be rethought in terms of the nature-culture continuum (32–33).

5. The discussion in this paper pertains to Minecraft Java Edition, specifically version 1.20.2 (demo), which was released in 2023.

6. While the version of *Minecraft* under examination generally facilitates reflections on human interactions, including those involving non-player characters (NPCs), this paper will specifically focus on the human-nonhuman relationship for the purposes of its analysis.

7. Through the notion of "vibrant matter," Bennett acknowledges the proactive engagement of nonhuman entities within occurrences, thereby altering the conventional anthropocentric emphasis within political theory, shifting emphasis from the human perspective of entities to the entities themselves.

9. However, this is not invariably the case, as the dynamics of world-building characterizing the game are integral components that diverge from the experience of leisure time (*otium*).

10. For a further discussion on the engagement between colonial and ecological issues, see Huggan and Tiffin, and Patterson.

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Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 222-250
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/11

Ruin Lust, Fantastic Futures: From the Eighteenth Century to Contemporary Speculative Archaeologies

Giulia Iannuzzi

ABSTRACT

This article examines the ruin as a device of cognitive estrangement used in speculative fiction to thematize given conceptualizations of historical time. Drawing on the hypothesis that the fantastic ruin and archaeological methods applied to past futures matured in the European imagination during the early modern age, this research locates twentieth-century fantastic archaeology in the long-standing history of the ruin within speculative imagination. Since the eighteenth century, the remains of the past have synecdochically fostered the idea of a future observer contemplating the ruins of the present. Throughout the nineteenth century, the idea of radical changes to come increasingly incorporated the possibility of disasters, catastrophes, and extinctions and speculations about lost civilizations. This article outlines the connection between these textual genealogies, with a particular focus on English-language literature and twentieth-century pseudo-archaeology that speculates about hyper-evolved terrestrial or alien civilizations in a distant past, through the case study of Peter Kolosimo, an Italian author who compiled his books drawing on sources from many European cultural traditions, and whose works have been translated into several languages, including English. (GI)

KEYWORDS: Ruin, speculative archaeology, ancient astronaut hypotheses, lost civilizations, catastrophes

Introduction

The contemplation of ruins has been an essential ingredient in the emergence of a science fictional mindset. During the early modern age, the physical decay of the artifacts of past civilizations stimulated the conceptual construction of the passing of time and thus informed the conceptualization of the future in the European mind (Clute). Building on the conceptual framework established by Darko Suvin (Suvin; Parrinder), the ruin may be defined as a device of *temporal cognitive estrangement*: it prompts a temporal defamiliarization, originating in the narrative dominance of a *novum* validated by a cognitive logic. It provides a *novum*—a fantastical element, a departure from the

author's experiential reality—which invites a form of distanced fruition, an *ostranenie*, disrupting the mental automatisms with which we conceive time, and providing a meta-understanding of the lenses through which we view history. Drawing on the methodological perspectives of comparative literature and cultural history, this article aims to connect the long-standing history of the relationship between ruins and the future with a recent form taken on by fantastic speculation: that of pseudo-archaeology. Pseudo-archaeology—or "fantastic" or "fringe archaeology"—refers to the fanciful interpretation of the remnants of the past and their use outside the boundaries of the disciplinary fields devoted to the study of history, to trace in them signs of fantastic events: legendary civilizations, ancient catastrophes, aliens who came to Earth in bygone eras. These ideas are found in books that enjoyed great commercial success in the twentieth century (and still do). Works such as Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* or Graham Hancock's *Fingerprints of the Gods* have had wide trans-national circulations owing to their translations into numerous languages. Millions of copies have been sold worldwide, with multiple television programs and films in their wake, inspired by their ideas (Feder 16, 60, 267). Peter Kolosimo, an Italian author active between the late 1950s and the early 1980s, exemplifies a pseudo-archaeology close to the themes and rhetorical-narrative strategies typical of science fiction, which may be described as "speculative archaeology." Kolosimo's books lend themselves very well to exemplifying the twentieth-century use of the futuristic ruin. This article assumes that texts that have entered the Anglosphere through translations are of interest in the study of English and American literature and culture.

Heliotropic civilizations

As early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ruins appeared in European art as *memento mori*, warnings against human *vanitas*, emblems aimed at stimulating the contemplation of the mortality of things and people, and the passing of time (Clute; Macaulay). The feelings of melancholy aroused by this contemplation were captured around 1779 by Heinrich Füssli (Fuseli) in *Der Künstler verzweifelnd vor der Grösse der antiken Trümmer* [The Artist's Despair Before the Grandeur of Ancient Ruins] (Figure 1), and no less famous examples could be drawn from Giovanni Piranesi's influential works.

Figure 1.
Heinrich Fuseli, *The Artist's Despair Before the Grandeur of Ancient Ruins,* c. 1779

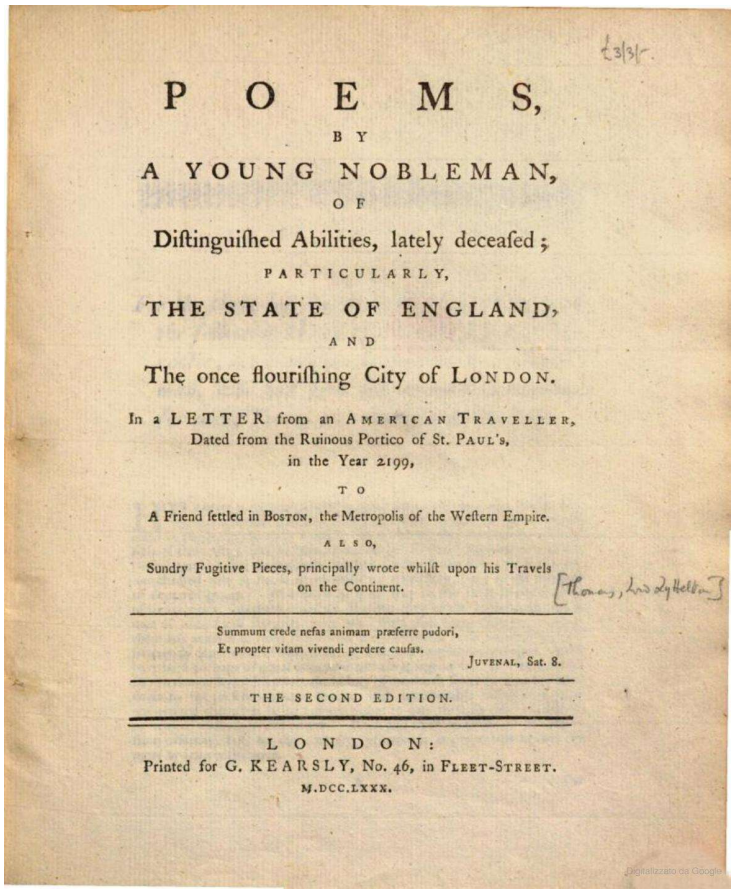
Buildings conceived and constructed as classical ruins, or romantic and Gothic decadent structures gave rise to a fascination that led, in the eighteenth century, to the coining of an *ad hoc* word in German—*Ruinenlust*—to indicate a taste for, even obsession with, or irresistible attraction to ruins (López Galviz et al.). Reframed within a plurality of contexts and interpreted as a fragment of processes ranging from the picturesque to the apocalyptic, the ruin also had the power to engender futuristic projections (Prica 24–25, 207–32). The contemplation on remnants of past events made the spectator aware of the existence of a time continuum, the last moment of which, in the present, is represented by them. Reflections on historical time as a linear dimension, the seat of cause-and-effect mechanisms, gradually gave rise to a new imaginary colonization of the future. The present—in which the traces

of the past were observed—was destined to become the past of observers to come.

The futuristic projection, the extrapolation—logical and imaginative at the same time—of a distant state of affairs derived from the present was nourished by a look backwards. American space and time, for example, became, in the eighteenth century, the backdrop for revitalizations of *translatio imperii topoi*. Greco-Roman classicism became part of the ideological, cultural, and rhetorical repertoire exploited to represent British power overseas and, later, in Britain's former colonies (Bradley; Malamud). Ancient history provided models for conceptualizing and understanding cultural differences, and for articulating an imperial discourse in its entanglements with ideas of monarchical power, expansion, and civilization, as well as for anticipating developments to come (Vlassopoulos). This is how Horace Walpole, in a letter written to Horace Mann in 1774, described this scenario:

> The next Augustan age will dawn on the other side of the Atlantic. There will, perhaps, be a Thucydides at Boston, a Xenophon at New York, and, in time, a Virgil at Mexico, and a Newton at Peru. At last, some curious traveller from Lima will visit England and give a description of the ruins of St Paul's, like the editions of Balbec and Palmyra. (Walpole)

America as the cradle of future civilizations made an impression on some observers of the New World from across the Atlantic. A collection that appeared in London in 1780, attributed to Thomas Lyttelton (Cannon), claimed to contain the letter of an American traveler who wrote it, in the year 2199, from the ruins of St. Paul's porch to a friend in Boston, the capital of the western empire, enclosing his poetic compositions about the once prosperous city of London (Lyttelton; *The Critical Review*; *London Review*). The ruins of England whose greatness once illuminated Europe were observed from the west (Figure 2).



POEMS,

BY

A YOUNG NOBLEMAN,

OF

Diſtinguiſhed Abilities, lately deceaſed;

PARTICULARLY,

THE STATE OF ENGLAND,

AND

The once flouriſhing City of LONDON.

In a LETTER from an AMERICAN TRAVELLER,
Dated from the Ruinous Portico of St. PAUL's,
in the Year 2199,

TO

A Friend ſettled in BOSTON, the Metropolis of the Weſtern Empire.

ALSO,

Sundry Fugitive Pieces, principally wrote whilſt upon his Travels on the Continent.

[Thomas, Lord Lyttelton]

Summum crede nefas animam præferre pudori,
Et propter vitam vivendi perdere cauſas.

JUVENAL, Sat. 8.

THE SECOND EDITION.

LONDON:
Printed for G. KEARSLY, No. 46, in FLEET-STREET.
M.DCC.LXXX.

Digitalizzato da Google

Figure 2.
Thomas Lyttelton, *Poems by a Young Nobleman,* 1780

Similarly, in Madame de Tessé's correspondence, Thomas Jefferson's memoirs were presented as a guide to the antiquities of the future for travelers who would visit the ancient vestiges of Paris, a new Babylon long since decayed (de Tessé; Gerbi 244–46).

The philosophical traveler in the letters of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur at the end of the century looks forward to the tumultuous changes across the Atlantic (St. John). The spectacle of America as the site of a re-foundation of civilization is, for Crèvecoeur, more pleasing and philosophically productive than the melancholic and decadent ruins of Rome or Campania. The future of America and Russia are compared: while the Americans are the seeds of future nations, the Russians are new men insofar

as they are newly introduced to the progress of the arts and sciences (St. John 251). The foundation of American cities, whose youth was in the present so apparent, will one day be lost in memory, and will be an enigma for posterity. In Crèvecoeur's futuristic projection the streets of American towns, trodden by countless passers-by, are already overlapping with the ancient passageways still visible behind the buildings of Pompeii.

The French and American political upheavals at the end of the eighteenth century favored the semantic shift of *revolution* from a repetitive, cyclical circular motion—for instance, that of a celestial body in orbit in astronomy—to the sudden change of a political, social, economic regime, the acceleration of historical processes within a unidirectional time (Koselleck 136). Liminal in this sense was the use of the term in Constantin François Volney's *Les Ruines, ou méditation sur les révolutions des empires* [Ruins, or Reflections on the Revolutions of Empires] (1791), a text that codified the trope of the present as the site of future ruins by its synecdochal property.

The taste for the ruins of the present observed from a distant future is emblematized in the ruined Louvre as imagined by Hubert Robert in the well-known diptych exhibited in Paris in 1796 and in Joseph Michael Gandy's work depicting the Bank of England (Figure 3).

Figure 3.
J. M. Gandy, *A Bird's-Eye View of The Bank of England,* 1830

Gandy portrays the building completed by Sir John Soane after some forty-five years of work. The watercolor, *A Bird's-eye view of the Bank of England,* presents an axonometric section of the building, which combines elements typical of Renaissance aerial perspectives and Piranesian ruined landscapes. On closer inspection, it is not clear whether the building portrayed is in decay or not yet completed: commissioned by Soane, the image was meant to celebrate his work by making visible the architect's mastery of structural design, decoration, and the monumentality of the result. The building's future appearance suggests an early comparison to the iconic ruins of classical antiquity.

Future past disasters

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a secularized future began to be pliable by human actions. As the examples offered so far have illustrated, the temporal vertigo engendered by ruins led writers and painters to assume the point of view of observers situated in a distant future. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, speculative narratives of post-catastrophic futures proliferated; cataclysms and extinctions to come entered the European imagination. Francophone and Anglophone literature became populated with last men, the melancholic incarnations of an individualized romantic subject. Influenced by Volney, Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville published *Le Dernier Homme, ouvrage posthume* [The Last Man: A Posthumous Work] in the fourteenth year of the French Republican calendar (1805). Grainville's work exemplifies an apocalyptic imagination that re-functionalized a Christian eschatology on a secularized basis. Grainville codified the paradoxical role of the apocalypse in the emergence of a futuristic literature: apocalypse was in continuity with the Biblical tradition and, at the same time, was part of a post-French Revolution world, in which humankind had the power to shape the course of history (Alkon 158–60; Kupiec; Roberts 121–23). In *Le Dernier Homme,* the entire planet is in ruin, desertified and depopulated (Grainville II, chant VIII 85). The end of time is wrapped in religious symbolism: the textual and prophetic model of the Book of Revelation underlie the narrative structure, and the narrating voices, Omegarus and Sydera—the last man and woman—are presented as the new Adam and Eve. In the tale, there is also a Genius to whom God had entrusted the protection of the earth at the moment of creation.

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) marked the abandonment of the Christian mythological dimension. Here the last man before the ruins of civilization is fully disentangled from the parousia or apocalypse of the

Biblical horizon (Petitier 151–53). The narrator claims in the introduction to be printing the prophetic content of some of the writings of the Cumaean Sibyl, found in the prophetess's cave near Naples, but this frame is overtly part of the text's narrative invention. In the late twenty-first century envisioned in the novel, the English monarchy has been overthrown by a revolution, which marks a disconnection between time and progress, since in the heart of the republican empire misery still exists, and the world suffers the tragedy of war caused by a destructive competition between national powers (Sterrenburg). The pandemic that strikes this imagined twenty-first century is a scourge with no ulterior or transcendent meaning (Petitier), and the passage of time does not lead to any realization of humanity. There is no end to history in a metaphysical sense, only in a human sense: no one is left to update calendars. Shelley's work also calls into question our epistemological anthropocentrism (Lokke) and stands out against the backdrop of the vogue for "the last men," who, in the early nineteenth century, populated numerous literary narratives and poetic compositions (Langford; MacArthur), and inspired pictorial works such as those of John Martin (Murray II 714–15) (Figure 4).

Figure 4.
John Martin, *The Last Man,* 1849

Human diversity, remote times, lost civilizations

Speculative inventions around the ruin also developed as a consequence of the profound changes that characterized the conception of the history of humanity in the European mind during the early modern age. The possibility of imagining a very distant future was nourished by the new depth of time that started to characterize the conceptualization of the past. It was especially in the eighteenth century that a number of discoveries and reflections destabilized traditional biblical chronologies, according to which the world had been created some 4,000 years before the birth of Christ. Since at least the seventeenth century, challenges to the biblical chronology have been fuelled by the growth of knowledge on cultures remote from Europe, which had preserved traces of ancient times, or which could not easily be placed into the biblical account of world history. Egyptian dynasties, Chinese sources, and American peoples had cast deep doubt on the Old Testament narrative and the verisimilitude of the Mosaic revelation. There was a growing need for a computation of historical time that would enable different civilizations to be accounted for. The rediscovery of sources from Greco-Latin antiquity also brought about the need to renew chronology between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (Tortarolo; Toulmin and Goodfield 141–70). Besides, the study of nature prompted a profound reconfiguration of the problem of time. The mystery represented by fossils and the study of the stratifications of the soil fuelled new questions about the past of the world, and about the possibility of making it the target of scientific investigation (Rossi, *The Dark Abyss* 3–6; Rossi, *The Birth* 164–74; Iannuzzi, *Geografie* 17–46). The cultural diversity encountered around the globe and the natural world both favored ideas of time and chronology different from those we were familiar with in Christian sacred history.

The future and past of human civilizations became the subject of new speculations. While the study of human history was undergoing critical methodological innovations, at the junction of historical writing and literary invention it became possible to imagine fantastic interpretations of archaeological evidence and ancient documents. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, theses such as those of Bernard de Fontenelle emerged from the study of the past, according to which ancient myths subjected to rational, critical, and comparative analysis could reveal information about the remote past of peoples. Myth could be used as a historical source, provided one knew how to read beyond the distortion operated by the imagination of ancient peoples, credulous and fond of the marvellous.[1] Thus, legends could provide fantastic representations and explanations of real phenomena and

answers to questions about the cosmos elaborated by a primitive mind, which reduced otherwise incomprehensible elements to known forms.

Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the similarities of Christianity and pagan cults from different eras and areas were unraveled with a comparative method. All these elements, which were to bear considerable influence on later research in many fields of knowledge, from anthropology to the study of mythology, religions, and literature, can also be traced, much later, in the re-functionalization of material and the folkloric evidence provided by pseudoscience and clipeology (the reinterpretation of textual or material evidence from the past in search of evidence of the passage of extra-terrestrial visitors to our planet). Contributing to the roots of fantastic or mysterious archaeology is also the invention of lost worlds and races that took place between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What made this subgenre recognizable was the belief that in unexplored parts of the world there might exist civilizations that had survived, in isolation, from pre-Mosaic times to the present (Langford et al.; Pringle et al. "Lost World"). Some of these civilizations were imagined to be more advanced than that in Europe.

Eighteenth-century travelers could believe they saw the hypostatization of past moments of the European development in distant peoples. Thus, the indigenous peoples of America or Africa could become "primitives"—paradoxical contemporary fragments of the past, and it was debated whether humanity was the product of the same creation as Adam and Eve, or whether it was, instead, a descendant of one of the lost tribes of Israel (Gliozzi). Against the backdrop of these geographies of time mapped by travel accounts, philosophical treatises, and encyclopedic compilations, novelists could easily imagine that countries were to be found on the globe that represented the future of Europe—countries more advanced, that is, politically, philosophically, or scientifically, which were shaped by independent histories. Other peoples, thus, served as distorting mirrors through which travelers reflected on their home societies.

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) exemplifies a body of narratives in which fantastic civilizations were located just beyond the geographical horizons of the known world. In an age in which Australia was not yet known to Europeans, and large areas of the globe were not yet mapped, Laputa could be imagined east of Korea (Figure 5), Lilliput northwest of the Sunda Strait, and Brobdignac as a peninsula on the Pacific coast of the North American continent. As in an earlier utopian tradition, these were inventions in which geographical location was the spatial counterpart of "otherness" in a cultural and historical sense: these fantastic

nations were the result of histories different and independent from those in Europe. They offered a satirical image to comment on the mechanisms that governed the writer's society.

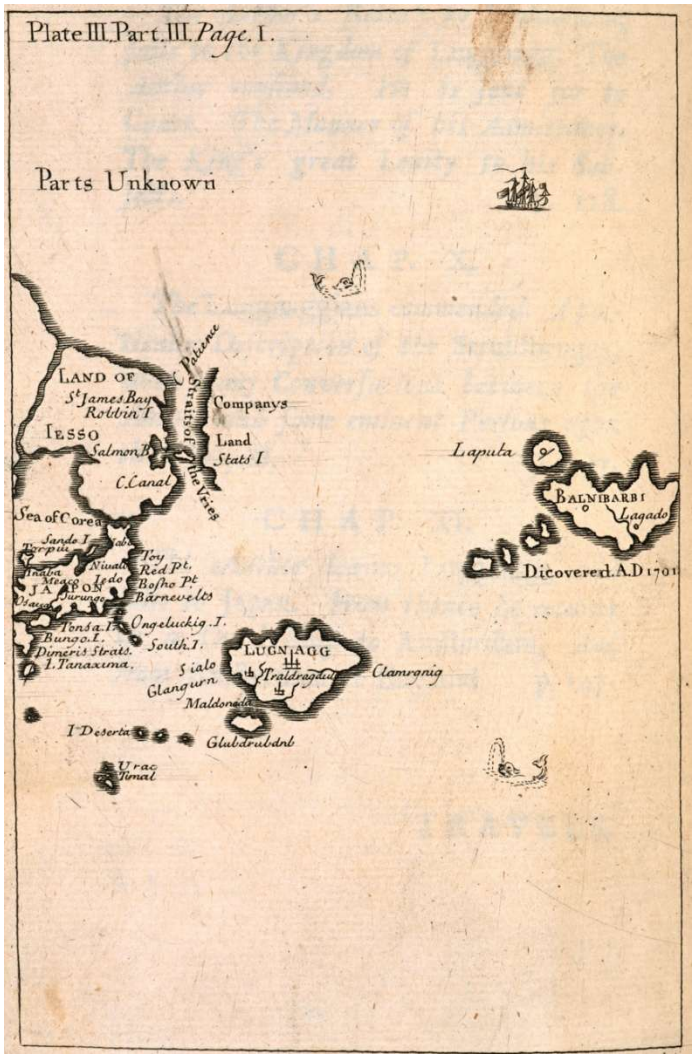


Figure 5.
Map of Laputa. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels, first edition*

Drawing on theories about the earth's internal structure such as the one proposed in Athanasius Kirchner's *Mundus subterraneus* (1665) and astronomer Edmond Halley's hypothesis in the 1690s to explain the earth's

magnetic fields, novels about extraordinary journeys to subterranean realms were published in several European languages. The anonymous *Relation d'un voyage du pole arctique au pole antarctique* (1721) [Report of a journey from the Arctic to the Antarctic Pole] and *Nicolaii Klimii iter subterraneum* (1741) [The Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground] written in Latin by Ludvig Holberg (Figure 6), *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins* (1751) by Robert Paltock, and *Icosameron* (1788) written in French by the Italian Giacomo Casanova hinged on these scientific notions (Bleiler and Langford; Fitting; Standish).

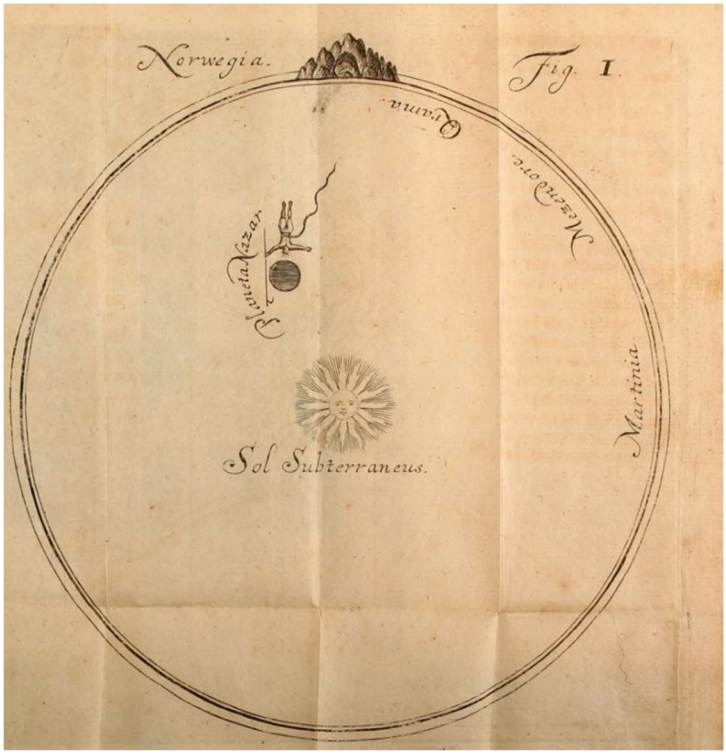


Figure 6.
Ludvig Holberg, *Nicolaii Klimii iter subterraneum*

These subterranean worlds—sometimes entire universes lodged in the inside of our planet—functioned as socio-political experiments and often as backdrops for incredible adventures.

The European protagonists encountered civilizations that, characterized by certain values, manners, or laws, functioned as

demonstrations of given philosophical and socio-political theses, in a utopian or dystopian sense, or as an ironic commentary on the travelers' home society. The origin of these civilizations sometimes preceded the known history of Europe and had developed independently, demonstrating the pliability of a history that looked to the future as a motivating horizon, suggesting the consequences of given choices made in the present.

During the nineteenth century, lost civilizations continued to be imagined underground, exploiting theories that assumed that the Earth was hollow—an idea canonized by Jules Verne's *Voyage au centre de la terre* (1864) [Journey to the Center of the Earth]—as well as in places on the Earth's surface that were still uncharted, such as the poles, the Amazon rainforest, the interior regions of the African continent, or the peaks of the Himalayas. Far from waning, during the nineteenth century, the trope of the "lost race" underwent a refunctionalization in the context of European imperial expansion and the hierarchization of racialized difference (Rieder 34–60). Everett Bleiler's bibliography of pre-1930 English-language science fiction lists three hundred works that employed the trope of the hollow Earth, with a marked growth towards the end of the century (*Science-Fiction: The Early Years*; see also Rieder 34, 159 note 4). Between 1926 and 1936 some three-hundred-and-fifty stories made use of the trope in science fiction pulp magazines (Bleiler, *Science-Fiction: The Gernsback Years*). Lost places and lost civilizations, however, tended to lose their connotations as philosophical-political and satirical mirrors. They increasingly functioned as adventurous devices, pivots of fantastic tales of exploration, discovery, conquest of resources (Rieder), or were charged with esoteric connotations, as in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871). In the novel by the English writer and politician, an underground race has existed since before the Flood and is more advanced than human civilization thanks to its ability to master a particular form of energy called Vril, which gives them telepathic abilities and other extraordinary powers. The fictional nature of the work did not prevent it from influencing later occult and theosophical circles, testifying to the permeability between textual genres and the ease with which in late modern and contemporary times ideas circulated across the boundaries between seemingly distant epistemic genres (Blavatsky I: 18, 614; Pauwels and Bergier 265–72; on the cultural history of Vril in esoteric Nazi circles see Galli 45–57). Hollow earths, subterranean worlds, portions of the planet still unknown as the dwelling places of legendary lost civilizations reached Peter Kolosimo's twentieth century by this route. Kolosimo's globe still teems with possible unknown life, from places beneath the surface accessible through waterfalls

in the Amazon, to entire civilizations possibly hidden beneath the icy surface of Antarctica (*Non è terrestre* 170, 109).

Ancient civilizations, pseudo-science, and comparativism

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the myth of Atlantis—the lost continent and ruined civilization *par excellence*—underwent a new chapter in its history, perhaps the most popular one. Rediscovered by Angelo Mazzoldi in his work on the history of mankind in the Mediterranean as early as 1840, it found wide international acclaim especially with the publication of *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* by Ignatius Donnelly in 1882. By reading archaeological remains, geological evidence, and comparative observations on a number of ancient cultures and languages, Donnely argued that Atlantis was in fact the cradle of civilization. Already in classical times—Plato (419–502)—and in early-modern times—Roger Bacon—Atlantis was often imagined as more advanced than known societies both on a socio-political and a scientific level. In Plato, the story of Atlantis and Athens—which had defeated Atlantis nine thousand years before the dialogue takes place—presents two contrasting models of political organization. Plato's narrative invention expands known horizons, temporal (backwards) and geographical (westwards), and embodies, in the topographical and physical features of the two cities, the connection between human communities and their environment (Gill 1–48).

In Bacon's *New Atlantis*, Atlantis is identified with the American continent; "New Atlantis" is a secret island, called Bensalem, at an unspecified point in the Pacific Ocean west of the Peruvian coast. These places serve as images of a geographical and historical otherness: Bensalem's civilization, more advanced than Europe's, is a virtual experiment in the relationship between science, religion, and power. Bacon was interested in the problem of origins, causal processes, and historical depth: what laws and customs could yield in terms of collective organization. The Bensalemians know the history of Europe and America better than the Europeans and Americans themselves; they guard a global history from the earliest times, the memory of which had been lost in Europe (Bacon 163). The construction of the utopian society in Bacon is based on a profoundly temporalized idea of civilization. The Bensalemian society is presented as the product of a historical process and of precise causal mechanisms over time. The *New Atlantis* functions as a virtual utopian laboratory, set within a fictional narrative framework.

Ignatius Donnelly epitomized the transition of Atlantis from a narrative device to philosophical-political reflections, to an object of pseudo-historical treatment (Figure 7). Starting with Donnelly's work, Atlantis became a recurring motif in speculative fiction, and, above all, omnipresent in twentieth-century pseudo-science. It came to symbolize the vertigo of ruin—a temporal short-circuit that imagined the planet's distant past as containing civilizations that, according to the logic of linear progress, should have belonged to the future. In the latter guise it will also be widely present in Kolosimo's books (De Camp; Bleiler *Science-Fiction: The Early Years* 852; Feder 28–35; Pringle et al. "Atlantis").

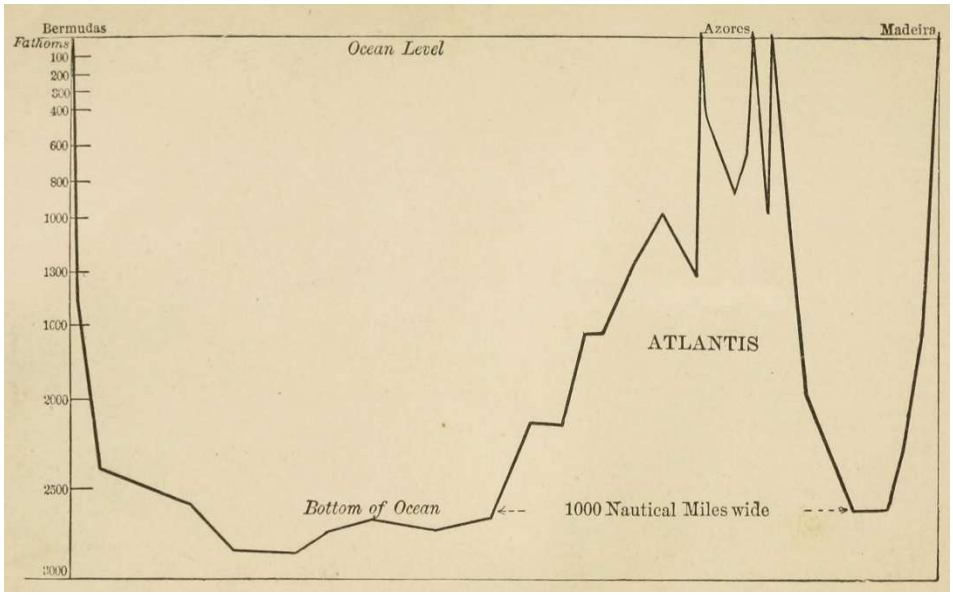


Figure 7.
Ignatius Donnelly, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World,* 1882

Donnelly's *Atlantis* differs from other seminal texts on pseudo-scientific themes and fantastic archaeology for the absence of occult or supernatural elements. An eloquent comparison may be made *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), the work with which Helena Blavatsky gave fundamental impetus to the theosophical movement by elaborating her own theory concerning the birth and structure of the cosmos, the Earth, and mankind. To argue the historical truth of Atlantis, Donnelly amassed scientific "data" related to the conformation of the seabed, the continental plates, and the geological strata of the Earth, and compared "evidence" drawn from

archaeological remains and texts of various ancient civilizations around the globe. Thus, Donnelly arrived at his (fanciful) conclusions using evidence and rational reasoning although methodologically far removed from the contemporary scientific standards of archaeology, geology, and linguistics. Through elements of its textual and rhetorical construction, *Atlantis* claimed to be a scientific essay. In this sense, it played a seminal role in the codification of subsequent pseudo-science.

Blavatsky asserted she was writing under telepathic dictation from Himalayan "Masters," mixing in elements from Kabbalistic traditions, branches of the Hindu and Buddhist religions filtered through contemporary occult currents and spiritualistic notions. These include, for example, the existence of immaterial beings and astral bodies, as well as lost continents such as Atlantis, Lemuria, and Hyperborea. Of the seven "root-races" of which, according to Blavatsky, mankind is the fifth, the third was a race of telepathic beings with a more advanced scientific system than that of human beings due to their mastery of occult forces. This third race perished in remote times in a natural catastrophe, but a few survivors gave rise to the fourth race: the inhabitants of Atlantis. The Atlanteans were a highly developed civilization devoted to black magic practices that brought about its downfall. The history of mankind is characterized, according to Blavatsky, by cycles of advancement and regression, the memory of which is lost in modern times. More advanced beings watch over mankind and, from time to time, reintroduce fragments of lost knowledge into the world.

Blavatsky's treatise, too, claims to be a study and not an invention, but a mixture of pseudo-scientific, mystical, esoteric, and occult elements visibly characterize the work. Blavatsky's doctrine, however chaotic, obscure, and bizarre in its exposition, would also contribute to the popularization of ideas widely reused in science fiction, such as those concerning hyper-evolved civilizations in the past and the existence of a higher knowledge inaccessible in the contemporary world (Bleiler, *Science-Fiction: The Early Years* 851–52).

Textual genealogies and pseudo-science in Kolosimo

Peter Kolosimo's writings, mainly the ones published between the late 1950s and the early 1980s, represent a twentieth-century outcome of the methodological and thematic lines referred to above. They gather the comparative and pseudo-scientific suggestions of these textual genealogies, updated to suit Kolosimo's own cultural-historical context, that of Italy and Europe during the Cold War and the space race.[2] Particularly in the late 1960s and 1970s, Kolosimo's books achieved exceptional popularity, with millions

of copies sold in Italy and translations into numerous languages. Early translations of titles such as *Non è terrestre* [Not from Earth], *Ombre sulle stelle* [Shadows on the Stars], and *Il pianeta sconosciuto* [Unknown Planet] came out in German, French, English (with editions in England and the United States), Dutch, Spanish (first in Spain and later also in Mexico), Finnish, Portuguese, and Japanese. *Non è terrestre* enjoyed particular success in the Anglophone world: it was translated as *Not of This World* in 1970 and went on to have reprints and new editions in 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1977, and 1987. Other titles translated in English in the 1970s were *Terra senza tempo* [Timeless Earth] in 1973 and *Astronavi sulla preistoria* [Spaceships in Prehistory] in 1975. During the 1970s, versions in other languages included Turkish, Croatian, and Greek; in the 1980s and 1990s, Catalan and Korean, while editions in other European languages were also frequently reprinted. In Kolosimo's work, the ruin and its fantastic interpretation takes on new meanings in the space age. Thus, the material remains of ancient cultures become the basis for imaginative hypotheses not only about hyper-evolved extinct civilizations, alien visits to earth, and the extra-terrestrial origin of mankind, but also about space technologies known to such civilizations (see also Bigliardi "The Stellar"). The fortune and circulation of Kolosimo's works in translation exemplifies and in part prepares for the wider circulation of pseudo-archaeological texts in the English-language publishing market, and the emergence of academic studies dedicated to this type of cultural expression, with the appearance of terms and expressions such as "pseudoarchaeology" and "alternative archaeology," which appeared as early as the 1960s but have only been widely used since the 1980s. It is also because of this role in the English-speaking publishing market that we can now offer a few observations on the content and (pseudo-) methods of Kolosimo's work, with examples mainly from the text that has circulated most in English: *Non è terrestre*.

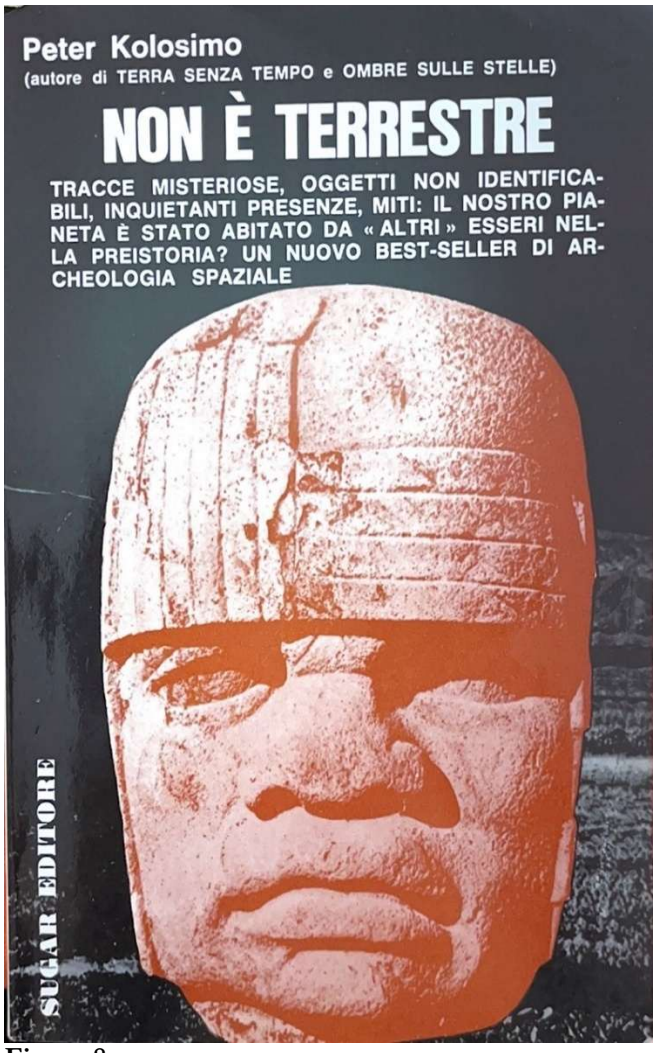


Figure 8.
Peter Kolosimo, *Non è terrestre,* 1969

Despite the antipathy that Kolosimo openly expresses towards exponents and sympathizers of theosophy such as George Adamski (*Non è terrestre* 26–33; Gramantieri 26, 27, 48–59), others he mentions as explorers and writers of interesting reports. These include, for example, Henry Steel Olcott, president of the Theosophical Society, who Kolosimo quotes on mysterious explosions in the Brahamaputra region of present-day Bangladesh, suggesting the thesis that they were the engines of spacecraft

(*Non è terrestre* 135; Blavatsky I: 2, 3, 136). In *Non è terrestre* (Figure 8), reference is also made at several points to James Churchward, whose relations with the Theosophical movement are complex, but whose theories on the lost continent of Mu overlap with the Theosophical theses on Lemuria (Colavito "The Naacal Tablets"; Tumminia 6). Kolosimo introduces Churchward as "the puzzling English scholar whose research is anything but negligible when it does not border on theosophical speculations" (53) and again as "a bizarre figure of a traveller and scholar who certainly has considerable merit in the field of science, but whose theosophical digressions cannot be taken into account in the slightest" (208). Churchward's theses on Mu are taken up extensively (206, 208–11, 298–301), citing the discovery of the so-called Naacal tablets, which Churchward claimed to have found in India and interpreted as evidence of the existence of the lost continent (228, 231; see also *Astronavi sulla preistoria* 382–85). The tablets were purely fictional, just like the ancient *Stanzas of Dzyan*, the text that Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* claimed to comment on. Kolosimo also mentions Churchward's ideas about the legendary civilization of Baalbek and the cataclysm that interrupted its growth (*Non è terrestre* 248–49), and on the interpretation of the Quiché sacred text *Popol Vuh* (274–76).

The reuse of Churchward in Kolosimo is an example of a cultural comparativism that looks to non-European traditions in search of archaeological and textual evidence to substantiate the legendary existence of civilizations annihilated by ancient catastrophes. Kolosimo's fascination with philosophies and religious texts such as those of the Hindu tradition or Buddhism, or those of the indigenous peoples of South and North America, is the result of pseudo-scientific and pseudo-doctrinaire elaborations such as those of Donnelly and Blavatsky, albeit often indirectly. On the subject of Atlantis, Kolosimo favors, for example, the founder of Soviet atlantology Nikolaj Žirov,[3] who was in turn a reader of Donnelly (*Atlantis* 30, 40, 51, 52, 106, 375, 381), according to the dissemination of information on Soviet science that Kolosimo fostered since *Ombre sulle stelle* (1966), and which culminated in *Fiori di luna* (1979).

Kolosimo's works are compiled through amassing evidence from different cultural traditions and through European secondary sources. The fascination with the idea of a hyper-evolved past that engenders speculations on legendary civilizations and on the existence of beings superior to humankind is nourished by a proto-ethnographic curiosity rooted in the age of European explorations and colonial expansion, and in the upheavals that these processes brought about in the conceptualization of historical time.

Since the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the epistemological and methodological tools of a number of disciplines related to the study of the past, including geology and archaeology, had been increasingly enriched and defined. The agglutination of these disciplinary fields and of a modern scientific paradigm allow us to account for Donnelly's or Kolosimo's works as "pseudo-science." The appearance of the expression "pseudo-science" in European languages is recorded from the end of the eighteenth century, preceded in the seventeenth century by other expressions, such as "science falsely so-called" or the Latin phrase *pseudo-scientia*, through epistemic and linguistic clarifications (Thurs and Numbers; "Pseudoscience"). It is a complex and controversial notion; its boundaries depend on the negotiation of what does (or does not) fall within a recognized epistemic paradigm.[4]

Constructed as a review of scientific research, studies, and hypotheses, the bulk of Kolosimo's writings falls into the epistemic domain of pseudo-science or pseudo-scientific popularization.[5] In particular, the series Universo Sconosciuto [Unknown Universe] by the publisher Sugar (later SugarCo), comprising ten books by Kolosimo between the late 1960s and 1970s,[6] presents his works as "overviews of the scientific enigmas of our time," "*research*" with "adduced evidence," "reported data . . . supported with meticulously analysed evidence" (*Ombre*, tenth edition, back cover and *Non è terrestre*, first edition, back cover). Fantastic archaeology is described as a "science," whose "findings and . . . shocking analogies" meet with opposition from "sceptics," but whose documentation proposed by Kolosimo is such as to support hypotheses about the development and past of the human species that contradict and invalidate the "hypotheses that official and evolutionary science has so far elaborated" (*Astronavi*, third edition, back cover). The presence of overtly fictional elements and compositional strategies, such as the insertion of narrative passages, on the other hand, invite one to approach these writings as fiction rather than essays (Camilletti 7–8).

Literary fascinations

The content (and success) of Kolosimo's books owes much to the literary materials that accompany the citation of pseudo-scientific written and visual sources, and the oral testimonies of "experts" reported with formulas similar to those of a journalistic investigative report. In *Non è terrestre* (95–96), for instance, *Le Comte de Gabalis ou Entretiens sur les sciences secretes*, published by Nicolas-Pierre-Henri de Montfaucon de Villars in 1670, is used as a source (Latimer; Seeber; Nagel). The work, which had a wide influence on

subsequent European literature, as well as on occult and esoteric circles, contained dialogues in which the count discussed immaterial beings, Paracelsus's theories, and Rosicrucianism. The works of H. P. Lovecraft—especially *At the Mountains of Madness*—provide materials on lost Antarctic civilizations and ancestral cults of alien origin. The fictional nature of the source highlighted in some passages is overshadowed in the English translation.[7] Kolosimo constitutes an Italian chapter in the history of the Providence writer's influence on later theorists of "ancient astronauts." A number of pseudo-scientific Anglophone works found in Lovecraft's cosmic horror story their inspiration to imagine an archaeology harbinger of disturbing discoveries about the past of the planet and the human species (Colavito, *The Cult*). Lovecraft's own work is part of an intertextual network in which ideas about an alien past circulated between literary imagination and pseudo-scientific theories, drawing inspiration from theosophical theories (referred to particularly, albeit not exclusively, in *The Call of Cthulhu*). Lovecraft's characters read books such as Donnelly's *Atlantis* and the works of Charles Fort—also known and relied on by Kolosimo (*Non è terrestre* 65–66), alongside fictional volumes such as Abdul Alhazred's *Necronomicon* (Lovecraft, *The Descendant*).

In tracing the cultural history of the mysterious themes to which each chapter is devoted, *Non è terrestre* exploits an ideal library which includes folkloric materials used by William Butler Yeats,[8] Murray Leinster's *space opera* (169–70), the moon as seen by Plutarch (194–95), Lucian of Samosata (201) and the classical sources of Camille Flammarion (194–95), and twentieth-century science fiction rich in adventure elements and archaeological suggestions by authors such as Pierre Benoît (234), Charles Henneberg (268), and Donald Wandrei (200). Hoaxes and forgeries from the past also find their way into the history of certain fantastic ideas. Stigmatized as such, famous journalistic mystifications and frauds are nevertheless mentioned to give literary substance to legends and beliefs such as the existence of giant human beings in remote places or times (173, ff.).

Concluding remarks

The ruin and its fantastic interpretation engender a disconnection between progress and temporal linearity, making it possible for fantastic archaeology to imagine visits by hyper-evolved aliens in remote past eras, and lost civilizations predating known history. In exploiting the ruin as a catalyst of temporal cognitive estrangement, Kolosimo's writings function as collectors of long-lasting textual genealogies, re-functionalized within the

editorial and literary context of the second half of the twentieth century. Against the backdrop of the Cold War and the space race, his books satisfy a widespread interest in space themes, with attention not so much or not only to scientific popularization, as to fostering a sense of wonder in the reader. Kolosimo's speculative archaeology combines scientific and historical-comparative curiosity with references drawn from literature and folklore, testifying, with its success, how widespread in the late twentieth century the desire is to look at the past and the future with feelings of mystery and wonder. Kolosimo's work exemplifies a broader international popularity of the subject of mysterious or fantastic archaeology, which in the same years saw books such as those by von Däniken and Hancock become bestsellers on the European and North American publishing markets. This essay has framed these cultural trends in a longer-term history, highlighting literary and visual precedents that employed the representation of the ruin as a creative means of estrangement and fantastic manipulation of time and history.

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Notes

1. Feldman and Richardson 7–18; 10–18 for the English translation of de Fontenelle, *De l'origine des fables*, written ca. 1691–1699, first published in 1724.

2. Kolosimo is the pen name of Pier Domenico Colosimo, 1922–1984. Bigliardi "Peter Kolosimo"; Ciardi and Labanti; Russo.

3. Kolosimo, *Non è terrestre* 253–261. Kolosimo does not indicate from which work the extensive quotations given here are taken; a plausible source may be *Atlantida,* one of Žirov's best known books.

4. Central in any discussion of "pseudo-science" are the (lack of) falsifiability, aspects of methodological inadequacy, tendentious motivations of the investigator, up to the expression of feelings of encirclement and ostracism, and conspiracy theses directed against "official" science (Cioffi). In Kolosimo we find for example the notion of a "conspiracy of

silence" (*Non è terrestre* 276); and, referred to Adamski (33), the discrediting arguments that others might apply to Kolosimo himself, see Colavito, "Review."

5. On Kolosimo's fiction: Iannuzzi, *Fantascienza* 87, 107, 131–32.

6. Kolosimo, *Terra*; *Ombre*; *Il pianeta*; *Non è terrestre*; *Astronavi*; *Odissea*; *Polvere*; *Fratelli*; *Italia*; *Fiori*; *Viaggiatori*.

7. Kolosimo, *Non è terrestre,* 101–3: here mentioning the source as a "hallucinating novel"; 110, 137–39: here as a "hallucinating fantastic reconstruction"; 151, 187: here with a generic allusion to "certain tales." Compare for example with *Not of This World* 80; on the ambiguity thus created: Colavito, "Review of Peter Kolosimo's 'Not of This World' (Pt. 2)."

8. Kolosimo, *Non è terrestre,* 115–16, here two quotations from a play mentioned under the title "Cathleen." These are two lines spoken by the character Shemus in "The Countess Cathleen" (1892), scene I.

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Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 251-254
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/12

Women's Writing, Reading, and Education in the Romantic Period

Elizabeth Eger

Antal, Éva, and Antonella Braida, eds. *Female Voices: Forms of Women's Reading, Self- Education and Writing in Britain* (1770–1830). Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2022. 269 pages. Pbk. ISBN: 978-2-84867-933-4. €15.00.

Women's voices are inextricably linked to questions of education and writing. As the title of this impressive collection of essays suggests, women have used the power of their voices at various points in history to become more involved in their cultural and political worlds. The essays in this volume cover a revolutionary period in European history—a time in which the concepts of liberty and education were debated with intensity and ambition. It was also an age of radical transformation in the numbers of people who could read. Women took part in this movement to improve literacy: as educators, authors, printers and publishers, novelists, and poets. Over the last thirty years a similarly seismic shift in our historical knowledge of the sheer range and diversity of different voices at play between 1770 and 1830 has been made by scholars interested in interrogating questions of class, race, and gender—and the intersections between such categories. In their thoughtful introduction to *Female Voices*, editors Éva Antal and Antonella Braida raise varying definitions of reading, opening with a quotation from Mary Wollstonecraft's *Female Reader* (1789), which was one among many such contemporary works addressed to young people who were learning not only to read but also to imbibe a sense of moral justice and virtuous social behavior. The title of Anna Barbauld's *The Female Speaker* (Joseph Johnson, 1811) gestured to the fact that the extracts in her book would be read aloud in a family setting following a long tradition of sociable reading (recently explored by Abigail Williams in *The Social Life of Books* [Yale UP, 2017]), but one cannot help thinking of the political resonance of the term "speaker," as in the regulator of parliamentary speech. Barbauld grew up within the walls of Warrington Academy, an educational establishment solely for religious dissenters, who at this stage were denied political representation and barred from attending Oxford and Cambridge. Barbauld's "female speaker" is inevitably tinged with a radical irony.

The editors have assembled fourteen essays arranged according to five thematic units, starting with "Cross-cultural Connection across the Channel," a fascinating study of European intellectual networks (not confined to Anglo-French relations, so "across the channel" is mildly

misleading). Hannah Moss investigates British responses to Madame de Stael's *Corinne* (1807). Both the European author and her fascinating creation, the conduit of passion, Corinne, straddled the private and public with fierce tenacity. David García's essay on Helen Maria Williams's translation of Bernardin St Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788) gives us a sense of the politics and abilities of women as translators in a revolutionary age. Williams smuggled her own poems into her translation of the novel, replacing some of the original text with her formidable sonnets. The final essay in this section, by Hélène Vidal, provides an interesting counterpart to Hannah Moss's work. Taking a slightly different approach through the use of psychoanalytic definitions of auto-fiction, she makes a strong case for the educational role of sensibility in the novels of Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, including *The Sylph* (1779).

The themes of Vidal's essay are continued in the next section of the collection: "Writing the Female Self and (Self-)Education," in which radical writers including Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shelley are shown to express the struggle between reason and passion in novels that combine life and art with the courage to experiment. Dóra Janczer Csikós's essay introduces the intersection of contemporary periodicals (in this case the *Lady's Magazine*) with novels in forming a didactic role for readers. Anthony John Harding's discussion of Mary Hays's six-volume encyclopedia of female achievement, *Female Biography* (1803), alerts us to contemporary attempts to bring women fairly and squarely into the public sphere and to inhabit a lexicon of historical heroines, from Abassa to Zenobia. Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, mother and daughter, form the respective topics of essays by Nóra Séllei (who focuses on the body in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [1792]) and Kiel Shaub (who addresses the role of Arts and Sciences education for young women through a lively discussion of William Godwin's work as author and lecturer and its influence upon Shelley's *Frankenstein* [1818]).

Women were resourceful in their use of genre to explore questions of knowledge, politics, and philosophy. Male intellectuals who supported female education had long chosen poetry as an instructive medium in which to impart moral or scientific instruction. Erasmus Darwin's *The Loves of the Plants*, first published in 1789, is an excellent example of the ways in which the complex details of Carl Linnaeus's theory of the sexual reproduction of plants were fashioned into an attractive and compelling narrative. A decade later, Darwin published *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* (1797). While he expanded contemporary ideas about the range and

ambition of female education, he thought women should still remain in their allotted place: the domestic sphere. The third section of the edited collection, "Reading and Experiments in Form," provides strong evidence that Darwin's female contemporaries were not content to stay confined within the domestic sphere but established themselves powerfully as the authors of public poetry and novels. Angela Escott's fine reading of Hannah Cowley's epic, *The Siege of Acre* (1801), a vividly realized war poem, describes the convergence of drama and poetry in this bold work. Through a combination of close reading and contextual detail, Angela Escott convinces us of Cowley's poetic mission, using the techniques of drama in poetry, "to engage with Britain's increasingly global perspective but also emphasizing how this particular event was a moral crisis for the community and showing how it affected its citizens personally" (153). Krisztina Kaló's essay on Clare Reeve's epistolary novel *The School for Widows* (1791) is a fascinating exploration of how older women remained connected to the idea of reading as self-education. While it was rare to be left an independent widow, there remained an attraction to this state in which one could exert financial and social power. The final essay in the section on form and genre is Angelika Reichmann's discussion of Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which returns us to the topic of auto-didacticism through reading.

"Women's Critical and Economic Thought" is the final theme of the collection. Marie-Laure Massei-Chamayou explores how women could learn practical skills about housekeeping and traveling from books, and women's appreciation for the role of novels in allowing them a measure of economic agency. Jane Marcet's *Conversations on Political Economy, In which the Elements of that Science are Familiarly Explained*, first published in 1816, used conversation as a tool of improvement for those who wished to better themselves. Alexandra Sippel's excellent discussion of this work provides many avenues for future research into an area that encompasses some of the most challenging moral and theoretical questions of Marcet's day.

As Sippel points out, the seeds of Marcet's approach can be found in the bluestocking circle, an informal "Academy" for educating women, led by Elizabeth Montagu, Queen of the Bluestockings. Montagu's *Essay on Shakespeare* (1769) was the first extensive female defense of England's national poet at a key moment in the history of his reception. Magdalena Pypeć's exploration of Anna Jameson's *Characteristics of Women*, first published in the year of the Reform Act of 1832, shows how much of this classic text of feminist ideology was derived from her previous study, *Shakespeare's Heroines* (1831). Montagu and Jameson alike found that women could derive critical

authority from Shakespeare, whose lack of formal and classical education was no hindrance to his literary power, or his ability to conjure female voices. Éva Antal and Antonella Braida are to be congratulated on bringing together a collection of essays that celebrates the ongoing connection between education and the female voice with energy and originality.

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Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 255-259
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/13

Dangerous Identifications—Beckett and Shakespeare

Patrick Lonergan

Olk, Claudia. *Shakespeare and Beckett: Restless Echoes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 240 pages. ISBN 9781316514939. HB. £75.

Roughly half-way through *Shakespeare and Beckett*, its author Claudia Olk observes in passing that Beckett "loved to recite" Shakespeare's "Sonnet 71" (94). It is easy to understand why he felt that way. With its insistence that the listener should "no longer mourn for me when I am dead," the poem is frank in its expression of the realities of bodily decay—"I am fled / From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell" (qtd. in 94)—which will ultimately be matched by the decay of love, friendship, reputation, and more. Noting that Beckett thought that "someone should write a play" about the poem, Olk offers a tantalizing suggestion: "Perhaps," she speculates, "this is precisely what [Beckett] accomplished in *Happy Days*" (94).

The word "perhaps" is found everywhere in Shakespearean criticism, its ubiquity a consequence of the ambiguity that was so central to his dramaturgy—an ambiguity that, as Olk observes, has allowed his plays to seem relevant across times and cultures. That feature of his work has produced varying and sometimes conflicting interpretations, the best-known example of which is that, both famously and notoriously, in some societies Shylock has been seen as the villain of *Merchant of Venice*, and in others as its hero; the same play used to be staged as a comedy, and nowadays it is more often presented as tragic. As Ben Jonson famously claimed, Shakespeare thus is "for all time"—in part because he allowed his audience to bring these kinds of divergent meanings to the same source texts.

Contrastingly, Beckett is famous—and in many quarters nowadays infamous—for his precision, for his insistence that his plays should be performed exactly as written, and for the relative scarcity of words like "perhaps" in the analysis of his work. That characteristic still allows for personal interpretations to be applied to Beckett's drama, of course. Olk might look at *Happy Days* and see traces of Shakespeare, for example—but many twenty-first-century audiences will also see the play's presentation of a woman trapped in a mound of earth beneath a blazing sun as a metaphor for the climate crisis, even as they acknowledge that Beckett died before anthropogenic climate change was widely understood. Even so, such interpretations always apply to context rather than character or theme; Beckett's intentions in relation to Winnie—and his other characters—are free

of Shakesperean ambiguity, ensuring a relative homogeneity in audience response.

That fundamental difference between the two playwrights gives rise to the question of whether a detailed comparison of them is necessary or worthwhile. We already know that there are Shakespearean allusions in Beckett: to *King Lear* in *Endgame*, to *Hamlet* in *Echo's Bones*. We also know that Beckett had read and annotated Shakespeare's scripts, and that he sometimes borrowed Shakespeare's neologisms for his own plays. And we regularly see examples of theater companies moving fluidly between the two authors' works. The book's cover, for example, presents Marty Rea and Aaron Monaghan in *Waiting for Godot* by Druid Theatre, a production that was enriched in my own viewing of it because I had seen the same actors playing Richard II and Richard III respectively in other Druid productions a few years beforehand (and incidentally, the caption for that photo fails to credit Druid, an omission that ought to be rectified in any future editions).

But Shakespeare's dominance of Western theater is so strong that his influence will always be detectable. And, as Olk herself points out many times, Beckett is a famously allusive writer anyway, peppering his work with references to Schubert and *Effi Briest*; to Dante, Vico, and (of course) Joyce; to Proust and Saint Augustine, Descartes and Saint Paul, Yeats and Synge—and so on. "Beckett himself encourages this kind of archaeological reading," Olk notes (38). So why focus only on Shakespeare?

One of the book's strengths is that it answers that question persuasively by showing how the links between the writers are of significance, while remaining mindful of the admonition from *Disjecta* (1983) that "the danger is in the neatness of the identification" (Beckett qtd. in Olk 10). In other words, Olk identifies interesting links, but is not trying to make more of them than is strictly justified by the evidence in Beckett's writings. The book therefore builds on correspondences that have already been made; for example, she acknowledges that the link between *Endgame* and *Lear* was posited (at least) as early as 1964 when Jan Kott wrote about it in *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (19). However, she is also willing to put forward new correspondences, as when she reads the fourth act of *Lear* as a metaphor for "the theatre in which both Beckett and Shakespeare explore the edges of their very medium" (6)—an analysis that applies to *Endgame* but which can also be used as a way of reading Beckett's other plays, especially his later works. Beckett and Shakespeare, in Olk's analysis, thus wrote their dramas as if on a kind of cliff-edge, both formally and in relation to their societies' norms and expectations.

That discussion of *Endgame* exemplifies Olk's ability to move fluidly from considering documented, provable, and/or intentional correspondences to proposing links that must necessarily be accompanied with more of those "perhapses." Some of her comparisons are instantly persuasive. For instance, with its treatment of how women are entrapped in roles that place them in positions of voyeuristic vulnerability, *Cymbeline* can certainly be detected in trace form in the texture of *Happy Days* (89–91)—a link that had not occurred to me before reading about it in this book. Other proposals struck me as more tenuous, as, for instance, when it is suggested that the father and son in Beckett's *Company* who tramp through the hills are like Edgar and Gloucester in *King Lear* (23). Well—maybe they are, but could it not be proposed instead that they are more like Christy Mahon and his Da at the end of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*? Given that Synge was one of the very few writers that Beckett acknowledged as an influence upon his writing, such an interpretation might also be worth considering.

But to quibble in this way is to misunderstand what the book is trying to achieve. Olk is neither a detective nor an archaeologist; she is not seeking evidence of influence with the tools of decoding or extraction. Rather, her aim is to identify the importance of both writers as figures who both engender and symbolize moments of transformative change within the history of dramatic literature. Taking a long but useful detour into Beckett's indebtedness to Joyce (a writer who was much more obviously in dialogue with Shakespeare than Beckett was), Olk shows how the two Irishmen engaged with literary history in ways that were both creative and destructive—which is to say that both drew from past models but, by doing so, brought about a rupture from that past. Just as it is now difficult to read Homer without thinking of *Ulysses,* so it is now difficult to watch *King Lear* or *Macbeth* without thinking of *Endgame* or *Godot*. Thus, Shakespeare, Joyce, and Beckett become enmeshed in the contemporary period in ways that are more complicated than can be captured in the standard model of linear literary influence.

These and many other stimulating suggestions are presented across seven chapters that are organized thematically rather than in relation to specific texts or the chronological development of either oeuvre. Those themes include echoes, sleep, the purgatorial, and "endgames," and there is also the chapter just mentioned about how Beckett's reading of Joyce influenced his reading of Shakespeare. I mean it as a description rather than a criticism when I state that the seven pieces can be read in no particular order and that each of them works equally well as a standalone discussion that can

be read in its own right. Here the book's subtitle—"restless echoes"—is apposite: each of the seven sections is an echo of the others, exploring the same overall theme but resounding slightly differently against the surfaces of the different plays under discussion. I admired and enjoyed Olk's decision to adopt a style of composition that seemed appropriate to the subject matter: there is some necessary repetition at times, but the overall result is the creation of an argument that feels as if it has been layered iteratively, much as Beckett's plays frequently are.

The book's Introduction states that it will focus on the dramatic works of each writer, and certainly there is ample consideration of many of the important plays—*Endgame*, *Happy Days*, *Footfalls*, and *All that Fall* are given detailed treatment for Beckett, and the discussion of Shakespeare is strong in its references to *Midsummer Night's Dream, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet*, *the Tempest*, and (of course) *King Lear*. The importance of Beckett's prose fiction for the book must be emphasized, however—there is useful, insightful, and detailed commentary on *More Pricks than Kicks*, *Molloy*, and *Murphy* as well as on less well-known works such as "The End" and "Fizzles."

For that reason—and again I intend this as a statement rather than a criticism—it must be acknowledged that the book is more focused on the literary than the theatrical qualities of these writers' works. That does not mean that Olk ignores the theatrical—the impact of directors such as Peter Hall and Alan Simpson and of actors such as Billie Whitelaw and John Gielgud is mentioned, and there is also a suggestive if brief exploration of how Beckett's engagement with Shakespeare paved the way for some of Tom Stoppard's innovations. But the book leaves open a fruitful area of investigation for scholars to consider in the future, which is how the links that Olk identifies can deepen our understanding of the staging of both authors' plays. To give just one example, when the South African director Yael Farber put her gravediggers in bowler hats (making them appear like Beckettian tramps) in a 2018 production of *Hamlet* for the Dublin Gate Theatre, she was showing how new productions can make it seem as though Shakespeare is indebted to Beckett, rather than the other way around. What, then, might it mean to stage Shakespeare "after Beckett"?

Similarly, as Olk points out, the problem of nothingness features in many of the plays of both Shakespeare and Beckett—and that problem is usually considered by scholars who focus on language, philosophy, and religion. But in the theater, nothingness is also a problem of space: where do we put it, how do we show it, and how do we ensure that the audience knows it is there? Whether one thinks of the cliff-edge in *Lear* (which, of course, is

not a cliff edge) or of the "corpsed" exterior that lies beyond the walls of the *Endgame* set, we find both writers engaged in considering deeply the problem of how to make space for nothingness. Olk's book is important in its own right, but I also welcomed how it clears the ground for the practice-based investigation of these and many other questions.

Returning to the question that I began with myself, then—can we say, after reading this book, that *Happy Days* is a theatrical adaptation of "Sonnet 71"? To that suggestion I would offer a resounding "perhaps"—but would add that what matters is the asking rather than the answering. "Beckett works through Shakespeare, not around him" (210), writes Olk—and in showing how that is the case, she also does the necessary work of identifying how we as readers have to work through both writers (not around them). Their influence is proverbially all-pervasive, both within the theatre and the academy—so much so that it can sometimes be tempting to treat them as an established presence rather than as a problem that must be grappled with, again and again. The "restless echoes" presented by Olk are—as the subtitle implies—inevitably unresolved: they continue to resound, continue to repeat—continue, like Didi and Gogo in *Godot*, to wait for that which will never quite arrive. Olk provides a model for the kind of questioning that we must nevertheless go on with. Enriched by the deepest familiarity with both authors' oeuvres, and strengthened by incisive close readings of their texts, Olk's *Shakespeare and Beckett: Restless Echoes* is an original contribution to our understanding not only of Beckett and Shakespeare, but of intertextuality, cultural transmission, and the ongoing anxiety of influences.

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Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 260-264
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/14

Tracing Early Modern Readers: New and Traditional Approaches to Historical Data

Natália Pikli

August, Hannah. *Playbooks and their Readers in Early Modern England.* Material Readings in Early Modern England. New York: Routledge, 2022. 270 pages. ISBN 978-1-003-19974-8. Ebk. $71.17.

The digital age ushered in new research methodologies and expanded the accessibility of historical material beyond imagination in many fields, including early modern studies and book history. However, as Hannah August's monograph and other works in early modern culture and book history point out, this should not mean that traditional research methods are no longer necessary. Not all data are available even in such large and continuously expanding databases as the *Early English Books Online* or other scholarly webpages. Even with thousands of early modern print products and other data becoming widely accessible digitally, interpretation must be complemented by hands-on research, flipping the pages of early modern books in libraries. Investigating the materiality of culture remains indispensable. Hannah August's *Playbooks and their Readers in Early Modern England* is a prime example of recent cutting-edge scholarship in book history, combining digital and archival research, print and manuscript sources. Her monograph maps out what we can say about early modern readers of playbooks with some certainty, while remaining honest about the degrees of probability when it comes to such elusive and ephemeral fields of investigation as the history of reading and early modern handwritten marginalia. The conclusions of the monograph are based on consulting more than five hundred playbooks in different holdings (among others, The British Library, The Folger Shakespeare Library, The National Library of Scotland, The Oxford Bodleian Library), looking for different readers' marks in them, which are rarely—if ever—recorded in library catalogues. This archival and in-person examination is contextualized by the author's reliance on previous findings in the field as well as other, digitally available sources, thus showcasing how present-day cultural historical research balances various sources of information. Therefore, the book has a solid grounding in leading present-day research and proves a rich storehouse of information in the field, even if it shows some points of weakness in presenting findings and sometimes tends to oversimplify interpretation to help easier categorization of data.

The "Introduction" clearly delineates the corpus, the time frame, and the aim of the book: to examine what it meant to "read a play," that is, to read a (mostly) quarto-sized print edition of a professionally performed play for early modern readers in England and Scotland between 1584 and 1660. The designated period spans almost eight decades from the first print publication of commercial drama (Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London*, with the title-page designation "as it hath beene publiquely played") to Charles II's restoration, which launched a new era in theatrical production and consumption after an 18-year-long hiatus, when all theaters had been closed in England. The focus on one print genre, one format (more than two-thirds of playbooks appeared in quarto, making them relatively cheap and portable in an unbound, stab-and-stitched form), and a clearly designated time frame appears reasonable and laudable. However, one of the major shortcomings of the book is that it only occasionally takes into consideration that this is too large a time span to investigate without making careful and due distinctions between very different decades in early modern English culture. The early boom of professional London theaters in the 1590s under Queen Elizabeth I, followed by a gradually changing cultural climate in the first two decades of Jacobean rule, can only be compared to the late Caroline period of James Shirley (after 1625) with careful distinctions. August's claims of corresponding data become even more problematic when these earlier phases are lumped together with what happened in the theater-less decades of the 1640s and 1650s after the Puritans closed all professional theaters in 1642. Although there are references to how marketing and readerly considerations changed within these almost eighty years, findings are too often combined without due distinction to fit categories and conclusions, especially in Chapters 3 and 4 ("How were plays read? Part one: Extractive reading"; "How were plays read? Part two: Using, marking, annotating"), which discuss the author's fresh readings of well-known dramatic extracts in manuscripts and her original findings of readers' marks in playbooks.

The "Introduction" and the first two chapters ("Who read plays?", "Why read plays?") mostly offer an informative summary of previous scholarship in the field, citing all the major scholars and publications by Roger Chartier, Peter Stallybrass, Zachary Lesser, Alan B. Farmer, Holger Syme, Emma Smith, Heidi Brayman Hackel, just to mention of few of them. Therefore, this part of the book becomes a little too dense with information and is hard to read with such copious footnote material. Nevertheless, August makes very important claims as well, as she calls attention to the significance of the early modern "continuum of literacies" (in Brayman Hackel's phrasing,

11), besides emphasizing the role of printed paratextual material in playbooks to orientate and control readers. She also points out the potential dangers of traditional approaches in book history. Such pitfalls include the distortional effect of too much emphasis on Shakespeare-related material (according to August's numbers, out of almost six hundred playbooks of the period only 68 were by Shakespeare), or the preference of discussing elite male readers ("gentlemen readers") as opposed to ordinary readers of the period, among them women or less educated people, belonging to the "middling sorts" (such as, artisans, yeomen, servants, shopkeepers). Here August also clarifies what publication in quarto meant regarding affordability and circulation outside London, even though she enters into an unnecessary argument with other scholars regarding the traditional price (sixpence) and usual size of a playbook. These passages are neither too convincing nor supported by enough evidence, so they do not mean a valuable addition to the field.

These chapters also introduce the three main claims of the book. First, as she proposes, playbooks were popular reading material since they were read, bought, borrowed, and scribbled into continuously throughout the period, even though they never comprised more than ten percent of the print market. August seems to avoid the word "popular" intentionally, claiming that "the usefulness of the concept 'popularity' has been thrown out by numerous scholars" (3), which is neither a correct claim nor a wise choice. A more careful consideration of what "popular" meant in these decades and how the concept and content of popular culture evolved in the commercial print and theater worlds might have helped balance some of the claims of the later chapters.

August's second major contention is that readers turned to playbooks as to other reading materials, only rarely considering their theatrical origin. Although we have records of playbooks being read out by readers in smaller groups (August mentions Edward Derring), the majority of evidence points to readers using playbooks as other quarto-sized books, showing the same modes of engagement with them from extracting wise or witty sayings and highlighting erotic or other amusing material to scribbling and inserting original material (owners' marks, lists, poems, records of family events). The so-called "commonplace book" culture of the time, originating in Humanist education, was readily applicable to playbook readers as well. They mined these texts for moral and linguistic profit, which is shown by August's fresh readings of the extracts made by three such well-known educated male readers of the time: gentleman reader Edward Pudsey (1573–ca.1612), Scottish poet William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585–1649), and poet-

preacher Abraham Wright (1611–1690) in Chapter 3. She pays close attention to changes in their handwriting, how these readers imitated playbook typefaces in different hands, how they changed performative markers for re-cycling them in personal communication, or to use them for their own poetic purposes, that is, how they adhered to and transformed the Erasmian tenet of commonplacing for rhetorical and moral profit, complementing received wisdom with entertaining bawdy or misogynistic extracts.

The third important argument of the book is that playbooks were bought, borrowed, and used by a heterogeneous readership, even if in most cases we can only speculate about the historical identity of a reader, especially in the case of people belonging to the middling or lower sorts, who did not leave any other historical trace. In the last chapter different types of marginalia by these unknown readers are inspiringly discussed, even though putting them into clearly defined categories regarding how "theatrical" the readers' response is appears somewhat more limiting than helpful and remains ambiguous by its own nature, since we may only guess at early modern readers' intentions.

The book offers numerous valuable discussions which are supported by original and innovative research, for instance, the readerly expectations based on authors' names, or the tension between publishers targeting wide audiences and authors trying to tailor their work to a specific readerly group, with a focus on Thomas Heywood and James Shirley. On the other hand, some claims of the book are easily confuted, like the awareness of Horace's and Italian theorists' writings instead of Puttenham's and Sidney's books among early modern readers, or the use of the word "wit" and "pleasant" as suggesting comedy and erotica in playbook title pages, or the emphasis on genre distinctions when genre indications like "history" were semantically flexible in the period. Some more detailed case studies might have served the argumentation better, like the one on the Bodleian copy of the 1618 edition of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, where the anonymous reader connected the motif of grief with a family death record and a poem by Henry King in handwritten marginalia (189–92). Nevertheless, the book informatively maps out the expectations and responses of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century readers of playbooks and offers a solid basis for further and even more nuanced research in the field; therefore, it is an important addition to book history and early modern cultural studies.

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Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies
31.1 (2025): 265-270
doi: 10.2478/hjeas/2025/31/1/15

Mapping Erasure: England's Insular Fantasy and the Vanishing of Scotland

Attila Dósa

Hutson, Lorna. *England's Insular Imagining: The Elizabethan Erasure of Scotland.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2024. xii + 320 pages. ISBN 9781009253575. Hb. £30.

At a time of renewed debate about national sovereignty and identity, Lorna Hutson's *England's Insular Imagining* offers a timely examination of how cultural artifacts from the early modern period shaped and perpetuated the ideology of English dominance. By analyzing literature, legal rhetoric, paintings, and cartographic representations, Hutson uncovers England's cultural project that erased Scotland's sovereignty and reinforced England's imperial ambitions. Through an interdisciplinary approach, she shows how the idea of English insularity and maritime supremacy was constructed that subtly subordinated Scotland while projecting an image of British unity. Hutson's work not only dismantles the self-proclaimed myth of English indifference to Scottish sovereignty but also illuminates the mechanisms by which cultural products shape political ideologies—a critique that has profound implications for understanding the legacy of British imperialism in both history and contemporary political culture.

With this volume, Hutson builds on her outstanding work in the field of early modern literary studies, in which she has looked at intersections of rhetoric, law, and national identity. Her earlier book, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford UP, 2007), examined the role of legal rhetoric and evidential practice in shaping early modern drama and offered groundbreaking insights into the ways in which Shakespeare's works reflect the epistemic framework of their time. Now, Hutson broadens her focus to examine how these rhetorical strategies not only reflect imperial ideologies but actually shape them.

The interdisciplinary methodology of this volume places it in a broader scholarly tradition, alongside influential works such as Richard Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (U of Chicago P, 1992), which examines how early modern literature shaped English identity, and Lauren Benton's *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge UP, 2009), which investigates spatial and legal claims in the making of empires. Hutson's innovation lies in the interweaving of these perspectives. For example, while Helgerson focuses largely on canonical texts such as Shakespeare and

Spenser, Hutson integrates visual and geographical artifacts such as the famous "Ditchley" portrait of Elizabeth from 1592 by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger and Elizabethan cartographer Laurence Nowell's maps to show that England's insularity was as much a visual as a literary construct.

Central to Hutson's argument is how English cultural productions systematically erased Scotland's role as a sovereign nation and reduced it to a symbolic or marginal presence in narratives of British unity. Hutson shows how English narratives and visual products reframed Scotland as territorially and politically insignificant, thus diminishing its historical agency through ambiguous and often dismissive symbols. In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, for example, the term "Scot" is used ambiguously as shorthand for a territory, a rebel or an abstract threat, without ever acknowledging the King or the Kingdom of Scotland as an independent entity. This rhetorical ambiguity, Hutson argues, served to obscure Scotland's importance within the British Isles while reinforcing England's dominant role. Similarly, in *Macbeth*, Scotland is imagined as a kingdom, but its portrayal is oriented towards residual medieval ideologies of vassalage, which delicately subordinates its independence to England's imperial vision.

Her analysis of English insularity shows how Elizabethan and Jacobean cultural productions constructed an image of Britain as a unified, self-contained nation protected by the sea. This narrative relied heavily on maritime metaphors, such as Britain as an island with the sea as its walls, to emphasize natural boundaries and disguise internal divisions, particularly with Scotland. Hutson examines how rhetoric supported this narrative, analyzing in Chapter 5 Edmund Plowden's 1567 *Treatise on the Succession*, among many other early modern legal and military texts. Plowden's arguments positioned England as the center of a naval empire and tied its sovereignty to control of the seas rather than the disputed lands to the north of the country. By depicting the sea as both a defensive barrier and a unifying force, cultural productions such as cartographic and chorographic representations diverted attention away from the land border with Scotland, effectively erasing its political implication. This construction of insularity not only reinforced the notion of England as an inherently sovereign entity but also laid the foundations for its future imperial ambitions by presenting maritime dominance as a logical extension of its geographical identity. In addition to maps, other products of visual culture also played a key role in creating or contributing to this narrative, as shown by the "Ditchley" portrait of Elizabeth I that Hutson examines in Chapter 3. In this iconic image,

Elizabeth stands over a map of England, surrounded by the sea, with Scotland notably absent from its northern borders.

Hutson's examination of Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* (1605) in Chapter 7 also reveals how England's insular identity was closely linked to imperial and racial ideologies. She analyzes Jonson's depiction of blackness versus pigment removal as metaphors for assimilation to Britannia: by the end of the masque, blackness is reduced to a layer of soluble paint applied to white skin (221). This removable "blackness" symbolizes the condition of incorporation into the imagined British Empire, in which racial and cultural difference must be erased or transformed to conform to English identity. Jonson's play reflects a broader strategy that aims to define England's insular unity not only by what it includes but also by what it excludes, making whiteness the core of Britannia's identity. Jonson's conceptualization of blackness as an inherent, immutable quality of those outside Britain is reminiscent of England's treatment of Scotland in earlier cultural productions. Much like Scotland, which was erased or rendered marginal and unassimilable in English visual and textual representations, the masque constructs blackness as a symbolic marker of exclusion. By positioning England at the center of an expanding multiracial empire, Jonson envisions a global imperial reach, but one that simultaneously preempts the full inclusion of those outside its boundaries. This dual strategy—of projecting an expansive imperial vision while maintaining strict racial and cultural hierarchies—ties Jonson's masque to the broader patterns of erasure and inclusion that Hutson reveals throughout the book.

Hutson also highlights the powerful role of myth in the construction of insular identity and England's imperial ambitions and shows how narratives of unity and overlordship shaped national and imperial consciousness. At the center of her analysis is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* (1136), which served as a foundation for Union propaganda during the reign of James VI. These medieval myths portrayed Britain as a unified island nation under the legendary rule of Brutus and his descendants, a narrative that conveniently marginalized Scotland by excluding its distinct history and identity. Hutson shows how these myths were weaponized in political discourse to justify James's accession and the vision of a unified Britain by presenting England's supremacy as both natural and historically inevitable.

Hutson situates her analysis of cultural erasure and identity construction in the political crises of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, focusing on the tense debates over the union of England and Scotland. With

the succession of James VI to the English throne in 1603, these tensions came to the fore, and issues of sovereignty, mutual naturalization, and national identity became deeply contested. Hutson highlights how legal rhetoric, particularly in Plowden's *Treatise*, portrayed the Union as a consolidation of English dominance. Plowden's "geopolitical theology" (174) translated England's claims of authority over Scotland into constitutional terms and presented the Union not as a negotiation between equal kingdoms but as an extension of English control under the guise of British unity.

In Chapter 8, Hutson examines how these anxieties are reflected in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. While the play is not explicitly about the Union, it takes up themes of division and union and reflects the contentious relationship between England and Scotland. Hutson argues that the fragmentation of Lear's kingdom and the ensuing chaos reflect the tensions that arise when a single ruler presides over two politically distinct nations. Shakespeare's alteration of the traditional Lear narrative—rejecting the redemptive arc of earlier versions—emphasizes the uncertainty and instability that surrounded the Union debates.

Hutson's style is both incisive and subversive. She brings literary theory, historical criticism, and global perspectives to her analysis to challenge accepted narratives of England's imperial expansion in the early modern period. Her examination of sources from the Anglo-Scottish wars of the sixteenth century illustrates her ambition to deconstruct the ideological manipulation embedded in language. For example, by describing the phrase "rough wooing" as carnivalesque, she exposes how this euphemism—ironically, first coined by the Scottish historian Patrick Abercromby, later popularized by Sir Walter Scott—trivializes the brutal military campaigns of Henry VIII and Edward Seymour, the first Duke of Somerset, and hides systemic violence under a playful metaphor of courtship. Hutson argues that such trivializations, including the condescending representations of violence found in William Patten's *The Expedition into Scotland* (1548), continue to perpetuate a superficial recognition of this devastating conflict, often still jocularly referred to by contemporary military historians.

Hutson's examination of metalepsis in these early modern texts—from literature to legal documents, letters, war reports, and more—further underpins her interdisciplinary approach. Metalepsis, traditionally a narrative device in literary works, becomes a powerful metaphor for how English propaganda reshaped historical narratives by transferring the causes of war onto the Scots and absolving England of its responsibility. This rhetorical

sleight of hand mirrors the disruption of historical causality by propaganda, which inserts ideological justification in place of facts.

Her invocation of Lauren Benton's work on rivers as instruments of imperial claims brings a global dimension to her analysis. By comparing Somerset's riverine strategies in Scotland with those employed in the Americas, Hutson situates these conflicts within a continuum of imperialist practices. This comparison underscores the universality of spatial manipulation in conquest and appraise the ideological contradictions of empire, such as Somerset's metaphor of Britain as a naturally unified island, which obscures the military violence needed to enforce that unity. This thematic parallel between Scotland and global imperial spaces decouples England's actions from any claims to exceptionalism and shows how its tactics fit into broader patterns of domination.

Ultimately, Lorna Hutson's *England's Insular Imagining* is a landmark contribution to the study of early modern Britain, offering a compelling examination of how English cultural productions erased Scotland's sovereign identity while constructing an insular, imperial British mythos. Challenging both historical and critical complacency, Hutson dismantles sanitized narratives of English expansion. By revealing how language and metaphor mask violence, she pushes readers to reconsider the ideological underpinnings of history and criticism. Through careful analysis of literature, legal texts, and cartography, Hutson exposes the subtle but pervasive ways in which English narratives subordinated Scotland's agency and transformed diverse histories into a unified vision of England's supremacy. What distinguishes this book is its interdisciplinary depth and its ability to link early modern cultural strategies to enduring myths in British political and academic culture. Hutson's work not only sheds light on the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras but also invites us to reflect on the tensions between England and Scotland and the myths that continue to shape these relations. In the age of post-Brexit and renewed debates about Scottish independence, the book's insights feel as urgent as they are illuminating. While its dense style may be challenging for some readers, the book's scholarly rigor and provocative conclusions reward close attention. *England's Insular Imagining* not only rewrites our understanding of British history but also challenges us to engage with the narratives that define national identity today. It is essential reading for historians, literary scholars, and anyone interested in the cultural and political foundations of Britain as we know it.

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