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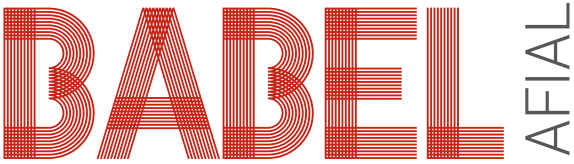
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A View of the Chemical Valley: Waste and Wasting in Jennilee Austria-Bonifacio's "The Outsiders"

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Abstract: This paper analyses "The Outsiders", the sixth short story included in Canadian Jennilee Austria-Bonifacio's 2023 collection *Reuniting with Strangers*, from the productive juncture at the intersection of environmental and eco-social justice theories. With special attention to the local-international scale of globalisation processes, and the defiance brought to light by the attempt at narrating eco-social violence, it is proposed first that the so-called Anthropogenic Great Acceleration, which chronologically encloses Filipinos' first massive arrivals at Canada, also provides a context in which to weave a critical dialogue between turbo-capitalist ecological disposability and human dispensability within toxic neoliberal power structures. Secondly, it is argued that, within a general context of dynamic wasting relations, the story articulates a general repoliticisation of the current socio-ecological crisis in which a transnational alliance based on sharing and caring reduces power asymmetries and provokes a collapse of the dualities scaffolding concepts like home and outsider to advocate instead their multiscalar refiguration.

Keywords: Jennilee Austria-Bonifacio, "The Outsiders", waste and wasting, Filipino Canadian, Canadian literature.

Una panorámica del Valle Químico: Basura y Basurización en "The Outsiders", de Jennilee Austria-Bonifacio

Resumen: Este artículo analiza "The Outsiders", el sexto relato breve que la canadiense Jennilee Austria-Bonifacio incluye en su colección *Reuniting with Strangers* (2023), desde la coyuntura productiva a la que da lugar la intersección de las teorías de justicia ambiental y ecosocial. Con especial atención a la escala local-internacional de los procesos de globalización y al desafío presente en el intento de narrar la violencia ecosocial, se propone en primer lugar que la llamada Gran Aceleración Antropogénica, que enmarca cronológicamente las primeras llegadas masivas de filipinos a Canadá, también proporciona un contexto en el que establecer un diálogo crítico entre la desechabilidad ecológica turbocapitalista y la prescindibilidad humana dentro de las estructuras tóxicas de poder neoliberales. Se sostiene en segundo lugar que, dentro de un contexto general de relaciones dinámicas de basurización, el relato articula una repolitización general de la actual crisis socioecológica en la que una alianza transnacional basada en la distribución y el cuidado reduce las asimetrías de poder y facilita un colapso de dualidades como las que sostienen los conceptos del hogar y lo foráneo, para promover en su lugar una reconfiguración multiescalar.

Palabras clave: Jennilee Austria-Bonifacio, "The Outsiders", basura y basurización, filipino canadienses, literatura canadiense.

1. Introduction

According to Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, the Anthropocene is characterised by a visible disjunction between knowledge production and its circulation, which may be sutured by allegorical representations given the power of such a trope to feature a dynamic nature in contrast to the future of humans on Earth (3-4). In her view, allegory is well-known for "its embeddedness in history (time), its construction of a world system (space) and its signification practices in which the particular figures for the general and the local for the global" (5). The challenge to render anthropogenic violence representable and readable could in this form match the aim to raise ecological and social awareness in global times of international displacement, resettlement and community transformations.

Critics like Rob Nixon are more precise in their classification of the current times and venture to state that our current moment is that of the Great Acceleration, the second anthropogenic phase, and its "accelerated connectivity" (12), one that has affected the rates of human attention under the effect of "info-whelm[ing]" (Nixon 12). This stage of information excess modifies relations among human community members, their place-based bonds and their self-representations. Drawing on the work by Will Steffen, the Great Acceleration also comprises post-1950s changes in fields as diverse as nation building, shipping, consumption and disposability. For DeLoughrey, these are part and parcel of "the material 'fall out' of globalization" and involve "a recognition of a 'disembedding' of the human from place, in relation not just to the mobility of circuits of capital and culture, but also to the planet itself" (27).

In opposition to DeLoughrey and Nixon, historian Marco Armiero differentiates our present from the Anthropocene. While every anthropogenic story concedes waste a central role to abound on humans' capacity to turn the environment into a "gigantic dump" (Armiero 9), the Wasteocene juxtaposes literal and metaphorical residue to investigate the process of wasting, the "socio-ecological relations creating wasted people and wasted places" (Armiero 10; Armiero and De Angelis 356). In taking into consideration these eco-social factors, the Wasteocene draws attention to the presumed neutrality underlying the anthropogenic stage and unveils unequal responsibilities among the

capital-based social groups having the agency to affect the environment, and those affected together with their habitats. In this sense, the Wasteocene "repoliticises the socio-ecological crisis" (Armiero 11) and presents wasting as a process of negotiation between unequal actors. That process is a constituent of the necessary attempt at (re)imagining how personal and communal subjectivities are in an ongoing political transformation in global, present-day times plagued with neocolonial attitudes, neoliberal policies and boundary-making strategies oriented to the containment of difference.

This paper analyses "The Outsiders", the sixth short story included in Canadian Jennilee Austria-Bonifacio's 2023 collection *Reuniting with Strangers*, from the productive juncture at the intersection of environmental and eco-social justice theories. Paying special attention to the local-international scale of globalisation processes and the "major challenge" involved to "devise arresting stories" able to reflect a "pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects" (Nixon 2), one able to simultaneously wastify humans and the environment, it is proposed first that "The Outsiders" intertextualises the anthropogenic Great Acceleration and its socio-economic shifts. This period provides a context for a critical dialogue between turbo-capitalist ecological disposability and human dispensability within toxic neoliberal power structures. Secondly, it is argued that, within a general context of dynamic wasting relations, the story articulates a general repoliticisation of the current socio-ecological crisis in which a transnational alliance of sharing and caring reduces power asymmetries and provokes a collapse of the dualities underlying concepts such as home and outsider to propose in turn their multiscalar reconfiguration.

Reuniting with Strangers interweaves nine seemingly independent stories revolving around the breach and reunion of Filipino families in the context of a migratory passage to Canada. Under the improbable name of Monolith, a child diagnosed with a severe autistic grade appears in all of them, sometimes centrally, and some others, tangentially, as it is the case in "The Outsiders". Monolith's silent presence raises some pertinent questions on his role as a catalyst of structural and communal cohesion in the collection. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines a monolith as a "single block of stone, esp. a large one shaped (frequently in prehistoric times) into a pillar or monument" ("Monolith" n. p.), a

definition that assembles connotations such as sturdiness, support or common origin out of a single mother stone, which bring Monolith to mind as a commemorating emblem of the Filipino community grappling with DeLoughrey's "disembedding" from place. Monolith, like most of the characters in the collection, is both inheritor and protagonist of the Wasteocene, "a planetary phenomenon", which materialises on "particular bodies, ecologies and stories" (Armiero 31), tainting them all with a residual aura.

As evidence of the connectivity provided by the (post-) Great Acceleration within the frames of a disjunctive neo-imperialist, neoliberal Canadianness, *The Canadian Encyclopedia* online dates the first arrivals of Filipinos as early as the nineteenth century and the proliferation of communities from the 1960s on to presently reach almost one million members and become the most numerous of the Southeast Asian Canadian groups (Laquian n. p.). Whereas large unemployment rates and overpopulation are given as propellers for leaving the Philippines, Canada first sponsored international hosting initiatives like the Caregiver Programme (1982–91), which mostly fuelled the immigration of women from the islands, and thus feminised caregiving, and later encouraged the reunification of families. As a matter of fact, Filipinos arriving in Canada go "first in the independent immigrants category" (Laquian n. p.), their current rate of desirability constructed on their qualified aptitude to contribute to the receptor's society and economy. *Reuniting with Strangers* is imbricated in a "regime of disposability" (DeLoughrey 100), setting aptitude and desirability rates against the wastification of Filipino workers, whose residual, low-waged jobs and the hard, living conditions of their transcontinental resettling are ingrained within a neo-imperialist vested sponsorship.

"The Outsiders" presents readers with a double structure whose conflictual halves contradict and supplement each other, toying with a dualist thinking separated by generations, geography and cultures, and an unlikely eventual reconciliation of views. On the one hand, Canadian-born Avril's first-person narration looks back to reach the present. Both her parents, former petrochemical workers settled in Sarnia in the 1970s, died of cancer, while her younger sibling Paulo left for Toronto. Avril's resentment is firstly projected onto Paulo for leaving their parents' home. While she had to become an underage

bar worker to contribute to the family's economy, he was pampered to only focus on the pursuit of his degree and career as a nurse. Avril's bitterness is also directed to her relatives in the Philippines, the recipients of periodical remittances from her parents. The family in Taguig, situated in Metropolitan Manila, is headed by her uncle Edmond, who requested endless payments to afford a remodelled house where Avril's parents were talked into retiring and resuming family life. Neither survived to return to Manila, and instead their money has provided Edmond with a comfortable life. His wife Manuela, in a late wave of Filipino immigration, left for Canada as a caregiver, and in the present time of the story is now ready to bring her offspring to the country: fifteen-year-old Edman and his sister Monela, aged seventeen. That is the moment when, via Paulo, Edmond and Manuela ask Avril, who is now office admin staff, to share her house with them. Avril has grown up a loner, and thus cohabitation proves tough and family bonds meaningless to her.

On the other hand, the second part of the narrative accommodates Monela's first-person perceptions as she documents her early landing in Canada. Her disappointment with her new life in Sarnia poses a stark contrast with her recent past in pleasant and advanced Taguig. Monela demystifies the dream of a Canadian education as the only way to progress and destabilises the ossified representation of things Filipino that Avril inherited from her parents and preserved most of her life. Monela's decision to return to Manila and to Edmond pinpoint Sarnia as far from the ultimate end of her life journey: "Sarnia isn't my final destination" (Austria-Bonifacio 122), she resolutely states as an opening to the future. "The Outsiders" displays a complex dual temporality that looks back and forth, from the past of the Filipino Canadians in Sarnia and to the future, to entertain the viability of a return to the archipelago. Such a perspective is darkened by the durability of chemicals in living beings and habitats, and their transportability, and marks the globality of risk society and its future orientation with "chemical and toxicological contamination", as Molly Wallace holds, determining a transition from the first to the second modernity of global risk (12).

Significantly, *The Canadian Encyclopedia* closes its entry for "Filipino Canadians" by recalling how fluent bilateral relations were jeopardised in 2019, when it was revealed that some Canadian "containers full of

waste were stuck in the Philippines since 2013–14" (Laquian n. p.). While Canada insisted on their "recyclable" content, the Philippines urged their repatriation to Canada, and it was Canada that finally returned the containers home (Laquian n. p.). However, the incident rekindled the controversy raised in 1991, when chief economist of the International Bank Lawrence Summers, in a memo to his institution, put forward hauling the toxic debris of the industrialised North to less-developed African countries, which he later dismissed as his parody of neoliberal strategies of waste disposal (66; see DeLoughrey 102; see Nixon 1, 3, 17). Summers's proposal belied much of a neo-imperialist distribution of the globe with economic superpowers that, situated mainly in the northern regions of the planet, wastify the less developed southern countries, and what is more, an unequal "global risk distribution", as Wallace affirms, one with "some benefiting from others' losses; some able to shield themselves from hazard, environmental or otherwise", but also a "cosmopolitan spirit of shared hazard" with individuals that "experience their shared condition of 'being-at-risk'" (12). Wallace concludes that "while the globalized nature of risk can be an opportunity, risks are always represented and experienced unevenly" (22). Unevenness is what the dynamic wasting exposes, while it adumbrates a possibility of renegotiation. Within its scope, we now turn to analysing "The Outsiders" as paradigmatic of a double wastification process nurtured by the Great Acceleration and its multifarious changes to later focus on how sharing and caring reduce social and emotional asymmetries thanks to a multiscalar reconfiguration of duality-based concepts, such as home and outsider.

2. Sarn-hole: Wasting People and Places

In "The Outsiders", the enmeshing of neo-imperialist neoliberal state practices affect Filipinos and one of the places where their community resettled massively, Sarnia, in southwest Ontario. The unceded territories of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation or Chippewas are now dotted with refineries and oil industry plants, a living testimony of how settler colonialist extractivism affects the environment and dwelling species, in a complete modification of habitats and strategies of survival to eventually impose on their "vernacular landscape" an "official" one, which "writes the land in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-

driven manner" (Nixon 17). Early Indigenous communities were deteriorated, displaced or extinguished, their existence inflected by the double sense of waste, as loss and detritus. In the area, settler colonialism turned them into "disposable people" (Nixon 4), who preceded a later repopulation with Europeans, and in the middle and late twentieth century, with a large volume of Filipino immigrants. The Sarnia area has often been reported as being one of the most polluted in Canada and with high rates of cancer (MacDonald n. p.), making it difficult to overlook a connection between the cheap accommodation deriving from toxicity and the settlement of Filipinos there. As Avril soon states at the beginning of "The Outsiders", "we […] know that without the Chemical Valley, we wouldn't have our three-bedroom houses; our trucks and cars; our education; our entire damn lives" (108). "Chemical and radiological violence is driven inward", Nixon says, "somatised into cellular dramas of mutation that particularly in the bodies of the poor remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated" (6). Radiological violence has preyed on the bodies of the Filipino community and made Sarnia inhospitable. Imbibed by this reality, "The Outsiders" unfolds a double wastification of people and place, triggered from the state and the community, at local and international levels, which reverses the cliched identification of Canada and the Philippines with a "garden" and a "dump" (Armiero 10), respectively.

In the story, Sarnia is a post-industrial geography whose toxicity replicates Cynthia Deitering's "riskscape" (200) and Lawrence Buell's "betrayed Eden" (647). It is, in other words, an enclave that thanks to human vicious extractivism is not "useful" anymore but "harmful" (Deitering 200). For nearly two centuries, Sarnia has been the object of a gradual degradation that contravenes the traditional connotations of any violent act as momentous, spectacular and sudden. Instead, it falls within the scope of Rob Nixon's slow violence, namely, a man-made, gradual aggression of long-lasting sequels, erosive and hardly visual, but "incremental and accretive" (2), wasting human bodies and the place of their dwelling.

Between its blooming past in the 1990s and its disgruntled present of bankrupt business and ramshackle edifices, Avril's pride for being a local goes hand in hand with the decline of Sarn-hole, which is how townspeople refer to Sarnia, since "we don't tolerate disrespect"

(108). The story rapidly forges a cause-effect relation between industry, cancer rates and the community's decreasing activity in town, since "as the titas and titos died of cancer", Avril asserts, "the only thing that brought our community together was funerals" (109). Unlike most of her fellows, Avril stays in town to pay homage to her parents' sacrifice by preserving their legacy. That seems to be what sparks a conflict with her own brother. For her, those deserting Sarnia, like Paulo, were resorting to "sob stories about Cancer Valley to get [themselves] a free-ride scholarship outta here" (110).

As a product of the anthropogenic Great Acceleration, "The Outsiders" relies on a settler-based, local turbo-capitalist exploitation of resources to reach exhaustion. First, oil extraction and its refinement have polluted Sarnia: "We have to put up with loud-ass emergency warning siren tests every Monday at 12:30 sharp" (108), Avril warns. Even so, locals would drive visitors for a sightseeing tour at dusk "when all the smokestacks were lit up against the night sky, the emissions glowing neon under the flare" (109). At that time, the question "looks just like Vegas, don't it?" (109) was launched, and if visitors hesitated, car windows would be opened for them to breathe "the burning fumes" (109), just for a second before, terrified of being intoxicated, they confirmed "it's beautiful" (109), followed by the shutting up of car windows.

This visible and unbreathable decimation of local Sarnia in the story is paired with international transformations in Filipino nation-building processes, consumption and disposability of human and material resources. While the bilateral programme Caregiver fractured community and family ties, it also produced a controlled displacement of Filipino labour force and a disconnection from place and homeland; it also was a repository of qualified economical workers that escaped the unemployment and overpopulation of the Philippines. In February 2025, the Government of Canada website still announced in its Immigration/Citizenship section what seemed to be the remaining echoes of that early wastification: "If you don't meet the requirements for permanent residence you may be able to work temporarily as a caregiver" ("Government of Canada" n. p.), which offers a relaxation of entry and hosting policies in turn for specialised caregiving work. As Zygmunt Bauman states, economic migrants share with asylum seekers

their "global origin", and their "contribut[ion] to a stalemate state of affairs", helping states in their reaffirmation of borders, from their role as the "waste of globalization" (58). In this sense, *the outsiders* may convey not only a reference to newcomers in Sarnia or any other town community, but also to anyone walled off by the state in conditions different from the exceptional permeability of its borders that Filipino workers were presented with. Avril's unnamed parents in the story reflect the early Filipino migration, whose conditions were not as benevolent as those in practice for their descendants and were therefore much closer to residual citizens to whom Bauman refers as "human waste". For him, "the production of 'human waste', or more correctly 'wasted humans'" includes "the 'excessive' and 'redundant', ([…] those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay)", and "is a by-product of modernization, and an outcome of modernity" (5).

Globalisation and its modern and free circulation of capital has also brought the Philippines territorial speculation, trends of consumerism and international tourism, creating an uneven juxtaposition of local and international landscapes as a result (Appadurai 33). In Monela's description, Taguig has passed from being a former fishing village to "the pride of Metro Manila" (124), as "developers turned the area around us into a million luxury condos and designer shops" (122). In her own family, as she reveals, Edmond "respectfully rejected all of the developers' offers, knowing that our land would be worth more money year after year" (119). In the present time of the "the Outsiders", the Philippines and Canada then swap places with Taguig and Sarnia as landfill and heaven, two concepts destabilised in the passage across the Pacific that the discourse of globality brings about in the story, through its exploitation of a tensile flexibility of cultural, economic, political or environmental factors to finally render borders redundant (Steger 9).

Despite the generational gap setting them apart, first-wave Filipino migrants to Canada, like Avril's parents, just as those in a second wave, like Manuela, intended to improve their living conditions with a Canadian heaven in mind. Thus, Manuela left first for Shanghai then to Calgary to help her family, since Edmond's "crappy high school diploma" (115) was not enough to support them all. Likewise, in the past time frame of "The Outsiders", Avril's parents fairly contributed to

improving the lives of relatives in Taguig from their Canadian stability: "Paulo and I never had much", Avril says of her domestic situation, but "back in the Philippines, they need friggin' everything" (111). Her parents used to spend hours purchasing essential products to send over to Taguig: "Hanes briefs, Always Pads, Centrum vitamins, Band-Aids, Kleenex, Spam and Hereford Corned beef" were packed in cardboard "balikbayan" boxes. As Avril explains, "balik" stands for return and "'bayan' meant 'the country', but there was no way in hell that we'd ever be going back" (111). Daily products give way rapidly to second-hand clothes and toys as Avril's parents' preferences for regular shipping to the islands once her seventeen-year-old uncle Edmond is known to imminently become a father. For Avril, also seventeen at the time, the perspective is "so trailer trash" (112).

However, there is a turning point in the story as her parents stop sending second-hand goods and, in turn, send new furnishings and money to remodel their family's old house: "'Why does the Philippines get new bedsheets when we've had the same ones since I was born?' […] 'And how come they get fluffy new towels when ours have holes in them?'" (113), Avril wonders, realising how her family's consumption and disposal trends have varied. "Why do they get fancy pillows when we've got these ghetto flat ones?" (113), she concludes. Her parents' determination to retire in Manila and found a definitive Taguig home accounts for the beginning of a new era of 24-hour reception to remittance petitions, as the family in Taguig "kept calling to ask for house renovation money like they believed our smokestacks were spewing out hundred-dollar bills" (113). When they became severely ill, moving to Manila was impossible for Avril's parents, as was keeping them comfortable in their last days, since "all of our comfortable things were on the other side of the world" (114). For Avril, Sarnia is her family's *home*; the *home* in Taguig that her parents envisioned is where the "effing leeches" (114), those who wasted their lives, are still having the settled life that they sponsored.

Together with the financial exploitation of Avril's parents from inside the Filipino community, the story draws on a general wastification, playing at times with the enhanced obsolescence of products and their required expendability, from teen Avril's riding of a "rusty Crappy Tire bike" (113) to her present driving of a "rusty, black truck" (125)

in which the cassette player still works (110). Avril herself seems to be fond of that oldness, but her scruffy appearance rapidly incites Monela's comment to equate it to aging, with special attention to her unsmart attire of "baggy clothes", which is worsened by unmoisturized skin and oily, uncombed hair (121). Sarnia, in turn, sometime a vibrant hub of Filipinos, is now an aged dormant city of scarce commercial activity in Avril's description, with "Value Village" as the most alluring place "where folks donate the crap they don't want so other folks can get it for dirt cheap" (123). The family house cannot escape this atmosphere of decrepitude either, and Monela's attention is rapidly drawn to closets hoarding "old, green Catholic uniforms", not to mention "shelves with outdated encyclopaedias", inside which folded Gravol boxes, sometime bookmarks (121), can still be found. Paulo's long study periods were usually taken with the aid of such a medicine normally used against dizziness, like that produced by car or boat displacements. Therefore, a connection between movement, like that of local or transcontinental migration, and knowledge accumulation to contribute to social ascent and stability is inescapable, as also is the association between them and sickness.

In a similar sense, Monela is quick in realising that disease and the town of Sarnia can easily go hand in hand in the Filipino community's recent history. Instead of an impressive "macopa tree", like those back in the Philippines, from her open window, the newcomer girl now sees "a horrific view of smokestacks that belch wispy clouds into the air" (122). Her impressions on how humans are endangered by this wasting of the land are verified by Avril's mother's breast and her father's pancreatic cancers, which add to the many other cases that reduced the community and discouraged living members from continuing in Sarnia. "Sarnia is Cancer Alley", Avril explains to Monela: "lung cancer, colon cancer, pancreatic cancer, you name it and we've had a tito or tita who's died from it" (127). According to her, "after the Dow Refinery was shut down, Dad's only happiness was waiting for the Sting to play so he could scan the crowd at the hockey games and see which of his old coworkers were still alive" (127). Intoxicated bodies and lives in a panorama of perceptible decimation of resources moors them to "a social process through which class, race and gender injustices become embedded into the socio-ecological metabolism producing both gardens and dumps" (10), namely, Armiero's full definition of what wasting involves, the

creation of "socio-ecological relations" (Armiero 10) producing wasted people and places.

In Taguig, however, capital remitted from abroad has definitely created a gardening effect, a general material improvement accompanied by a perceived reality of social ascent. Manuela's "caregiving remittances" afforded Edmond and his children "a new car, tailored clothes, skin bleaching, hair rebonding treatments" and "the best private schools" (120). Avril's mother's "funds", in turn, let Edmond benefit from "the incredible dollars to pesos exchange rate to pay for an entire renovation of the house" (120), one now exhibiting "design features that made us look like mysterious old money". Yet "air-conditioning and hot water and a new roof" were followed by "a taste for imported goods", these ranging from "hand-painted Portuguese floor tiles" and "a hand-carved Indonesian dining table" to "a Japanese toilet with all the fancy buttons", and finally "private English tutors" for Edman and Monela to acquire "the foreign accent that every Filipino coveted so much" (120). Tagalog was not spoken any longer and they easily passed as "balikbayans visiting from abroad" (120). Hoarding money for them runs parallel to the discarding of all things Filipino and the accumulation of international influences treasured as a symptom of economic affluence.

The connectivity of the Great Acceleration is fundamental in triggering the purchase and shipping of goods bound to be consumed and/or discarded, or in activating family bonds in the service of that same consumption. Asking for funds incessantly, midnight telephone calls from Taguig distress Avril and her family in the past time of the story, so much so that she switches off her parents' telephone and leaves her own off the hook, to only hear a "beep-beep-beep" that Avril calls "a sound of peace" (117). In the present of "The Outsiders", Avril receives via text message Manuela's request to share the house (114), just before she welcomes her kids with selfies at the airport (119). After hopping off from the Robert Q shuttle in Sarnia, Monela's first view of the city as a "disappointing place" (118) is endorsed by the size of Avril's TV set, which is "half the size of the one we have at home" (119). But her brother and Manuela are so excited that they "insist on friending" the cabbie on Facebook (121). If Monela usually texts her father at Taguig (124) so as to persuade him to let her return, Manuela is fond of continually taking selfies and uploading them to Facebook

(119) for Edmond to follow them from the Philippines, and Edman is enthusiastic about "pulling out his phone" to record "how the cars signal to change lanes" or "how Canadians drive like they're being tested by driving instructors!" (126). Seventeen years earlier, when Monela and Edman were born, Paulo created his first Yahoo email account to be in contact, as he and his sister would be the children's "ninong" (115)– godfather and godmother. But now conversations are held on Facebook Live (133), and life in Canada is streamed frequently. Monela and Paulo video chat while he is at work caring for a recently arrived child in his nursing centre, a "drowsy" Monolith. Just guessing, Monela believes that Monolith's silence results from being "overwhelmed" (131), not to say "info-whelmed", as Rob Nixon defines humans' usual condition in our current times. This present moment of information excess and disposability, however, may also be the ground for sparking ethical commitment in the form of an antidote to wasting, to which we now turn.

3. Taguig-Sarnia-Taguig: Reuniting Outsiders at Home

The video conference that Monela conducts with Paulo is her attempt at finding a way to soften Avril's hermetic attitude. It is her impression that Avril, like Monolith, reflects "the longing for company and love and the cry for help, but without the words to ask" (132). In a scene of overconnectivity and accessible communication, the opposite effect is prevailingly produced, as new and more numerous forms of self-representation hardly end disconnection among individuals or community fragmentation, which results in isolation. This contemporary evil that the *reuniting* alluded to in the title of Austria Bonifacio's collection nuances and presumably counteracts, despite the defamiliarization that displacement and relocation have also brought about, nourishes and is in turn nourished by the wasting ambience that "The Outsiders" recreates. From his peripheral presence in the story, as elsewhere in the collection, Monolith draws attention to the relevance of community bonds, and the need to reformulate them in keeping with premises of diasporic subjectivity. In the representation of that subjectivity, alliances of sharing and caring reduce distance and power asymmetries.

It is not incidental that during Monela's video conference with Paulo, he is backgrounded by posters of "sharing and caring" (129). They enliven the room where he nurses newcomer Monolith, recently transferred from another centre in the Toronto Oakville suburbs (129), where he had been put "on meds" (131) to curb his violent outbursts. The dosage is now being gradually reduced to try other forms to redirect his violence during his adjustment period which is also helped by his mother's moving residence to Toronto's "Little Manila" (131). Paulo's literal caring of the child is complemented by Monela's concern with Avril's loneliness, her bunkerisation to family affect and her excessive attachment to her parents' place and time in Sarnia. As Paulo also affirms, his invitations to visit him in Toronto have always been refused, as if there is "an anchor holding her in place" (130), which impedes her "disembedding" from the enclave of her parent's resettlement and any proximity to the people that worsened their already wasted existence via economic exploitation. "By the end, they didn't have much money left in their savings" (130), Paulo recalls, partially agreeing with Avril's blaming of financial exploitation on their Taguig relatives. Despite the bleak panorama of community fragmentation, exploitative relationships from within the community can be partially dismantled thanks to the founding of emotional alliances among individuals, which Marco Armiero calls "commoning". In contrast to wasting, which "produce[s] profits for a few through othering and extraction", Armiero affirms, commoning "is reproducing communities through sharing and caring" (quoted in Simal-González, "From Waste" 178). Profiting from Avril's parents, their Taguig relatives have extinguished the sense of community, since the unidirectional relation between them has replaced affect with economic advantage.

Armiero's production of communal subjectivities needs be juxtaposed to the panorama of transcontinental displacement that Austria Bonifacio's collection is rooted in. Accordingly, an ethico-political constituent able to refigure unequal social structures is complemented by the liberatory space for the reformulation of transnational subjectivities, enabled by the cross-border circulation of global flows. What Arjun Appadurai terms the coexistence of various (ethno/cultural/financial) landscapes is uprooted and re-routed anywhere (33), creating a scene of traffic and readjustment of cultural subjects. In the service of the precarious survival of ethnicity, such a process relies on

the adaptation and meaningful reuse of cultural signifiers in the age of mass consumption of difference. The otherness mediating the relation Sarnia-Taguig, Avril-Monela, is significantly reduced when community and cultural bonds are rethought and implemented anew.

Historically, Paulo's and Avril's ties to the Philippines have been mostly severed as a reaction to their parents' wasting. For example, both have disremembered and neglected Tagalog and made English their only language. In turn, despite the social prestige attributed to articulate English fluency in the Philippines, Monela retrieves that language in the service of persuading Paulo to visit Avril, which may reignite their relationship. "I haven't used Tagalog since the English tutors rewired my brain", Monela says, "but in this moment, it all comes pouring out. Pasesinya na, Ninong. Kailangan ka ni Ate Avril" (132). Monela's help petition to Paulo seems to also partially spark a reaction from the drowsy Monolith witnessing their conversation: "Monolith blinks his huge eyes open, and his pudgy brown hands reach out to the screen" (132). His attempted hugging of Paulo's phone screen contravenes the distance that the nurse himself set with the community, partially materialised in his resistance to his parents' language. "I can't speak Tagalog […]", Paulo says, since "after our parents' generation began to die, us kids went our separate ways. […] I didn't want anything to do with Filipinos anymore" (132). Paulo's way to grapple with his trauma contradicts what Monela proposes, and Monolith emblematises: a return to community bonding despite spatial and temporal distance.

Broadly speaking, in "The Outsiders" that approximation is symbolised by the shifting implications that the term "ninang" acquires for Avril. When Monela is born, Avril grudgingly accepts being her godmother, charging the term with the exploitative aura that she associated with the Taguig family, not to mention the fact that the offer reaches Avril's mother through a "disrespectful" (115) midnight telephone call across the Pacific for her to transmit to her son and daughter. "Mom, tell them I'm not interested in being a godparent to these random kids" (115), she initially responds before later being talked into it by Paulo. The resumption of the term years later in Manuela's text message to Avril asking for room for herself and the kids in the Sarnian house equally triggers Avril's fury. "She has the nerve to call me 'Ninang', she wants me to act like I'm my own cousins' friggin'

godmother?" she yells to later conclude, "I never said yes to that, not now, not ever" (115). And therefore, during most of her stay in Canada, Monela is only permitted to address Avril as "Ate", meaning "old sister". Avril blames them all for turning their house into a "war zone" (128), causing a continuous stress to the family and community, derived from urged periodical remittances. "The community got decimated by cancer–that's not your fault. But the fact that they couldn't afford the better [*sic*] medical treatments", Avril complains to Monela, "the fact that all the kids had to clamour for scholarships to get an education–the fact that our parents scrimped and saved just so we could send you the best things, well, that's your fault" (128).

As Monela empathises with the situation of her Canadian cousins and acknowledges her father's abusive disrespect, a new perspective for healing Avril and closing the schism of family relations is entertained. When taken on the so-called Sarnia "grand tour" (134) for outsiders, Monela trespasses the border and becomes an *insider*. With her truck windows open, and her eyes "water[ing] in the acrid air" (134), Avril asks the girl if the view reminds her of Las Vegas. However, her response that Sarnia is rather similar to Taguig unsettles Avril's expectations. Images of an illuminated night skyline, massive shopping malls and wide lanes are recurrent in Monela's description to fracture Avril's ossified views of her parents' homeland as a "backwater village" (134). The revelation that much of the money demanded for years was used to remodel the house in which her parents would live with Edmond brings about a new reality: her Sarnian house "isn't the only home that you have" (135), Monela reminds her. Avril is then offered the possibility to spend time in Taguig, which opens simultaneously a transoceanic *home* on both sides of the Pacific with relatives on each, and "if you need anything from Canada", Monela tells, "you can always ask Edman and my ma to send it to you in a balikbayan box" (136), which, replacing exploitation with cooperation, unwrites the former wasting relations predicated on her parents, giving prevalence to a reciprocal exchange over a unidirectional liaison. Monela's will to return to Taguig and her approach to Avril creates for them a transgenerational nexus that reduces physical and emotional distances, *reuniting* them in bidirectional form, and revitalises family connections, a rekindling evident in Avril's final permission to be addressed as godmother: "Call me Ninang" (136), Avril corrects Monela when she uses "Ate" instead. This newly coined emotional linkage to

Taguig replaces Edmond's transactional practices with Avril's parents and reconstitutes a community nexus that was severely damaged.

When based on community building and resource sharing, as Armiero holds, commoning interrogates and distorts vertical relations (13; 47), but it also gives visibility to invisible subjects and unmasks "processes of exploitation and violence" (Armiero and De Angelis 357). Connection building then results in "tracing new circuits of resilient and sustainable production" (Armiero and De Angelis 358). In parallel, commoning places the emphasis on a different form of "politicisation", one that "can happen when you […] understand that, if the place where you live is a dump", it is because "somebody is using you as a dump" (quoted in Simal-González, "From Waste" 179). Seen through the lenses of commoning, the crossing of the Pacific from Taguig to Sarnia resituates home, but it also refigures community relations in horizontal form. Lastly, it opens a possibility of return, one very remote for Avril at the beginning of the story (111) and rarely contemplated in Monela and Edman's reunion with their mother pages later: "Sarnia is the final Canadian destination" (119), Manuela told them when just arriving in Sarnia town, alluding to the proximity of the city to the US border. Now Taguig-Sarnia-Taguig is also a probable itinerary for reuniting, thanks to the multiscalar processes of global, and no less important, emotional circulation.

As a result of those same processes, the term *outsider* is partially affected in its designation. Being founded on the building of a sturdy border which, through othering, includes and excludes to establish what and who belongs, that boundary appears as porous as the category itself is shifting in the story. Therefore, when the porous border lets selfhood and otherness blend, the presumed other/waste hardly differentiates from self/purity, and residual presences, or "matter out of place" (Armiero 39), transgress their normative location in a wasteocenic system. Consequently, the "borderisation", or containment strategy (Sandten 3), does not quite work in "The Outsiders". Monela herself, on firstly arriving in Avril's house, is prey to that othering mechanism that separates her host from her, her family and community: relying on Avril's disheveled physical appearance, she concludes that "compared to my father, who is always so-together", Avril "looks like a whole other species. It seems impossible that we're related" (121). "The practice of

othering, which is inherent to the colonial project, rests at the heart of any wasting relationship", Armiero says to then conclude that "the production of waste is connected to the production of the other, and the outside, and of the 'us'" (2). Drawing on the same mechanism, visitors are outsiders in Sarnia, walled off and unauthorised to refer to it as "Sarn-hole". In turn, Avril will be "an outsider" in Taguig, "the worst feeling in the world" (136), which, through sharing and caring bonds of homemaking, will be negotiated to grant her admittance. "It's not so bad when you have someone to give you the grand tour" (136), Monela says, thus realising that caring for her cousin may circumvent any borderisation strategy like the ones implemented by what Armiero terms "wasteocene logic" or "the (re)production of wasted people and places" for the preservation of a "safe and worthy 'we'" (31). As the present anthropogenic globalisation has imposed its logics of boundary-building and boundary-crossing, these processes used to produce and neglect wasted lives are recurrently brandished to figure out a precarious "we" in a socially and environmentally degraded world (Bauman 97). Commoning, in the form that Armiero defends, is a way to negotiate asymmetry within neoliberal, neo-imperialist frames of vertical relations that wastify people and places, an indebtedness of (post) colonial societies to the project that originated them, still "at the heart of any wasting relationship" in which "othering means to change the 'nature' of the other while simultaneously using it to preserve a privilege" (Armiero 2). As "The Outsiders" seems to reflect, these privileges can be drawn on to be recycled and repoliticised to strategically contravene the power of wasting.

4. Conclusions

"The Outsiders" intertextualises the Great Acceleration as one of its most visible influences, making its characters the protagonists and participants of the ground-breaking changes produced in the morphology of the Filipino nation's migratory passage to Canada, in processes of increasing connectivity and in the relevance given to trends of consumption and the management of detritus. Therefore, the double wastification of place and people that the story displays is also an outcome of the Great Acceleration. Its turbo-capitalist exhaustion of material and human resources paves the way for a transition into a society of global

hazards in which waste disposal is also a source of collective risk in tandem with an uneven power distribution at global levels.

The toxicity of neo-imperialist and neoliberal power frames in the story stems from transnational and local spheres, with a Filipino community on the move showing how its disembedding from place, symptomatic of the Great Acceleration, results in a production of wasted lives in parallel to the production of privilege in our modern civilisation. For Zygmunt Bauman, that civilisation is one "of excess, redundancy, waste and waste disposal" (2004, 97), a bleak panorama which, nevertheless, grounds the plausibility of horizontal ethical alliances of caring and sharing. Apart from exposing the vertical relations that emplace wasting processes and a repoliticisation of the eco-social crisis of our present times, as Armiero holds, in the story they also enable a refiguration of home and outsider, atavistically moored to dualistic binary formulations, which, when destabilised, may favour a reduction of power asymmetry.

In "The Outsiders" and throughout the collection *Reuniting with Strangers*, Monolith's allegorical significance, an emblem of the importance of community bonds, also points out the needed refiguration of the Filipino collective in Canada. In that sense, instead of being extremely dependent on its past, or only determined by its future, the diasporic community hankers after the conciliation of both time periods. Likewise, instead of focussing only on its *here* to be oblivious of its *there*, the refigured community that the transgenerational nexus Avril-Monela metonymically embodies, reconciles both time frames and geographies. In that same sense, Monolith's presence encloses past and present to look forward. It is mandatory now to find ways of expanding the wasting views of the Chemical Valley, of (re)presenting and narrating eco-social violence in multiscalar times of globality.

Notes

[1] CBC's Best Books of 2023 and longlisted for Canada Reads 2024, *Reuniting with Strangers* is marketed as a "novel" in the front cover of the 2023 Douglas & McIntyre edition. However, the nine narratives composing the book are "a polyphonic chorus" of "interlacing stories" (Maclear n. p.) with recurrent characters that focalise the action from

their own perspective. In his characterisation of the English-Canadian short-story cycle, Gerald Lynch underlines the emphasis on place, community and character as defining traits of a genre, "whole but suspicious of completeness" (96). I would argue for classifying *Reuniting* as a transnational cycle, which playfully toys on the Canadianness of the genre to accommodate Filipino and Filipino-Canadian experience.

[2] All references to "The Outsiders" are from the 2023 Douglas & McIntyre edition and appear parenthetically indicated by page number only.

[3] According to an Earth.org report, the principal four environmental issues in the Philippines are connected to different forms of contamination. Together with sea level rise, air, plastic and marine pollution have capitalised environmentalists' concern in 2024 (Raji n. p.). The Philippines has been repeatedly pointed out as a "dumping ground" in the global south for northern countries' hazardous waste. As of 2019, South Korea and Canada had been recurrently denounced for dispatching their trash to the islands ("Philippines" n. p).

[4] As Simal-González states in her 2019 pioneering essay on Waste Theory, labels like "global North" do not exactly correspond to geographical coordinates, since New Zealand, for example, its obvious southern location notwithstanding, is enclosed in such a denomination ("The waste" 211), given its status as a developed country.

[5] Austria-Bonifacio herself is unveiled as Sarnia-born in the personal bio that closes the 2023 Douglas & McIntyre edition of *Reuniting with Strangers* (230). Her story "The Kayaking Lesson" features Lina, a Filipino-Canadian protagonist from Corunna in the area of Sarnia, who relocated in Toronto for university and zealously embarked on kayaking classes. "I was never an outsider" (Austria-Bonifacio 261), Lina says to part ways with her best chums who decided to pass as Chinese to get a better consideration within the Canadian kaleidoscope (see Swan x–xiv). As does "The Outsiders", "The Kayaking Lesson" plays with the borders that destabilise belonging and its bearing on representation.

[6] Sarnia has recently been marketed as a clean energy hub ("About the City" n. p.) to transform its toxic image. However, Nixon's slow violence appears in its history from early on: French settlers from Detroit were the first Europeans to displace the indigenous inhabitants. The 1830s community, The Rapids, was renamed as Port Sarnia in 1836 and Sarnia City in 1914. Oil Springs concentrated the first exploitations of that fossil fuel from 1858 on, and the economic boom was enabled by Canada Steamship Lines in 1913 and Polymer Corporation in 1942. During

the Cold War, the American Government labelled Sarnia a likely target for a Russian nuclear attack given its petrochemical notoriety ("About the City" n. p.).

[7] Monela's words can be translated as "sorry, godfather, Ate Avril needs you" (My translation).

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The Dog as Guardian of Thresholds in Ali Smith's *Companion Piece*

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Abstract: Whether as the attributes of prominent Greek divinities like Hekate or as the guardian of the Underworld, Cerberus, the pervasive presence of dogs in Greek mythology is surely a result of their role as companions of humans throughout history. The features ascribed to canines through this Classical tradition emerge in literature, by means of symbolism, as a deliberate attempt to convey a message both to the characters and the readers. In most cases, this serves as a reminder of the origins of civilization – which coincides with the first interactions between humans and wolves – and a need for the recovery of some crucial features as a consequence of our estrangement from nature. In *Companion Piece* (2022), Ali Smith's revisiting of the mythical image of the dog/wolf accounts for our aim at exploring its distinct presentation both as companion and custodian of tangible and intangible doorways. The results obtained in this study denote that the narrative, through the image of the dog, entices us to conceive thresholds as an opportunity for the meeting of opposing realities, rather than an arena for the confrontation between arbitrary binary conceptions. This particularly applies to the female characters by asking them to break the conventions accepting their inner and real selves.

Keywords: Ali Smith, *Companion Piece*, dog symbolism, contemporary British fiction, Greek mythology, liminality.

El perro como guardián de umbrales en *Companion Piece* de Ali Smith

Resumen: Ya sea como atributo de prominentes divinidades griegas como Hécate, o en la figura del guardián del Inframundo, el Cancerbero, la ubicua presencia de los perros en la mitología griega responde con total certeza al papel que estos animales han desempeñado como compañeros del ser humano a lo largo de la historia. Las cualidades atribuidas a los canes en esta tradición clásica emergen en la literatura por medio del simbolismo con el propósito deliberado de transmitir un mensaje tanto al conjunto de personajes como al público lector. En la mayoría de los casos, dicho simbolismo remite a los orígenes de la civilización, coincidiendo con las primeras interacciones entre seres humanos y lobos, y plantea la necesidad de recuperar ciertos rasgos esenciales que se han perdido como consecuencia de nuestro distanciamiento del mundo natural. En *Companion Piece* (2022), la reinterpretación que hace Ali Smith de la imagen mítica del perro/lobo nos permite examinar su doble representación como compañero y como guardián de portales tanto tangibles como intangibles. Los resultados obtenidos en este estudio denotan que la narrativa, a través de la figura del perro, invita a concebir los umbrales no como espacios de confrontación entre construcciones binarias arbitrarias, sino como oportunidades para el encuentro entre realidades opuestas. Esto se manifiesta de forma especialmente significativa en relación con los personajes femeninos al instarlos a transgredir las convenciones y aceptar su auténtico yo interior.

Palabras clave: Ali Smith, *Companion Piece*, simbolismo canino, ficción británica contemporánea, mitología griega, liminalidad.

1. Introduction

Scottish writer Ali Smith has become one of the most influential figures in contemporary Anglophone literature particularly after the publishing of her *Seasonal Quartet*. Her subsequent *Companion Piece* (2022) has been understood by a number of reviewers as the coda of that series, whereas others have regarded it as a stand-alone novel. There is no doubt that her latest books share a concern for contemporary issues together with artworks by David Hockney on their covers. Although it has been the target of numerous reviews, especially during the year of its publication, this work is yet to be the subject of further scholarly examination. In general terms, *Companion Piece* has encountered a positive reception. Alex Preston, for instance, praises its awareness of "the way that problems we think of as being very much of our era – pandemic preparedness, gender identity, workplace equality – are rooted deeply in our collective histories" and its meditations on the process of writing: "Sandy's artistic practice … feels like a metaphor for the way Smith constructs her novels." In a similar vein, Bailey Sincox holds that: "*Companion Piece* invites us to read Sand as a version of Smith herself" and stresses its invitation to question aspects of reality which are usually taken for granted. As Sandy herself asserts in the novel: "a story is never an answer. A story is always a question" (Smith 155).

Emilia Ferrante, however, displays some mixed feelings concerning this narrative. Even if she recognises that its apparently discordant topics are inextricably linked, she considers that "this book is not perfect ... the tangents went on too long, the dialogue was confusing and the timeline lost me." Curiously enough, Ali Smith's experimental and uplifting writing has been highly praised. According to Laura Schmitz-Justen, "Smith … advocates for a mode of engagement with our socio-political present that is not hinged on one individual event," an opinion shared by several scholars (318; Houser 2; Slavin 231-33). Prior to the publication of *Companion Piece*, Clair Wills had argued that "sequence and consequence are the enemies of understanding in Smith's work" (4). Likewise, Montesdeoca-Cubas had described Smith's quartet as "a literary companion in hand with the status quo in which it is written" (71). The author's second-to-last novel can indeed be seen as a companion from various perspectives, leading Ferrante to wonder: "what is "Companion Piece" a companion piece to? The answers are

endless: to the pandemic, to the characters in the novel ... But I think, like all books, "Companion Piece" is a companion piece to you, the reader." It is not surprising then, given Smith's metafictional writing, that she explicitly refers to books as companionable (Calder 13-14) and explores how this role can be fulfilled by people as well as by inanimate objects or animals. Regarding the latter, she particularly expands on the figures of curlews and dogs.

In this paper, I explore the emergence of the image of the dog/wolf both as a companion and as the guardian of physical and abstract thresholds in *Companion Piece*. With this aim in mind, I move on to briefly describe our long-lasting relationship with the species and the inheritance of a collection of subject matters from Greek mythology in the following section. Afterwards, I examine how these antecedents have conformed a literary trope since Classical times and have become part of contemporary Anglophone literature through some selected works. A legacy which has been transmitted to Ali Smith's present novel. All these works share liminality intertwined with dog symbolism and their analysis will mainly be approached through the lens of Victor Turner's theory. Besides, it will involve the introduction of pertinent aspects related to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "becoming-animal" and Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*.

2. Dog symbolism

2.1 A long-lasting bond

Dogs have been one of the animal species with the longest and, probably, most significant bonds with human beings. It is a common assumption that our ties with the species originated from their acute senses which made them the ideal trackers or guardians. Yet their ability to warn us of impending danger by barking or carrying loads was developed much later and likely because of their interaction with humans, as these skills are unusual for wolves (Irvin and Lundock 191-92; Spikins 312; Escoll 127). Our relationship with canines has gone through many phases. There is, for instance, evidence of the consumption of dog meat in widely apart regions like prehistoric Greece, prehispanic Mexico or several native American tribes like the Pawnees. In recent

historical episodes, like World War II, people have eaten dogs due to famine but there are countries, like South Korea, where dog meat is still consumed even if this is not a generalised practice (Trantalidou 96; Spikins 305; Morey 86-90). There are grounds to believe that dog domestication did have, in certain cases, emotional-support purposes rather than functional ones. Dogs, according to Penny Spikins, have never played a practical role in a variety of communities, as is the case of the Martu people in Australia (299-306). This agrees with our current relationship with these animals and how they compensate for any possible deficiencies in social interactions, or complement them.

Spikins suggests some additional reasons for our closeness with canines with whom we share certain behavioural patterns. For example, they take care of their ascendants and descendants, being concerned for their well-being both physically and emotionally, and partaking of the same objectives as a community (319). Our relationship with the species has been, therefore, a noticeably multifaceted one where dogs have played a practical role as well as sharing an affective bond with us.

2.2. Canines in Greek mythology

The first canine-based or related cults have been recorded in Mesopotamia ca. 1800 BCE. At the time, they embodied a series of deities and were also sacrificed to them. There is evidence of the existence of similar practices during the late Bronze and Iron Ages both for purification and healing purposes (Irvin and Lundock 191-95). After the Mycenaean period, relevant differences were found in Italy and Greece, where dogs started to be related to the hereafter. Jacopo de Grossi Mazzorin and Claudia Minniti argue that the reason for interring dogs close to or inside human burial sites can be ascribed to their condition as companions in our passage to the Underworld (62-4). That is, dogs continued to accompany human beings in the afterlife as they had done during lifetime. Another key factor in this association of canines with death is their link with chthonic deities in Greek mythology. This is true for Enodia, who was the goddess of death and crossroads, and who often received dogs as offerings (Trantalidou 109-13). Hekate is the most remarkable example, though. She was seen as an intermediary between gods and people as well as a protector of intersections and borders. The latter is in alignment with her role as

protector of gates, most significantly of those leading from the land of the living to that of the dead. She is usually depicted with a dog's head or escorted by dogs, wolves and other animals which are also regarded as guards of this passage. Throughout time, canines continued to be involved in rites for protecting city gates; the Roman Lupercalia is a good illustration of how dogs were sacrificed to pay homage to the *Lupa* (female wolf) who reared Romulus and established a frontier separating the inner life of the city from the exterior (De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 65-115).

The presence of canines who are in connection with the afterlife is a recurrent topic in the mythology of Indo-European countries including the Sarameyan dogs Cabala and Cyama or the wolf-headed Calu for Etruscans (Irvin and Lundock 196; De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 62). The most significant dog associated with thresholds is Cerberus, the custodian of the entry to the Underworld in Greek mythology. This uncanny creature is mostly portrayed with three heads and the tail of a snake, whereas in other cases, he is also depicted with a mane made of these animals. The beast was twice subdued, once by Orpheus's lyre and another time by Herakles's strength (Syropoulos 85-91; Trantalidou 112). In the words of Chevalier and Gheerbrant, "these two instances strongly support the neo-Platonic interpretation of Cerberus as an in-dwelling daemon" (175). Thus, it is only through willpower and self-reliance that we can control our innermost fears or natural tendencies. This interpretation gains significance when compared to the use of dog symbolism in literature, which also continues to mirror the historic and mythological antecedents from a variety of perspectives.

3. The liminal nature of dog/wolf symbolism

The literary usage of canine symbolism for the depiction of liminal states or subjects dates back to Classical times. The term "liminality" — which stems from Latin "limen," which means threshold — was coined by Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* (1909). In the 1960s, Victor Turner reassessed this notion. He established that the liminal state is characterised by "symbolic dissolutions of the self" occurring when the subject abandons the prevailing social structure either purposefully or by coming into contact with other realities by chance (E. Turner 35-39; Kovach et al. 1). Consequently, subjects experience

an in-between state or "crack in the mirror" that is characterised by their invisibility to society as it resists categorisation. This explains the usefulness of this theory "for dealing with phenomena that obstinately elude clear-cut definitions" (Mueller-Greene 68-74).

In certain narratives, the dog/wolf symbolism discloses negative aspects of liminal subjects who are said to be tainted by their exploration of alternative lifestyles and disregard for social conventions. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which is an important source of inspiration for Ali Smith's novels, we find the myth of Lycaon. This Arcadian king committed cannibalism, hence his transformation into a werewolf by Jupiter (Ranger 399; Otten 8). His anthropophagy, nevertheless, can be read as the embracement of his animal instincts over rationality. The figure of the werewolf could work then as a representation of his natural tendencies: "Dogs can represent for humans aspects of the unconscious that are warded off, such as aggressivity, hostility, and sexuality" (Escoll 128). And, even more so, when there is a reference to an untamed member of the same species.

Turner elaborates on how the liminal state is one where socially established categories, like those between women and men or humans and animals, are suspended. The liminal subject is othered and considered a paradoxical figure, which results in their being feared and rejected (95-97). The mistrust to the possible presence of animal inclinations in human beings was particularly feared by Victorian society after the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*. There was indeed a proliferation of novels evincing this concern such as Stoker's *Dracula* and Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Escoll 134). In Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), Sherlock Holmes and his friend Watson are confronted with "an enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen. Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering gaze..." (150). As Adrian Tait notes, the detective is recurrently compared to a hound in Doyle's novels due to his capacity to follow a trail, but this may not be the only reason for this association. That is, Holmes, who is mostly regarded as the perfect embodiment of the rational man, is nonetheless frequently depicted as being carried away by his intuition, a possible hint to instinctive behaviour. Moreover, rationality and intuition were two opposed features in Victorian England, which regarded them

as manifestations of masculinity and femininity, respectively. The comparison between Holmes and the hound lays bare the arbitrariness of socially accepted binaries, which are exposed through the presence of the animal Other (48-52; Taylor-Ide 55-57).

Liminality entails the suspension of notions that we take for granted and this frequently generates social rejection. In fact, Turner adds that liminal subjects are mostly regarded as polluted due to their in-between state, this "uncleanness" is also the principal reason why they are marginalised in their own societies (96-97). A similar perspective is to be found in Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*. The expression was originally employed in ancient Rome when referring to "a human being alive only in a biological but not in a political sense, since he has none of the usual rights of a member of society." Even if this is not the place for an in-depth examination of all the implications of this term, suffice it to say that Agamben's theory implies that those citizens who are not completely subjected to the social contract are excluded from the prerogatives reserved to those that are compliant with the system (Fiskesjö 162). In this sense, both Turner's and Agamben's theories recognise the existence of individuals who live but are not fully integrated in our societies, being alienated or othered because of their different conditions or life choices.

Dana Fields explores how these issues have been constantly present in literature. In "Chained Animals and Human Liberty" (2016), she scrutinises the original and ensuing versions of a fable which contrasts the different lifestyles of a dog and a starving wolf. The canines represent two contrary aspects of humanity: our desire for material comfort versus our desire for freedom. Over the years, this story was increasingly regarded as a reflection of how society constricts individuals' actions whereas the wolf emerged as the embodiment of freedom at all costs, even if this means the rejection of any form of hierarchy, or renouncing society (68-80). This is echoed in Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1993) where both the eponymous dog and her owner, Elizabeth Barrett, experience the confinement of bourgeois life. Accordingly, the reader can understand the dog's unease with being kept inside a house as the depiction of Elizabeth's discontent with the Victorian lifestyle (Feuerstein 32-33). Moreover, Woolf is commonly seen as a precursor of postmodernism which precisely advocated for the acceptance of otherness and rejected

the conception of the animal Other as a source of contamination. Postmodern literature defends hybridity or monstrosity as desirable sources of creativity (Baker 100).

The portrayal of otherness through animals is, Rosi Braidotti argues, usually linked to the inclusion of "the negative opposite of the dominant subject" (Brown xiii-xv). This axiom is certainly on par with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming-animal," which also challenges the dominant position of human beings regarding animals. "Becoming-animal" is under no circumstances the imitation or transformation of a person into an animal. It is rather a dissolution of the boundaries that exist between them; a process that enables the disruption of our patterns of thought. Becomings can be intended or accidental processes, but they always imply the movement from fixed or "molar" identities to "molecular multiplicities." The latter is a state similar to the liminal condition because it allows the emergence of new principles and is mostly considered as a source of creativity (Brown 262-67). That is why, on a similar note, Steve Baker states that "*what becoming-animal does is close to what art does*" (138).

Baker analyses how Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal is bound to their notion of "becoming-minoritarian," that is, the suspension of the power hierarchy between humans and animals is only the first stage in the questioning of a few arbitrary binaries (104-13). It is then not only a withdrawal from anthropocentrism. It stands further as an invitation to appreciate the similarities between normative individuals and those perceived as the "other" like women, LGBTIQ+ people or some indigenous groups. This aim aligns with the ideals defended by posthumanism, which Francesca Ferrando links to the "recognition of nonhuman alterities" that should go hand in hand "with the recognition of human alterities" (2). Thus, writers adhering to posthuman beliefs are not involved in the dismantling of humanism but rather in giving voice to silenced collectives. It is an ideal way to open the door to a variety of perspectives by accepting they are all equally valid and worthy of respect as is, in fact, the case in Ali Smith's *Companion Piece*.

4. Canine symbolism and its implications in Ali Smith's *Companion Piece*

Ali Smith's *Companion Piece* is itself a compendium of the different ramifications of canine symbolism which, of course, includes the role of the dog as a companion: "Dogs were generally meant to be company. Companionable" (26). This allows the author to refer to companions other than people and, in particular, literature: "People said books were very companionable things. Much like dogs were said to be companionable" or "I think how *not* alone the speaker is every time someone reads that poem" (27, 117). However, there is an unnatural feeling regarding the relationship between the protagonist – Sandy – and her father's dog: "What this dog knew about me was that I wasn't my father" or "I'd given the dog nothing she really needed apart from food and water" (33-34;103). This alienation from "man's best friend" happens at the same time as the Covid-19 pandemic and, in all probability, works as a means for questioning the individuality and indifference of our present society.

In this narrative, on the contrary, everyone is welcomed irrespective of their condition. From the outset, Smith emphasises the word "hello," and continues to do so when opening each of the three parts of the book. In the first one, this greeting is articulated by Cerberus "'Ello 'ello 'ello. Wot's all this then? That's the voice of Cerberus, the savage mythical three headed dog" (3). The inaugural presence of this mythical figure is a clear hint to the author's intention of likening the entry to her novel to that of the Underworld, since both are spaces where changes of state do occur. In other words, it is her way of emphasising the liminal condition of literature, and its creative power to alter our perception: "And you're smiling at death now. Look how powerful a poem is" or "The people at the fair had gone wild for this story … caught up in the story like something had melted all their bodies into one body" (43, 206-207).

Continuing with this liminal approach in mind, Smith refers to the space between the world of the living and that of the dead, given that the plot of *Companion Piece* is set in the Covid-19 pandemic. A period in which many people were struggling for their lives and their relatives were not allowed to visit and accompany them. The protagonist's father happens to be hospitalised on account of a heart attack, a situation which is described by Sandy in the following terms: "He was some

place I couldn't get into, its windows all dark to me. Or maybe it was me who was in the dark place and he was in a bright elsewhere" (117). The pandemic is not a simple backdrop to the action of this narrative, but an in-between episode in the characters' lives which works as a recurrent source of reflection for the readers. In one of the scenes, Sandy remembers the conversations she would keep with other patients' relatives while sitting on a fence outside the hospital: "We'd say things like *we're not alone* and *you're not alone*." They are in the same situation irrespective of their status or profession: "*A bus driver. A dinner lady. Designs books. Teacher*" (119-20). Their unexpected comradeship takes us back to Turner's theory as those subjects who undergo a liminal process share a connection or *communitas* where differences cease to matter (E. Turner 36). The fence in this fragment is deformed as a result of their improvised meetings and, arguably, suggests Smith's aim to interrogate those arbitrary distinctions between people which became blurred during this unprecedented event.

The narrative continues to underscore the role of dogs as guardians of doorways. There is, for instance, a reference to a painting by William Blake where "there's a dog … All we know about it is its sheer size and the silent howl that's coming from it and passes between it and the child. There's no getting out of that room" (112). But, especially, Sandy's father's dog, Shep, which barks at every caller: "She's only barking because you knocked on the door, I said" (86-87). The dog seems to share Sandy's pandemic inhospitality: "Oh, I'm sorry, I said. I'm letting nobody inside the house. A member of my family is poorly and in hospital and I'm keen not to endanger him" (87). Although this is in line with Deleuze and Guattari's view that pets like dogs can only work as the representation of a person's subjectivity and are consequently despised as a means for "becoming-animal" (Baker 125), this paper will show how the figure of the dog in Smith's novel can also be used with similar purposes to the ones proposed by this concept.

Together with dogs and gates, locks are employed to make readers aware of arbitrary distinctions: "Church doors need to be locked to keep the people both out and in, Ann Shaklock said. Churches like to flaunt their closedness" (176). The most persistent example is the Boothby Lock, a fictitious work of art that serves as a nexus between the contemporary and former times in the novel: "an English metal lock

and key mechanism, a device, she explained, way ahead of its time and an unusually good and beautiful version, quite important historically" (6). As a result, Smith leaves bare the societal fear of everything that is not one thing or the other, but that exists in the in-between as ascertained by Turner, this is the case of Martina Pelf who has a double nationality: "Is one country not enough for you? the man behind the screen said" (96-97; 7). This is also related to how politicians and other sectors of British society try to create the illusion of pure English customs, language, etc. that need to be defended from external influence when in truth most cultures and, obviously, languages have been affected by other countries to a certain extent: "I'd listened to a cabinet minister declaring that TV or radio etc should feature only programmes that celebrated *distinctly British values"* (30).

The narrative also engages in the debate about the British policy on immigration: "I've heard how more new laws were on their way to stop anyone who asked for refuge in this country from getting here or getting help" or "I'd heard how some refugees who'd arrived in this country God knew how against all the odds were now being housed in the real cells of an old decrepit prison" (29; 30). Immigrants are a clear example of what means to be *homo sacer* in our present societies, they betray the hypocrisy of citizens in Western democracies who "convince themselves that illegal migrants are lawbreakers who must not be granted any rights" (Fiskesjö 163). In this novel, the reader encounters another character that faces a similar situation to the one of migrants nowadays, this is a female blacksmith from five hundred years ago. She is raped and almost murdered to evict her from her foundry because as her mentor had told her: "They love us for our magic, and then when they forget their good sense they think we're doing black magic and they get scared and angry" (188). Her tutor was called Ann Shaklock, yet another connection with "locks", like the ones they make at the forge. On a curious note, the girl is equated to the dogs because when she "was younger ... settled in the dogs' bed with the dogs happed round her for sleep" and when they try to murder her, "they killed the dogs first because the dogs were growling" (192, 175). As a consequence of this almost fatal experience, she starts to live in what she considers a middle stage between life and death, halfway between her life in the woods and her occasional contact with others. She becomes a pariah: "Christine Gross's father says she's a witch and she can't come into the house" and

is subjected to the Vagabonds Acts, a series of laws enacted in England since 1349 (212, 108). She is no longer regarded as a proper member of the community and is deprived of any rights, a condition she shares with a group of players she meets in one of the neighbouring towns. But it also means that, as an outcast, she is free from social pressure: "a wanderer, a vagabond, a person more free in this life than most of us can be and though they pay dear for their freedom God help them they walk free for all of us who can't" (191).

Throughout *Companion Piece*, the persistent feeling that Smith is deliberately casting doubts on societal restrictions permeates the narrative. A good indicator is the name given to the different parts of the novels: "You choose," "Curlew" and "Curfew" that could be interpreted as the necessity of choosing between the limitations imposed by our current society and a new lifestyle that may recover values lost as a result of our alienation from nature: "what we do with our allotted time ... dictated or controlled one way or another not by nature alone but by outside forces like economics, history, social constraint, social convention..." (21). Becoming-animal, as described by Deleuze and Guattari, may prove to be a powerful instrument to achieve this purpose. The first step is establishing an alliance with an animal that enables us to leave aside our preconceptions: "I smiled with my own preconceptions on both Martina Inglis's / Pelf's children. They looked back at me with their grown faces full of their preconceptions about me" (Brown 266; Smith 96). And, apparently, pets like dogs are too close for comfort. The wolf, however, is a common example of what these philosophers denominate "demonic animals," that is, animals that prompt us to move from our fixed identity and into new perspectives. This agrees with Smith's frequent allusions to wolves in *Companion Piece*: "I'd be wearing a kind of wolfskin over my whole self … Hello wolf, I'd say in the dream. Where've you been, old friend?" (51). Wolves connect Sandy with her absent mother who is described by her father as "a wild one ... That's exactly what she'd do. Throw a bold of curtain material at a curtain window and shatter it" (68). Actually, her mother says to her before going away "you'll be fine. I'm not worried for you. Because, you know what? There is a dog, a big one … in fact it's not a dog, it *is* a wolf, and it's sitting right next to you" (84). But this is not only indicative of a link between the two women but is also associated with those aspects of femininity that are restricted by society. What is

more, Deleuze and Guattari had emphasised the destabilising quality of becoming-animal in patriarchal societies as it makes possible the empowerment of women by subverting the distinctions between dominant and minoritarian positions (Steve 125, 168; Heymans 18).

At present, Sandy breaks traditional conventions about women because of her homosexuality but, in this novel, the reader can also find a non-binary character, Lea Pelf, who disrupts the traditional assumption that sex and gender are the same thing. They are not only an instance of how binaries are arbitrary by not considering themselves a man nor a woman but also their problems with their father echo this same notion: "my father … won't let me in the house till I *stop buggering about* and use what he calls the *traditionally correct pronoun* to refer to myself again" or "I was living in the workroom above the garage. Banished. To make me see sense. But because it didn't make me see sense he wants me banished from the garage too. I sully his Audi" (96, 135). In the last quotation, Lea goes through three different stages: firstly, they are inside the house; then they are in an in-between state while living in the workroom and, lastly, they are homeless because they do not subject themselves to social conventions. These are very similar to the ones categorised by Turner as preliminal, liminal and postliminal phases and, once more, stress the notion that liminal subjects, because of their contradictory status, are dismissed as polluted beings.

In contrast, every instance of prejudice or discrimination in *Companion Piece* appears to have a straightforward solution for Ali Smith: "Invite them in. Put the kettle on. What else you going to do?" (65-6). It is clear that the narrative advocates for embracing any person who comes to our doors or borders, and this is done by reversing the notion of locks as tools for segregation and transforming them into opportunities to open our minds to different realities and peoples: "Something about the story of that old lock mechanism had unlocked something in me" or "You've literally unlocked something, she said. Not just for me. In me" (34, 111). The threshold becomes a place where the meeting of opposing perceptions and the creation of more inclusive perspectives is possible as suggested by Turner's theory and posthumanism. Most importantly, the presence of dogs throughout the novel serves as a reminder of the importance of companionship, as underlined since the very title of this work. Contrary to Deleuze and

Guattari's theory, in Smith's case, the dog is not only able to reflect the subjective perspective of, for example, Sandy, but also to remind us of the necessity of welcoming other points of view and accepting them as equally valid to ours.

5. Conclusion

The reading of *Companion Piece* is in itself a liminal experience. Ali Smith employs several elements like doors and locks to draw our attention to the arbitrariness of the dual notions that we employ in our everyday lives. The most significant one is canine symbolism which intends to disrupt the binary between human beings and animals. It is a reminder of our animal nature and our estrangement from it. Both humans and dogs are liminal creatures because, as Escoll states, "human beings, one might say, have emigrated from the animal kingdom, although animals remain an important part of their lives. Dogs have also emigrated from the world of pack animals, perhaps jaguars, to being domesticated animals" (130). Moreover, the awareness of our own liminal disposition through "becoming-animals" is just a step away from the challenging of other binaries. It allows us to question if we may have lost some essential aspects with our current lifestyle causing our categorising of people into native vs immigrant or man vs woman, deeming the Other as marginalised and even placing them in the position of the *homo sacer*. After all, these distinctions are a human creation, inexistent in Nature.

In a nutshell, canines with their long relationship with humankind and their similarities with us become the perfect companions for exploring the threshold that they themselves guard. Smith, similarly, sets herself up as a custodian of this passage by writing about these concerns in a world where superficiality is widespread. Today's news is indeed easily forgotten in a society where immediacy prevails, and one of the possible solutions may be to register such relevant issues as the ones portrayed in this novel by means of literature, so that they are remembered and taken into account. This way, Smith is encouraging us to open the locks imposed by our social conventions in a posthuman attempt to accept new points of view and welcome people from different realities or, in other words, to value companionship over intolerance.

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'A Strange Kind of Love': Love and Disembodiment in Mark Strand's Poem "The Story of Our Lives"

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Abstract: The present essay consists of an in-depth analysis of the poem entitled "The Story of Our Lives", written by Mark Strand, on the subject of the absence of physicality in the love relationship concerning that poem. I have chosen this poem specifically because it addresses several points that I have found significant regarding its characters: the space of the room, the experience of dreams, the failure of language, the dichotomy of body and mind, and the presence of the book as the ruler of their fate. I have followed a phenomenological approach mainly under the study of Drew Leder's work *The Absent Body* and Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. The relevance of my investigation relies on the fact that, although absence and disembodiment have already been described as some of the most distinguishable traits in Strand's work, I will connect these elements to the theme of love in his poetry, a subject that has not been studied as a main focus.
Keywords: Disembodiment, love, fate, room, phenomenology, Mark Strand.

"Una extraña forma de amor": Amor y desencarnación en el poema de Mark Strand "The Story of Our Lives"

Resumen: El presente ensayo consiste en un profundo análisis del poema titulado "The Story of Our Lives", escrito por Mark Strand, sobre el tema de la ausencia de fisicalidad en la relación de amor que concierne al poema. He escogido este poema específicamente porque trata diversos puntos que encuentro significativos en cuanto a los personajes en él: el espacio de la habitación, la experiencia de los sueños, el fallo del lenguaje, la dicotomía entre el cuerpo y la mente, y la presencia del libro como el controlador de su destino. He seguido un enfoque fenomenológico, principalmente bajo el estudio del trabajo de Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* y *The Poetics of Space* de Gastón Bachelard. La relevancia de mi investigación recae en el hecho de que, aunque la ausencia y la desencarnación ya se han descrito como algunos de los rasgos más característicos en el trabajo de Mark Strand, conectaré estos elementos con el asunto del amor en su poesía, un tema que no se ha estudiado todavía como enfoque principal.
Palabras clave: desencarnación, amor, destino, habitación, fenomenología, Mark Strand.

1. Introduction

Mark Strand, a poet rooted in the American lyric tradition, is recognised for his examination of themes such as absence, memory, time, and the self, blending surreal aspects with philosophical richness, simplicity and irony. Influential literary figures in Strand's work include Whitman, Bishop, and particularly, Stevens.

In "The Story of Our Lives" Strand depicts the life of a couple whose lives are doomed by a book that seems to dictate all their actions. The book, which is first mentioned in the opening lines of the poem, is being read by the couple that appears in it; husband and wife are unable to escape their fate, which is always made known to both them and the reader, by means of the actions inscribed in the book. The landscape inhabited by the couple is the reduced space of a room. From the very beginning, the characters admit both their imprisonment and their inability to perform any action but that of reading the book. As John Bensko argues, the title itself can be misleading since it would suggest some biographical text (83) although, as we will see later, this is not the case. Regarding the deceptive title of the poem, it may be of interest to bring to the fore T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", since it was a great influence in the poetry of Mark Strand. In *Moments of Being*, a book where Barrie Brett collects moments in the lives of various celebrities where they share experiences that were relevant for them, Mark Strand told him that "at the age of seventeen, I read the poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' by T. S. Eliot. It was this literary moment that made me want to write poetry" (213). It is not strange then, that, despite their differences, we can find some similarities in the strategic election of an ironic title that doesn't match with the content that it may suggest but rather disconcerts the reader, who finds that the contents of the poem diverge from what should be expected in a poem of love. Throughout the poem we will encounter two different narrators: the main character, or husband, who sometimes addresses the reader and other times addresses his wife; and the second narrator, which is the book itself. Strand makes use of italics whenever the book takes the role of narrator to differentiate it from the speaker as narrator.

Throughout this essay I will approach the idea of disembodiment as a disconnection from the human living body. I contemplate the body through the organs of perception, mechanical or dehumanising acts on humans, and the dominance of mental over physical aspects. I also consider the greater focus on inanimate objects than on living bodies, and how sleep and nearness to death represent disengagement from the body. Finally, I contrast the written body with the real one.

2. The Strandian Room. The Space of Disembodiment

The scenarios in Strand's poems tend to be inner spaces set in unspecified locations. Regarding the choice of the room as his prototypical landscape, when interviewed by W. T. Pfefferle, Mark Strand asserted: "The space of my poem is the space of the room in the poems" (25). The room described in "The Story of Our Lives" resembles more incarceration and jail, or even a haunted house, than a harmonious place where conjugal life unfolds. The idea that the story takes place entirely within a single room is far from a love story; it suggests that while there may have been happy times, the couple now feels confined and apathetic, as if they are drifting apart. One room alone cannot capture the entirety of a couple's journey together, as implied by the title in the poem. As a means to analyse the room in the poem as the place of disembodiment, I will follow Bachelard's concept of *topoanalysis*. Bachelard describes this type of analysis as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (31). In order to perform a topoanalysis, the researcher must make questions about the space to be analysed: its size, the light, the objects and furniture, the characters in it, etc. As Bachelard mentions, "For a knowledge of intimacy, localization of the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates" (30). Taking this into account, the spareness of the description of the room, together with the behaviour of its inhabitants, provide significant clues in Strand's treatment of physicality in the poem. In his book of essays, *The Weather of Words*, Strand quotes Bachelard: "Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are" (117). Therefore, the room, Strand's prototypical scenario, and the absence of action and movement in it will be of great importance in order to understand the atmosphere of the poem and how it enhances the feeling of disembodiment.

What follows is my topoanalysis of "The Story of Our Lives":

Size: unspecified.
Light, colour, temperature: dark outside, darker in the room.
View: the street, trees, cars, the house of another man.
Furniture and objects: the book, rugs, couch, mirror, masks, a crown, cold dresses, costumes.
Characters: the speaker and his wife, the book, the other man.

The poem begins with the lines: "We are reading The Story of Our Lives / which takes place in a room" (Strand 27). Although we have no details about the size of the room, the following line suggests a very reduced setting to be able to contain the story of anyone's life: "It is almost as if the room were the world" (27). Here Strand not only diminishes the spatial, with regards to the place where they live, but also to the mental aspect. Gaston Bachelard argues that "Our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (26). If the room is the character's world, then the world -both physical and emotional-, becomes a tiny microcosm in Strand's poem, since it has been limited to just one room. The setting described in the first lines will not change throughout the poem. There are no details about the room's size or the predominant colours. The only exception is the allusion to a few objects that only contribute more to the strangeness and discomfort of the couple. Furthermore, we may observe that this bleak atmosphere is enhanced by the lack of movement and sound; neither natural elements nor immaterial objects ever move or are moved. If life outside the room only offers a somber perspective, life inside the room appears even more disheartening: "It is dark outside, in the room it is darker" (33). The space of the room exposes an even gloomier ambiance than the paralyzed world beyond them. According to Bachelard, "The house even more than the landscape is a 'psychic state', and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it bespeaks intimacy" (91). In the intimate space of the room there is neither light nor colour but darkness, which is commonly associated with depressing emotional states. In Strand's own words: "In some ways dark or the darkness has always been my freedom because it's where I can project whatever I want" (Handal 6). Therefore, both his choice of the room, as mentioned earlier, and the insistence on darkness provide him with the elements with which he feels most comfortable in his creativity. Although the room has a view of the street, the only insight it provides enhances the paralysis that pervades the couple's life both inside and outside the room, since there are no signs of life outside the room either (Strand 27). The anonymity of the space brings detachment since when we are rooted in a space, we are prone to naming the city, the street, or even the neighbourhood to which we feel attached. In his prologue to *Tormenta de uno* by Mark Strand, Dámaso López, very accurately describes Strand's archetypal scenarios: "Places do not even get a proper name. Some features of their

architecture or urban planning are alluded to, but not their names; it is just the city, an anonymous city in which any city could be reflected" (Strand 7).[1] Despite its anonymity, the room's uncanniness is precisely what makes it singular and particularly Strandian. The place resembles the *Hades* that Strand describes in the pages of his text "A Poet's Alphabet", like a particular version of some anteroom previous to Hell:

> H is for Hades, which I like to think of as an influence because of all places it strikes to me as the most poetic. A last resort, a high-walled kingdom, it has one major disadvantage -the weather-, which is windy, dark and cold. Its major advantage is the great amount of leisure time it offers. It is straight down under the world, and is the immortal resting place of souls. (6)

Hades stands for a stronger entrapment than that of hell, since nothing happens there but an eternal waiting. For this reason, if we think of the couple inhabiting a room in absolute loneliness, in a place where nothing ever occurs, we identify their room as closer to Hades -the space of *Thanatos*, ascribed to those who wait to enter hell- than to Paradise -the space of *Eros*, belonging to the living and to love. Regarding the objects in the room, Strand significantly focuses more on the inanimate objects -things that are not made of flesh and blood, and therefore do not have bodies-, than on the characters: "The furniture in the room is never shifted, / and the rugs become darker each time / our shadows pass over them" (27). Together with the fixed position of the furniture, we encounter two figures that remain as motionless as the few objects surrounding them. In the act of stepping onto the rugs, only their shadows are mentioned, and not their physical forms. This creates an eerie sensation, as though the characters were nothing more than apparitions. Peter Stitt discusses Strand's peculiar confinement of imagination:

> It is somewhat curious that Strand's retreat into a world of the mind should be accompanied by such extreme reductiveness. Somehow the method does not so much liberate the imagination as confine it. Being released from

1 The quote belongs to the Spanish translation of Mark Strand's *Blizzard of One* edited by Visor Libros in 2019.

> the demands of reality has meant for many writers a lush
> flowering of creativity within which they could go ahead
> and make up anything. (205)

Strand's treatment of the elements in the room bestows them with some phantasmagorical quality, since they are so unstable in their own immobility that they seem on the verge of disappearance: "The rugs, the furniture, / seem almost imaginary now" (28). The actions performed by the couple are always passive and repetitive, as if they were also objects themselves. The repetition of the last verses uttered in an almost mechanical way deprives them of their humanity:

> We sit beside each other on the couch,
> reading about the coach.
> We say it is ideal.
> It is ideal. (27)

As readers we have more knowledge about the furniture -the inanimate- than about the actual couple -flesh and bones-. In Strand's poem, the relationship between body and world is severed, and we can only envision the characters in the book as ethereal characters and not as fully embodied human beings. Besides, we will find in the poem some instances of unreal imaginary spaces, such as when we read: "I read and was moved by the desire to offer myself / to the house of your sleep" (30). Here Strand builds an alternative space that belongs solely to the woman, and by joining her in that house of her sleep, the husband would be disconnected from his physical consciousness, just like her. In relation to these lines, Harold Bloom suggests that the speaker "wants to inhabit that sleep with her, to escape the all-knowing book" (19). Sleep is both a way to escape the tyranny of the book, but also the emotional pain ascribed to the human body. Later, when the woman imagines a life with a different man, she seems to merely reproduce the same desolated atmosphere where she already lives:

> She imagined a dark, heartless parlor,
> a cold fireplace, a man sitting
> writing a letter to a woman
> who had sacrificed her life for love. (32)

From the adjectives selected to describe her imagined house: (dark, heartless, cold) the parlor she depicts is closer to decay and abandonment than to an idyllic desirable place or an Edenic garden where she could meet the man of her dreams. We may be confronted with the idea that she has never known any other kind of scenario and, therefore, she is not able to envision an actual home. Because of their reduced space, the characters in the poem seem to have been deprived of their imagination and they limit their thoughts to the places they know so well. As we have seen from the *topoanalysis* of "The Story of Our Lives", the characteristics of the room and its effects on our perception of the characters aggravate the feeling of absence of the human factor: the reduced space, the anonymity of the location, the darkness and lack of signs of life, together with the unreal atmosphere that pervades the room, create the perfect canvas for the portrayal of disembodiment.

3. Dreaming the Story of Our Lives

Dreaming and sleeping entail bodily disconnection because of a lack of consciousness of our material existence. In his contribution to *The Poetic Fantastic*, Lance Olsen considers that Strand places the speaker in a "hypnagogic state -that state of semi-consciousness that precedes dreams" (90). Those instances between dream and sleep stand as a nowhere place, similar to Hades, the perfect site where the real and the unreal can coexist. Throughout the poem, the actions of sleeping, waking and dreaming not only provide more instances of disembodiment because of this disengagement from the body, but also because husband and wife alternate their periods of sleep so that sometimes when one of them dreams or sleeps, the other is awake. This provokes that they do not coincide in time and space physically, thus increasing their lack of interaction. Dreamlike states provide spatio-temporal indefiniteness so that our perception of reality becomes subject to our own imagination.

In the third section of the poem, when the narrator wakes up, he seems to accept their bleak destiny: "This morning I woke and believed / there was no more to our lives / than the story of our lives" (29). Once the husband awakens, we are confronted with what resembles more the account of a nightmare than the speaker's peaceful waking in his own bed at home. According to Bachelard, "The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace"

(28). Strand's scenarios deviate from this since he offers, instead, a place where both dreaming and waking are equally terrifying and evoke similar feelings of dread, much like Kafka's writings, highlighting the characters' experiences of alienation and existential despair. The existence of a bed has never been mentioned in the poem: therefore, we could also infer that they sleep on the couch where they read the malefic book that retells their story. Later, when the wife falls asleep, the husband begins to read again: "You fell back to sleep and I began to read / those mysterious parts you used to guess at / while they were being written" (29). The written characters become blurred with the ones that appear in their dreams. In this sense, Strand adheres to what I consider one of his resources in poetry: the fiction of the dream. Dream and fiction coincide in their being versions of a reality that, in this case, we cannot reach. In the following lines, the speaker tells about the parts that he is reading while his wife is asleep:

> For her love is a sacrifice.
> The part describes her death
> and she is never named,
> which is one of the things
> you could not stand about her. (29-30)

The implications of death and of the woman not being named recall again the concept of disembodiment. The dead body escapes life and degenerates until it vanishes, and the absence of a name turns the character into something unreachable because of its anonymity. Following Drew Leder: "in deep sleep, we discover the radical anonymity of natural existence" (59). This absence of identity that persists throughout the poem projects dehumanization on the characters. We read about dresses, chairs or stones, but we never get to know any of the physical traits of the participants in the poem. The husband-narrator keeps reading while his wife sleeps and he painfully encounters the part in the book that describes her absence:

> Before you woke
> I read another part that described your absence
> and told you how you sleep to reverse
> the progress of your life. (30)

Sleeping cannot reverse the progress of life, except in fictional narratives, where the author can play with the non-linear narratives available in literature, but dreams can also create confusion with the notion of time. Some pages written in the book work sometimes as projections of the couple's own dreams, as when the speaker refers to the man who lives across the street:

> They built a house there,
> and one day a man walked out of it.
> You fell in love with him
> because you knew he would never visit you,
> would never know you were waiting. (28)

Here we have a clear instance of the idea of a love originating only in the mental realm, where physical interaction is impossible and even undesirable. This absence of the spatio-temporal coincidence of their bodies creates a strange conception of desire. She falls in love precisely because of the impossibility of their encounter. At this point we cannot be sure if the other man is just a version of himself as portrayed by the book but without the woman. It could also appear that Strand creates a replica of the house where they are reading the story of their lives. The other man appears as someone with the probability of a different life from theirs when the book as narrator tells: "*Maybe the man who lived there, / the man she loved, was reading / the story of another life*" (32). Nevertheless, the use of "maybe" gives us the clue that the possibility of another book or another life is only a fantasy. Although the sleeping or dreaming characters in the poem remain physically present, this physicality is not perceived by them and, as Leder writes regarding dreaming states: "there is a vivid flow of perceptual experience yet coupled with a recessed disembodiment" (59) since, as he argues: "My own sleeping body is one thing I will never directly see" (58). It seems that neither sleeping nor waking do liberate the couple from the book, since these actions merely mirror one another as if they were identical.

4. The Language of Nothingness

The inability to produce language is another of the examples of disembodiment we will encounter throughout the poem. As Drew Leder notes, "language is a profoundly embodied affair" (121). Destitute

of this human faculty then, the characters appear as less human and more fictional. This disconnection from language pervades not only the written word -in the poem the speaker puts the pen down and the role of the writer is taken by the book- but also the spoken word.

In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel in 1999, Mark Strand affirmed that "Emotional engagement is enhanced by language. There is no love without the language of love" ("American Poet"). This statement reinforces the withdrawal from emotional involvement between husband and wife in the poem, since they never speak to each other and no words of love are ever uttered in their story. Besides, the absence of dialogue emphasizes the absence of interaction between them but also erases one of the most important bodily functions performed by humans, that of speech. At one point, the book as narrator tells:

> *They became silent and did not know how to begin*
> *the dialogue that was necessary.*
> *It was words that created divisions, in the first place,*
> *that created loneliness.*
> (32)

One of the subjects we will encounter in Strand's poetry is that words and language are not useful for representing the world. Because the characters are deprived from the function of speech, it appears that the book has taken possession of their voices, and has therefore prevented them from the ability of oral communication. Although in the following lines we might perceive a glimpse of dialogue, the conversation remains a failure:

> You are asking if I am tired,
> if I want to keep reading.
> I say yes to everything.
> You cannot hear me. (33)

To her questions, he answers "yes" to everything, in an absolute indifference to her words. Furthermore, a "yes" that is unheard has no relevance, and as Harold Bloom puts it, "His indecision binds him ultimately to a life of nothing" (20). Besides, the fact that the wife cannot hear him epitomizes lack of communication and alienation. Hearing and speaking as means of reception and production of language

do not function properly here. Speaking is for them just a shadow of the human aspect of language. On the relatedness of language and body, Drew Leder argues: "In speech, language remains closely wedded to its point of origin in the human body. Speech (excepting the question of recordings) happens in the immediate context of an embodied speaker and listener" (123). Accordingly, every time the book takes the role of the narrator, the couple's disembodiment is reinforced; first, because what we encounter is written language and, second, because the characters are being written instead of writing themselves and, therefore, they become objects rather than subjects.

In relation to absence, Lars Frers has noted:

> Merleau-Ponty states that silence is nothing but an absence of sounds that appears as such because it follows on from sounds that could be heard. Silence appears as an interruption of sounds that have been perceived. i.e. sounds that did not just exist somewhere, but that were actually experienced by someone. (435)

Following Frers's argument, the absence of sounds that pervades the room in the poem undoubtedly recalls times when dialogue between the couple was possible, although it is now interrupted. At times, we have the illusion that the husband as narrator is producing language, but later we understand that this is always an action provoked by the dominance of the book over him. The use of the conditional in the following stanza adds to the resignation of the couple since they cannot participate actively in their lives and can only passively keep on reading:

> We are reading the story of our lives
> as though we were in it,
> as though we had written it.
> This comes up again and again. (27-28)

In discussing the role of repetition and its impact on the poem, Harold Bloom observes, "the story unfolds while we read it, as it unfolds the narrator. The repetition of the phrase 'We are reading the story of our lives' suggests that the action is cyclical and constant" (17-18). Consequently, repetition within the poem amplifies the mechanical nature of the couple, portraying them as automata caught in a tedious

cycle. In addition, the failure of language contributes to a sense of temporal ambiguity, considering that the human body is inherently tied to chronological sequentiality.

5. Absence of the Body, Presence of the Mind

Right from the start of the poem, the actions the characters have performed are those related to the mind instead of the body and their only few movements are those of turning the pages of the book. According to Drew Leder, "My relation to other subjects is, as well, a relation of flesh and blood. In Merleau-Ponty's description, I discover my own visibility and that of the world only through the gaze of another" (67). But, what if this gaze of another is missing? The couple's failure to engage with one another leads to their mutual invisibility both to each other and to the outside world, since a love relationship depends on acknowledging the other person. Following Levinas, "Love remains a relation with the other that turns into need, and this need still presupposes the total, transcendent exteriority of the other, the beloved" (254). The couple feels that the distance between them is widening, but even this physical divide occurs only in their minds which, in turn, are controlled by the book. The sole instance in the poem where the wife is seen reading illustrates the neglect in their shared life: "*She seemed to consider his absence /of no special importance*" (28). We can perceive how irrelevant their lives are since we can envision them as secondary characters with regards to the book: "We are reading the story of our lives / as if we were in it / as though we have written it" (27). The use of the conditional tense here intensifies the idea of their futile existence.

Mark Strand has frequently been described as "the poet of absence" by critics such as Richard Jackson (136-145), Sven Birkerts (36), or Linda Gregerson (6). The experience of absence necessarily needs a previous occurrence of presence to be perceived as such; something, present before, must be missing. Strand plays continually with the tension between presence and absence but favouring the latter, which causes strangeness and discomfort. Throughout the poem there is also an insistence on passivity. The narrator is tired, and he knows that the book is aware of it, but this tiredness does not seem to be connected with the physical but only with the mental or emotional side. The characters never have visual contact; they even look at themselves

through a mirror in order to relieve their solitude, or they read about each other in the pages of the book. Husband and wife are ghostly figures looking at their own shadows and we cannot perceive their physicality on either side of the mirror: "They sat beside each other on the couch. / They were the copy, the tired phantoms / of something they had been before" (33). The couple remains entrapped between past and present, with no possibility of a future that will inevitably dissolve into nothingness once the book is closed. The concept of disembodiment emerges from the idea of body and mind as two distinct aspects that can be conceived of as separate and which, in turn, only when joined may conform to human wholeness. In his studies regarding the loss of body awareness, Drew Leder claims that at times of disturbance we can even feel the body as the "Other", as opposed to the self. This is where his concept of *dys-appearance* comes as relevant; in *dys-appearance*, as opposed to *dis-appearance*, "The body appears as a thematic focus, but precisely as in a *dys* state –*dys* is from the Greek prefix signifying 'bad', 'hard', or 'ill' " (84). As he further explains: "dys-appearance tends to arise when we are away, apart, from the self. Surfacing in phenomena of illness, dysfunction, or threatened death, the body may emerge as an alien thing, a painful prison or tomb in which one is trapped" (87). Leder associates this dysfunctionality with illness; but this illness also includes the mental and emotional realms, which in the case of the couple is materialized in the form of anxiety and emotional paralysis: "Dys-appearance characterizes not only the limits of vital functioning but those of affectivity" (84). In the poem, by means of deleting, not only the focus on the body, but also the human activities associated with the body, Strand increases the estrangement in how we perceive the characters. We recognise that their bodies are never referenced, and we are aware of their lack of perception through the senses. This, together with the absence of interactions between them, heightens our awareness of their disembodied condition. I have already discussed the predominance of the mental aspect over the physical in Strand's poem. In *The Absent Body*, Leder also explains the problematic feeling of the invisibility of the mind as separate from the body:

> The experience of abstract thought thus provides one of the most powerful derivations for the notion of the rational mind as incorporeal. In this activity, the body of the thinker, the body of the sign, the body of the referent,

> are all experientially effaced. This strongly encourages the characterization of thought as a disembodied activity engaged in an immaterial soul. (125)

If we perceive this separation, this duality, the fact that in the poem all physical experience is being erased not only makes us focus on the absence of the body, but also on the insistence on mental activity. As Leder aptly puts it: "*It seems as if the thinker makes no use of a body*" (123) [2] and later he insists on that idea by saying that "thinking simply seems to come, involving no material substructure" (124). Hence, the insistence on mental activities contributes to our perception of the characters' bodies as absent from the poem. Peter Stitt speaks of this predominance of the world of the mind over the world of the body in Strand's work:

> The world of the mind is clearly predominant in the early poems of Mark Strand; reality is capricious, not to be trusted, even unknowable in any certain sense. The question of knowledge for Strand depends upon the question of perception; reality is so inconstant that the observer cannot trust what he seems to see. [...] Strand's major subject, then, becomes the question of human perception and how can this result in poetry. (204)

If we analyse the verbs that signal the actions performed by the couple, they belong to the realm of the mind: hope, consider, imagine, believe, guess, dream, learn or remember; whereas other verbs that could be related to the body, have to do with quiet activities like reading, sitting or waiting. Regarding lack of movement, Drew Leder asserts: "Human awareness can seem most disembodied only when the deep connection between perception and movement is broken" (116). Body and mind are profoundly disconnected in the characters in Strand's poem; even when verbs of perception occur, the actions are shadowed because they have been written in the book and thus dictated by it, because "It would be in the book. / Everything would be there" (31). The book has become the couple's only organ of perception and their only medium to contemplate their reduced microcosm. The figure of the book, which is an immaterial object turned into the controlling

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2 Italics in the original

force to which the characters are subjected to, will also contribute to the feeling of disembodiment.

6. The Book. Nothing but the Book

In "The Story of Our Lives", the figure of the book takes a central position in the development, or anti-development, of every aspect in the couple's lives. It sometimes assumes the role of the narrator throughout the poem, but also that of a perverse puppeteer, since the characters are always in its hands. The book stands as the medium through which the couple can have knowledge of the world, even if this world is as limited as the pages that had been written.

James F. Nicosia stated about "The Story of Our Lives", "that the only thing that is certain is the book created in the poem that creates the poet who writes the book" (45). Hence, a sense of fictionality also contributes to the disembodiment of the characters. The book becomes closely associated with the theme of the inescapability of fate:

> We keep turning the pages,
> hoping for something,
> something like mercy or change,
> a black line that would bind us
> or keep us apart. (Strand 27)

The couple appears as desperate because nothing reveals the possibility of a new life for them. On the contrary, as the husband narrates: "The way it is, it would seem / The book of our lives is empty" (27). Their only shared experience is that of reading the book, and as Drew Leder argues: "In reading I do not attend to my eyes but from them. [...]The rest of the body is often placed in background disappearance" (122). Consequently, when they read, their gaze is absorbed by the book and, in addition, they also stop perceiving their bodies. Quoting Leder, again, we could speak here of what he terms *mutual incorporation*:

> Through a natural empathy, one takes up the affective responses of another. I feel sadness as I witness another's tears and am infected by his or her laughter. There is a further transmission of intentions allowed by the use

> of gestures and language. In *mutual incorporation*, each person's capacities and interpretations find extension through the lived body of the Other.
> (94)

Mutual incorporation is the ability to perceive not through my own organs of perception but via the other person next to me. The feelings shared by the characters in the poem are those of hopelessness and anxiety and this provokes mutual incorporation, since by sharing those negative emotional states, the couple intensifies disconnection from their lived bodies, as if they had been isolated from one another and a contagion of paralysis and inactivity appears to happen between them instead. The husband as narrator feels his enslavement, not only in the room, but in the even smaller space that is the book, since it represents for them an inescapable cage and he finds he can only set the book aside because it dictates that he must. The narrator's yearning for another life -or another book- betrays the stagnancy and entrapment he is suffering: "I write that I wish to move beyond the book, / Beyond my life into another life" (28). Although the male character experiences impulses or desires, he cannot fulfill them. Besides, the book would prevent him from performing any action of his own free will. James F. Nicosia comments on the power of the book upon the couple and their fate by noting that

> The speaker may believe that he is choosing to write the book, but every time he puts pen to paper and consults the book, the words are already there. Even when he chooses his own destiny, this choice has been predetermined as well. Such despair and resignation dominate the poem. Ultimately, we are prisoners of fate: "They are the book and they are / nothing else."
> (47)

The book has a power that exceeds that of man or woman, acting like a divine presence. It can both create and destroy and, as we may see, the husband is not only incapable of writing the book, but he is also watching the woman reading instead of reading himself. This scene implies a somehow perverse voyeurist eroticism. The narrator is passively contemplating his wife reading about her falling in love with another man. Besides, the fact that she is reading about falling in love, instead of

falling in love in real life, is another sign of disembodiment. The couple seems to belong to the book so that they are resigned to admitting the fictional condition of their story where the book appears to know more about the woman's feelings than her own husband. Although we may sense that husband and wife have a desire for things to change, there is also an inherent fear provoked by the possible side effects that these changes might bring: "The book describes more than it should. / It wants to divide us" (Strand 29). The book sometimes stands as a menacing threat with its ability to separate them, but separation would imply change and also movement, and none of these occur. The book appears as a cage, but also as a mirror where the couple meet their other selves, thus producing a duplicate of their disembodied figures. David Kirby argues that in Strand's poem the book "is worse than a mirror, which merely reflects, as the images in the book preexist and cause anxiety by announcing limits that cannot be transcended" (30). This claim is evident in the following lines from the poem:

> The book said: *in these moments it was his book.*
> *A bleak crown rested uneasily on his head.*
> *He was the brief ruler of inner and outer discord,*
> *Anxious in his own kingdom.*
> (Strand 30)

The speaker's illusion of being the owner of the book and, therefore, the ruler of his fate only occurs during the passage where his wife is sleeping. There are no witnesses, and no one can provide evidence of his brief reign. Lance Olsen sheds some light on Strand's technical resources by saying that: "another way Strand disarms conventional notions about 'reality' is through his use of metafiction, a mode of narcissistic narrative that reinforces his key image of the mirror" (93-94). This resource mentioned by Olsen constantly adds to the feeling of strangeness that we perceive as readers. Ironically, the story has already been told to us and, reflecting what the characters have done in it, we are also reading the story of their lives. The book, which has become the speaker's organ of perception, materializes as his only way to interact with his wife, when at one point he tries to "read" the woman's face instead of actually seeing or touching her, when he says: "I looked at your face / and I read the eyes, the nose, the mouth" (Strand 31).

Regarding this action of reading instead of watching or touching her, Gaston Bachelard's insights come to mind:

> it therefore makes sense from our standpoint of a philosophy of literature and poetry to say that we "write a room", "read a room", or "read a house". Thus, very quickly at the very first word, at the very first poetic overture, the reader who is "reading a room" leaves off reading and starts to think of some place of his own past. (35)

Bachelard was of course referring to houses or rooms, thus inanimate things, and this is why Strand's resource of turning the woman into a readable thing -an object- brings us to that space of the *uncanny*: the familiar becomes unfamiliar so that we recognize the elements but the way in which they are presented to us is odd. Later, the speaker wishes that they could stop reading: "Each moment is like a hopeless cause. / If only we could stop reading" (31). The characters are reading together as if cursed with a perverse enchantment: they cannot avoid turning the pages of the book. If they stop reading, the man and the woman will cease being characters and will be removed from the book, which will not only cause their physical presence in the poem to fade but also lead to an inevitable and total vanishing that comes with the book's conclusion: "The book will not survive. / We are the living proof of that" (33). Strand has here reduced the couple's life to the space of the book so that the book becomes their story: "*They are the book and they are / nothing else*" (33).

As readers, we cannot either escape disembodiment, since when we read, our bodies, too, tend to disappear from our consciousness. Following James F. Nicosia: "ultimately the book represents humankind's fate" (47). Strand has deliberately given the power to the book as the ruler of a world where written language has a privileged position over that of the characters in it. Therefore, we can assert that prioritizing the written domain -that of the book- also aids in the diminishing of physicality and, consequently, contributes to disembodiment. Additionally, as Drew Leder expresses, "the written word […] has no three-dimensional depth" (122).

7. Conclusions

The different aspects of disembodiment to which the couple in Strand's poem are condemned have been discussed throughout this essay: the small room that they inhabit, and which can neither represent a home nor comprise the story of a lifetime; the absence of their human aspect due to their being deprived of language, movement and perception; their *hypnagogic state* between dreaming and waking; and the fictionality of their lives as being written but also commanded by the book. All this prevents their embodiment as actual beings; on the contrary, they have not been able to write the story of their lives themselves first-hand, and thus eventually govern their own fate. Disembodiment and the absence of love have gone hand in hand, and as Max Picard claims, "where there is no love, there are no objects" (114). Love belongs to the human realm. To be represented it necessarily needs a feeling of connectedness between human beings. Emotional involvement could have filled the absence of physicality in the idea of love that we derive from the poem, but emotions in "The Story" are essentially related to anxiety and despair. Strand's insistence on the absence of the bodies has resulted in the creation of a world that fluctuates between the real and the unreal. In the poem, the few elements that anchor us to an apparently ordinary domesticity, that of the couple, appear as insufficient and unstable. In this way, Strand has told us what we did not expect: the other side of experience; that which we can only reach when we open the book of the unsayable.

In "The Story of Our Lives", departing from what its title may have suggested, Strand elaborates a poem on the painful ending stages of what probably had been a story of love before. The poem deals with love but not in its glorious aspect of happiness and fulfillment, and more with the end of it and with the consequent tedium the characters are experiencing instead. Strand's constant use of absence and disembodiment, when applied to the love relationship, only increasingly enhances the opposite of love. In this case, by choosing to focus on the absence of bodily presence and emotional involvement, Strand reinforces the feeling of disconnection and despair on the part of the characters.

We have read "The Story of Our Lives", and we may feel that we have been exposed to a perverse fairytale where the husband and his

wife will disappear unhappily ever after in an irreversible vanishing act performed by the book and effected by Mark Strand. But, are we closing the book because it told us to?

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Troubled Departures: Migration and the Afterlife of the Northern Irish Conflict in Nick Laird's Fiction

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Abstract: The paper examines the portrayal of migration in Nick Laird's novels *Utterly Monkey* (2005) and *Modern Gods* (2014) within the context of recent Northern Irish fiction and its repeated themes. While contemporary fiction authors continue to address the Northern Irish conflict and its aftermaths, Laird's texts extend this discourse by focusing on an often-overlooked theme of (e)migration connected to the conflict. Providing a brief history of emigration from the province and the themes connected with migration literature, the paper provides a comparative analysis of the two novels. It demonstrates how Laird depicts characters who navigate identity negotiations and grapple with tensions between cultural and identity continuity and reinvention as they move from Northern Ireland, both within the United Kingdom and beyond. Drawing on theories of migration literature and identity formation, the paper argues that while not unique, Laird's nuanced portrayal of migration captures its deep psychological and emotional impact, revealing how Northern Ireland's turbulent history continues to shape the identities and experiences of those who leave its borders.

Keywords: Northern Irish literature, migration and identity, post-conflict society, Nick Laird, cultural memory.

Salidas conflictivas: la migración y las consecuencias del conflicto de Irlanda del Norte en la ficción de Nick Laird

Resumen: El artículo examina la representación de la migración en las novelas de Nick Laird *Utterly Monkey* (2005) y *Modern Gods* (2014) en el contexto de la ficción reciente de Irlanda del Norte y sus temas recurrentes. Si bien los autores de ficción contemporáneos continúan abordando el conflicto de Irlanda del Norte y sus consecuencias, los textos de Laird amplían este discurso al centrarse en un tema a menudo pasado por alto: la (e) migración (in)directamente resultante del conflicto. Después de ofrecer una breve historia de la emigración de la provincia y los temas relacionados con la literatura sobre migración, el artículo hace un análisis comparativo de las dos novelas. Demuestra cómo Laird describe personajes que navegan por negociaciones de identidad y lidian con tensiones entre la continuidad y reinvención cultural y de identidad a medida que se mudan desde Irlanda del Norte, tanto dentro como fuera del Reino Unido. Basándose en teorías sobre la literatura sobre migración y la formación de identidad, el artículo sostiene que, si bien no es único, el retrato matizado de la migración que hace Laird captura su profundo impacto psicológico y emocional, revelando cómo la turbulenta historia de Irlanda del Norte continúa moldeando las identidades y experiencias de quienes abandonan sus fronteras.

Palabras clave: literatura norirlandesa, migración e identidad, sociedad postconflicto, Nick Laird, memoria cultural.

1. Introduction

Despite the abundance and variety of recent fiction from Northern Ireland, there is a continuous discernible engagement with the Northern Irish conflict (The Troubles), the collective memory of it, engagement with its aftermath, and effects in contemporary society. While providing both historical and contemporary settings and focusing on diverse events and characters, even the most recently published works by prominent authors continue to address the legacy of this violent conflict. Fiction writers such as Anna Burns, Jan Carson, Glenn Patterson, or David Park continue to comment on the (recent) history of the province and on its current state. Concurrently, numerous scholars are examining these works and their discourse regarding themes connected to the Troubles, most notably Caroline Magennis and Birte Heidemann, among many others. Both fictional and critical engagements with the conflict underscore its continuing influence on the everyday life in the province and, more generally, the afterlife of such a period or event in any post-conflict society.

Northern Irish author Nick Laird, like his contemporaries, envisions characters and spaces grappling with the legacy of the Troubles. He addresses questions of identity regarding the Republican and Unionist communities and the transformation of the province since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Regrettably, Laird has been recognized primarily for his poetry, while his fiction has received limited and often dismissive attention. His debut novel, *Utterly Monkey* (2005), has been described as mere "lad lit," "lukewarm," or "overcrowded" (Block, n.p.). Although Laird's novels, *Utterly Monkey* (2005) and *Modern Gods* (2014), are often characterised as simple, straightforward thrillers or absurd social comedies, they warrant examination, particularly in connection with the themes established in contemporary Northern Irish literature. While the two texts differ in terms of characters, settings, and plots, Laird follows in the vein of other fiction writers by posing questions about Northern Ireland's recent past and its post-conflict prospects.

Both *Utterly Monkey* (2005) and *Modern Gods* (2014) engage not only with themes of memory and identity in connection to the Troubles but also, perhaps more intriguingly, with a key issue only recently addressed by scholars in relation to the province: (e)migration directly or indirectly caused by the Troubles. Laird himself moved from

Northern Ireland, first to London and then further to the USA. While he remarked in an interview that he did not feel a need to speak about specific topics or on behalf of others, he also added that "when you sit down to write, whatever is going on in your subconscious tends to rise to the surface" (Wroe, n.p.), making perhaps a reference to the similarity between his own life and those of his characters. His personal journey is indeed mirrored in his fiction, but more crucially, his texts discuss a specific consequence of the conflict that has largely been overlooked. This article considers Laird's portrayal of the process of migration or movement from the province caused by the Troubles. First, it explores the intricacies of identity formation in connection with migration from Northern Ireland, particularly when the movement occurs within the borders of the United Kingdom. Subsequently, it examines some established themes of migrant literature before analysing Laird's two novels.

2. (E)migration from Northern Ireland in the Twentieth Century

Roulston et al. note that despite the "scale and impact of 20th-century emigration from the North, there is no body of research on this aspect of Northern Irish history comparable to the extensive analyses of emigration from the rest of the island" (162). Indeed, engagements with this topic are mostly scattered, often focusing on oral history and personal memories of emigration from the province. Scholars like Johanne Devlin Trew and projects such as Conflict, Memory and Migration: Northern Irish Migrants and the Troubles in Great Britain under the University of Manchester have been recently at the forefront of this engagement. While the historical facts regarding the movement and migration that occurred during the onset of the Troubles, as well as the histories of so-called burnt-out individuals and communities, are well known, Roulston et al. (2024) point out that in the following decades, between 10,000 and 15,000 individuals left Northern Ireland each year, many of whom 'emigrated' to different parts of Britain (163). Just as the Troubles are often depicted in Northern Irish fiction, this major outcome of the late-century conflict can also be detected here. Although recent migration statistics show that Northern Ireland now experiences net immigration (Campbell, n.p.)—and immigration

appears, albeit briefly, in Laird's work—the scale of earlier emigration and the general neglect of this issue should not be overlooked.

The recent examination of migration from Northern Ireland within Britain and beyond recognizes importantly the identity politics that have played a major role in this movement, as well as in the problematic of discussing it. Tonge and Gomez rightly point out the complexity of any resettlement of Northern Irish individuals within the UK (279-280). Particularly concerning the Unionist community, from which Laird hails and which he portrays in his novels, these migrants predominantly identify "as a subset of the wider British population, whose identity and aspirations they share" (279). The simultaneous presence and absence of a border (the Irish Sea, but a single recognized country) and, since the Good Friday Agreement, the possibility of holding both a British and an Irish passport do not clearly categorise such individuals as emigrants in the simplest definition of the word. Moreover, the recent complex position of Northern Ireland during the post-Brexit negotiations demonstrates that movement from the province within Britain can be perceived as both moving within and outside the borders of a single country.

A particular issue crucial to Laird's texts is the interrogation of one's identity in connection with such a move. While Crangle et al. describe migration simply as an act of reinvention through departure, in the Unionist Northern Irish – British context, such reinvention is not straightforward. Binks and Ferguson point out that migration is often accompanied by a dilemma "between adaptation to a new society and, often, a new culture and the desired preservation of their original and established identity" (299). However, both Irish and Northern Irish migrants to Britain (or even to the USA) have historically been perceived and have perceived themselves as too similar for such a dilemma. They have not been seen as "sufficiently different to warrant affording them the status of 'foreign', although because of subtle differences in language and tradition, neither have they been allowed to be considered British subjects" (Binks and Ferguson 299). This paradox of being both strange and yet similar creates specific and often problematic encounters between individuals and cultures.

Importantly, migrants arriving from Northern Ireland during the Troubles would have also carried the weight of historical knowledge

and cultural memory regarding the province's position within Britain. Crangle et al. insist that migrants constitute themselves through memories of their home and those they have left behind (261). Not only migrants but all individuals construct their identity in communication with others, both those directly around them and those with whom they share a common image of the past (Assmann 127). This identity and shared memory of the past necessarily influence any migratory experience. As research on diasporic identities suggests, identities post-migration become dependent on both previous attachments and new connections (McDowell 880-881). It is then important to recognize that in the context of Northern Ireland, these were migrants escaping a violent conflict to a different region that is both involved and yet distant from it; they are both leaving and yet remaining within a single country, and they are both joining a new community while still staying within the same one. This image of Northern Irish emigration during the Troubles and the general intricacies of migrant experiences thus present unique circumstances when examining such a topic in local fiction.

3. Tropes of Migrant Literature (in Northern Irish Fiction)

Recent Northern Irish fiction is marked not only by its focus on the legacy of the Troubles (of which migration is only one feature) or on the relationship between the past and the present, but overall, by its attention to the themes of transition and *in-betweenness*, as well as to the uneasiness connected to them. Both Caroline Magennis and Birte Heidemann in their monographs comment on the many ambiguities and uncertainties that local authors illustrate. While Magennis in *Northern Irish Writing After the Troubles* (2021) draws on affect and feminist theories to discuss the contrast of intimate and public spaces and lives, Heidemann in *Post-Agreement Northern Irish Literature* (2016) even more closely focuses on the theme of liminality in Northern Irish fiction. Describing Northern Ireland as in the state of negative liminality, she asserts that it is to be "understood as precarious state of being trapped in a geography of fear, one that is performatively configured by a profuse sense of claustrophobic intensity" (39). Focusing on two of Nick Laird's poems, she comments on how he portrays the interaction between the past and the present and between two circumstances (Heidemann 148-

151). While she does not focus on migration as such, Heidemann's assertations on liminality, on the state of in-between can be connected also to the present theme, as the process itself creates a transition or an intermediate space and time filled with uncertainty.

Before examining Laird's novels and their engagement with migration in detail, however, it is necessary to consider the types of tropes that may appear in his work in connection with migration. Migration literature is often marked by themes of identity, belonging, and cultural conflict; the process of migration is not only a physical movement but also a psychological and emotional journey that challenges one's sense of identity and kinship. Fictional texts engaging with these topics create a tension between home and away, negotiating between the old and the new. The resulting hybridity, or a state of in-betweenness, as described by Bhabha (85-92), is one of the defining concepts in migrant literature. This state of in-betweenness or hybridity proves crucial in connection with migration from Northern Ireland within Britain or within the (post)colonial landscape. As Nyman comments, "the concept of identity plays a key role in migration literature" (35). As examined above, however, within the space of Northern Ireland such identity is complicated by the province's history in the colonial context.

Shuttleworth et al. caution against viewing the province as unique due to its "troubled political history, social divisions, and legacy of religion-based residential segregation" (2), noting that many migratory patterns are similar to those in other European countries in the second half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, all the factors they describe must be considered when discussing the province. While migration functions as a vehicle for exploring the complexities of identity, in the landscape of Unionist – Republican identities, one's identity is already complex pre-migration. Individuals are caught up in conflicting definitions of what a community means; new places, limitations, and borders may appear merely as outsiders enter different parts of a singular city. Within the space of a single country then, individuals can already experience migration or exile, where what they previously learned within family and close community relations becomes "strange, complex, and fraught with contradictions," as Corinna Assmann describes the impact of migration on familial relationships (2). Additionally, the cultural

trauma of the Troubles necessarily creates a close, albeit frustrating, connection to one's home.

It is therefore understandable that the portrayal of (e)migration in Northern Irish literature must be also complex and multifaceted. Themes of belonging, displacement, and rootlessness take on heterogeneous forms, led by the uncertainty of integrating into a new society or completely disconnecting from the old one. As contemporary novels continue to portray the nuances of life during and after the Troubles, its violence, religious and political divides, and the history of colonialism, similar nuance should be observed in their portrayal of migration. Nonetheless, these narratives may still be approached within the thematic scope of migrant literature. Commenting on previous scholars such as Bhabha and Hall, Nyman points out that cultural identities are always changing and developing through new encounters and interactions with previously unfamiliar cultures (35-36). While fictional accounts, Laird's own included, are not necessarily realistic representations of migrant experiences and rather narrativizations of the processes of transnationalism, multiculturalism, and transculturalism in a particular context (Nyman 43), they do provide insight into the complexity of the migration processes. In the case of Northern Ireland, the complexity stems from encounters between cultures and cultural identities that are different yet similar enough, where the precise moment of crossing a border and encountering a new culture does not necessarily occur, and subsequently, an establishment, redefinition, or transformation of one's identity may or may not transpire.

4. Nick Laird's Fiction

Laird's earlier novel *Utterly Monkey* (2005) takes place in post-conflict London and focuses on the character of Danny, who has previously moved from a small town in Northern Ireland to work in London as a lawyer, and thus closely mirrors Laird's own experience before becoming a writer. At the beginning of the narrative, he is joined by a childhood acquaintance, Geordie, and later by Geordie's girlfriend, Janice. The plot revolves around the 'shenanigans' of Danny and Geordie as they attempt to stop another Northern Irish character, Ian, who arrives in London as a member of a unionist paramilitary organisation to plant a bomb. The plot of *Utterly Monkey* is indeed quite

absurd and convoluted; however, it offers a clear focus on the topic of migration within Britain and, importantly, the complicated identity formulation of the Northern Irish characters regarding their move. Despite numerous minor characters, it is these four Northern Irish ones who function as focalisers. Their points of view are provided as they navigate life in England and experience clashes between their own culture and the metropolitan city. We observe their concerns about the process of leaving, the stage of settling into a new community, and the complex relationships these individuals have with their space. Through the minor characters both in Northern Ireland and in London—and thus through the home and host cultures—we can then also examine the different and often dismissive responses to the principal characters' migratory processes.

Utterly Monkey proclaims its interest in migration on its very first page. In introductory chapter the narrator comments, "Moving is easy. Everyone does it. But actually leaving somewhere is difficult" (Laird 1). By means of this opening, the text establishes the novel's interest in the many moves portrayed: Danny's previous economically motivated one, Geordie's escape from a violent gang, Janice's journey to follow her boyfriend, and Ian's arrival as a paramilitary. Their experiences may differ, but the complexities of being a Northern Irish individual in England are apparent. They all endure a tension between maintaining a connection to their community and its past and assimilating into their new home. The portrayal of Geordie's and Janice's departures, in particular, exemplifies the province's position in the UK. When Geordie describes his passage on the ferry, his journey seems easy, yet it is to "another country" (Laird 19). Geordie equates the travel to England with a possible further trip to Australia (Laird 43). Similarly, when Janice prepares to move from Northern Ireland to London later in the narrative, her concerns keep shifting; she reminisces about previous holiday trips while simultaneously having a difficult conversation with her mother and younger sister, as if she is never to return. She urges her sister to keep whatever she wishes from the possessions Janice is leaving behind. Janice's mother urges her to leave and "make a go of it," as if speaking to her daughter for the last time (Laird 217). The narrative also injects a comedic moment when Janice is unsure whether she needs a passport for her flight from Belfast to London. While the book portrays Danny and Geordie as having already left, through

Janice we are offered a glimpse into migrants' thoughts and anxieties concerning their upcoming move, and considerations of what they're leaving behind.

The process of settling that Geordie and Janice experience upon arriving in London is thwarted by misunderstandings, characterising both as clear outsiders and emigrants. Although the novel often focuses on a quick plot development, as the pair experience their first moments in the new environment the pace of the narrative often pauses to describe moments of first encounters. When Janice lands at Heathrow, she wonders about people from multiple cultures that she observes, not used to such an environment. She "suddenly [feels] that *she* [is] the exception" (Laird 271). Similarly, Geordie "[feels] himself in a new position: the outsider" (Laird 52), and experiences a *faux pas* when he asks for bacon at a kosher butcher's shop. Early in the novel, we learn that Geordie escaped Northern Ireland with money that Janice stole from her brother. Adding to the convoluted nature of the plot, that money actually belongs to Ian and his organisation. While this may serve as a critique of the novel and its many intricate sub-plots, through the migration lens, it additionally portrays Northern Ireland as a small place far away from busy London where everyone knows each other. It is seemingly a place where everyone has a close connection, which is questioned post-migration. This is mirrored later when Danny visits Belfast during a work trip and surprisingly meets an acquaintance of an acquaintance in the local company offices. The novel appears to affirm that these are indeed migrant experiences from a remote, small place to a metropolitan city abroad.

Regarding Danny himself, having previously migrated to London, it is interesting to observe how he has both acclimatised to his new community and surroundings while still being defined by his past and culture. When Geordie travels to London, Danny is the first person he visits, holding onto the connection to his home and resisting the new space. Danny's initial response is fear of someone from the province reaching out to him. Only when he realises that it is his friend does Danny compose himself, realising that Geordie "was not going to draw a gun and shoot him" (Laird 5). Danny soon begins to feel "relaxed now, forthright, made in Ulster" (Laird 14), as Geordie's arrival re-establishes his sense of connection to home. While they both left Northern Ireland

for a better life, the connection to it remains strong. The complicated relationship a migrant has with their previous home is also portrayed in the novel through Danny's work trip to Belfast. While Danny is cautious about returning in the middle of July during the marching season, and recognises the possible danger of encountering a march or a bonfire, he is also frustrated that he has forgotten certain facts, such as how the Northern Irish car registration system works. Having spent several years abroad, he isn't necessarily part of his original community anymore. Indeed, Wimbush asserts that the return of a migrant in literature is a form of exile (86). Peters similarly comments that a homeland becomes unapproachable (31); the character in the book experiences this development even during a momentary return. Furthermore, Danny arrives as a representative of his employer, a law firm, and has the task of shutting down the offices in Belfast. He is now a representative of the imperialist London employer.

The relationship to one's place of origin, in this case Northern Ireland, is crucial as the characters oscillate between intimacy and distance from the province. Danny and Geordie's encounter at the beginning produces both fear and kinship. It mirrors Crangle et al.'s interviews with Northern Irish emigrants who "evoked the solidarities and connections of life in Northern Ireland while bemoaning the repression these intimacies allowed for" (260). While Geordie migrates to distance himself from a violent gang, he happily sits down with Ian in a pub in London, bonding over stories from home and personal and familial connections to the Troubles. The characters desire a fresh start from the past but are unable to leave it behind completely. During these scenes of reminiscence between Danny and Geordie or Ian and Geordie, in particular, the main narrative again pauses and readers are offered short vignettes of the characters' past, indicating its importance. The responses that the Northern Irish characters receive from people in London similarly point to the double-edged reality of emigration, the individuals as well as the province's position in Britain. These minor characters are themselves unable to decide whether Danny, Geordie, Janice, and Ian are truly emigrants; they often seem to have no knowledge of the conflict at all, while having a sense that these individuals are different. The experiences of the migrants and the members of their host culture do not necessarily produce new understandings of established boundaries, but their encounters provide

a space for examining the identity of Northern Ireland and its people within Britain. Consequently, they further mirror the interest of migrant literature as well as Bhabha's assertion on sites that challenge fixed identities promoted by colonialism and nationalism (85-92).

Laird's text provides numerous quaint and amusing moments of misunderstandings. Several times, Danny is mistaken by his co-workers as being from Scotland rather than Northern Ireland, as if they are one and the same. More importantly, the novel also features two scenes where a map of the British Isles is examined, first by Danny's love interest Ellen and later by Geordie, both of which reveal the precarious coexistence of the differing cultures within a single space. In the first scene, Ellen asks Danny to show her on the map where he is really from. In the later scene, Geordie looks at an old car map and comments that the cover picture "made it look as if Britain was trying to hug Ireland. Or eat it" (Laird 310). The novel is filled with these misunderstandings and perceived distances between characters from Northern Ireland and those from London. Besides being mistaken for Scottish, Danny is also repeatedly called a stranger by Ellen. In reference to the novel's title, Geordie feels the need to explain the *completely monkey* phrase to Danny's London acquaintances. Here again, the complex relationship with home is revealed for both characters. Danny becomes angry at Geordie for revealing snippets from their shared—and abandoned—past to the people he knows now. Geordie accuses Danny of forgetting that he's Northern Irish. To demonstrate their entangled friendship, the narrative pauses and describes a formative event in their childhood when, as boys, they discovered a dead body while breaking into someone's house. It hints at their indirect fault and reflects the violent realities of the Troubles that continue to function as a frustrating bond. Ultimately, the novel portrays the delicate balance between the two places, the position of Northern Ireland within a larger entity, both the appreciation and misunderstandings that develop from encounters between individuals and communities that are very similar yet different, and importantly the need to both retain and sever one's connection to the province.

As discussed, Laird portrays Northern Irish characters from the Unionist community, who do not necessarily become completely separated from their primary culture and background through their

move. The primary reason for Ian to plant a bomb in London is his grievance and anger at the government in Westminster for having forgotten about the province's needs; Ian' goal is to remind those in London that Northern Ireland is indeed part of the Union. While Ian is characterised as simple and single-minded—his speeches are revealed to be copied from a superior—he embodies actual communal and political concerns of the Unionist parties and groups in the province, as well as the continuing question of Northern Ireland's status in relation to Britain and Ireland. Subsequently, although Laird's characters cannot be described as crossing actual country borders, their concerns regarding their move do fall under migrant literature themes. Indeed, the novel discusses the challenges concerning national unity, describes moments of potential border crossings, and utilises tropes such as language and translation or scenes of misunderstanding over food and cooking, which Nyman finds crucial for migrant literature (34-35). Although the novel is set in 2004 (Laird provides specific dates for chapter titles), through the migration lens, the text highlights how leaving Northern Ireland—both during the conflict and today—does not mean leaving the Troubles and the province's issues behind or in the past. As Roulston et al. comment on emigration from the province, this is due to "the transnational effects of war and the emotional afterlives and echoes of Troubles' memories" (166), which Laird brilliantly portrays in both novels.

Laird's later text, *Modern Gods* (2014), mirrors some of the earlier novel's concerns; there are even scenes that directly reflect *Utterly Monkey* (2005). However, in its consideration of migration from Northern Ireland, the novel ventures in a different direction. As the main character moves beyond the borders of the United Kingdom while also staying within the colonial landscape, the novel contemplates different historical aspects of Northern Ireland's position within the UK and beyond. Set in the present, the novel's main character is Liz, who (similar to Danny in *Utterly Monkey*) has previously left the province to live in New York. She returns at the beginning of the narrative to attend her sister's wedding and then immediately leaves again, as she is hired by the BBC to film a documentary on an emerging cult in Papua New Guinea. Her experiences both back in Northern Ireland and in Oceania are formative. As the primary focaliser, Liz views herself to be both an insider and an outsider. This consideration interestingly occurs during disagreements with her family at home as

well as when Liz witnesses a looming conflict between cult members and an established colonial authority on an island called New Ulster in Papua New Guinea. Liz's story is further accompanied by the novel's secondary focus on Liz's sister Alison and her new husband, Stephen. Shortly after their wedding in the beginning of the narrative, Stephen is revealed to have been a member of a paramilitary group during the Troubles and to have served time for shooting several people in a bar in the nineties. Switching focus between these three characters, the novel's primary concern is, as in the earlier text, the self-assessed position of Northern Irish characters in connection with the world around them.

While in *Utterly Monkey* the nearness of the violent conflict is portrayed through Danny's reacquaintance with his childhood friend Geordie and through Ian's bombing attempt, in *Modern Gods*, its presence functions more as a haunting. Liz has previously left the province, but as she returns home for the wedding and later travels to New Ulster, she is metaphorically confronted by the past. Similarly, Stephen is confronted by his personal history and the part he played in the conflict when a local newspaper reveals his identity. Although set in the present day, the novel makes it clear that the Troubles are still very relevant in the characters' minds and actions. This is reflected even in the novel's structure. The narrative focus switches between Liz, Alison and Stephen, offering different perspectives. More importantly, the main narrative line in the present is interrupted several times by the description of the last living moments of Stephen's victims. Although these vignettes are set apart as short, individual chapters, the past is directly positioned in the present lives of the three main characters.

The presence of the conflict is subsequently mirrored in the portrayal of migration as well. As the previous, this novel often portrays the process through humour and situational comedy. When Liz explains to her family where she will be travelling to film the documentary, her father comments: "A lot of violence in these places, […] a lot of trouble" (Laird 70), as if unaware of where he himself has lived his entire life. Later, when Liz returns from her work trip in New Ulster and tells her family about the violence that ensued there, about the multiple people hurt and a person shot by local authorities, only then her father comments: "A home away from home" (Laird 302). Her sister Alison then simply asks: "What'd you buy?" (Laird 302), normalizing to herself

Liz's descriptions of the remote violence. Interestingly, this scene mirrors one from *Utterly Monkey* where Janice and her mother discuss Janice's departure to London. When Janice's mother sees Danny with a black eye (given to him by Geordie), she looks at her daughter "as if to say *I told you so. It's a dangerous place*" (Laird 255), referring to London. These humorous instances comment on the assumption that emigration is a journey into the potentially dangerous unknown.

What *Modern Gods* portrays exceptionally well is the experience of an emigrant returning to their original community or country. Liz remains a member of her family but upon her return she is also a stranger. She has incorporated new experiences away from home, and is necessarily a different person. She is picked up at the airport by Stephen, and as they attempt to have an awkward conversation in the car, Liz makes several comments about her surroundings. She recognises the (re)adaptation she is experiencing as she returns to the North; the car functions "like a decompression chamber, adjusting the body to the new density surrounding it, to the element of Ireland" (Laird 45). Having spent years abroad, she has changed her perspective on what constitutes home. Indeed, Liz comments: "Home was like climbing into a suit that was made of your own body, and it looked like you, and it smelled like you, and it moved its hands when you told it to, but it wasn't you, not now" (Laird 46). She tries to remain detached in her relationship with her primary home and community, not reacting when Stephen begins to discuss upcoming elections. Yet throughout the car journey, the ghost of the province and its history lingers in her mind. She perceives this to be a place of diverse voices, which give her shivers. This scene clearly reflects Laird's interest in migration and its effects. As Nyman suggests, memory and return are prevailing topics in migrant literature (39-40).

Liz's departure to Papua New Guinea begins with her discovery of Stephen's past. Her response to it reflects her double-edged position as both an insider and an outsider. She explains everything to her English producer Margo, who comments that she would like someone to "explain Northern Ireland to [her]" (Laird 126). Liz only replies, "me too" (Laird 126), as if lacking knowledge of her home and its recent past. During her trip to New Ulster, Liz continually struggles between understanding and misinterpreting what is happening. Her active attempts to distance herself, such as those working in her car ride

with Stephen, do not prove successful. Even Liz's trip can be construed as both leaving and returning home. While there is no island of New Ulster in Papua New Guinea, there exists an island called New Ireland (there is also a province in New Zealand previously called New Ulster), which has a history of colonialism (Britannica). The conflict that Liz witnesses here between an emerging local cult and the joint venture of missionaries and a colonial government presents direct parallels to Ulster's own history. On the one hand, Liz is portrayed almost as a local, as if she has returned home. She quickly gains rapport with the cult leader and its members, comparing the cult's celebrations to "the Orangemen back home" (Laird 246). On the other hand, having previously emigrated, she no longer belongs, and just like the rest of the BBC crew, she is merely a colonial observer. Liz recognises that she "had entered a country that she did not belong in, and did not understand" (Laird 249).

Liz's trip to Papua New Guinea also opens the topic of engaging with foreign cultures and identities and the possibility of different cultures altering each other. The BBC crew, like the missionaries and the local government, only see the cult and its members as something to observe and control. Connecting Ulster with New Ulster, the novel reflects on the colonial assumption of Ireland being a place of barbarism and ignorance. At the same time, it rightfully questions the representation of the coloniser (Britain) as being tolerant and civilised. It subsequently recognises Northern Ireland's position as being somewhere in the middle. As Seamus Deane remarks, the language used to describe Northern Ireland in comparison to England and even Ireland has often been dominated by a division between vulgarity and refinement (128). Additionally, Liz's experience contributes to the important discussion on identity in relation to Northern Ireland and migration. On the one hand, when Liz returns to Ulster at the beginning of the narrative, she feels unwelcomed, both by her family and the province itself. She looks for ways to distance herself from her parents and sister. On the other hand, once in New Ulster, she comments that "the farther she travelled from home, the more unqualified and ridiculous she became" (Laird 126), as if reaching back for her connection to Northern Ireland.

Liz, like other Northern Irish characters in local fiction, continues to be defined not only by her individual past but by the province's history

and the collective memory of the conflict. The inability to fully distance oneself from their past is evident here, and Liz even admits that while the connections she has with her family and Northern Ireland may have loosened over the years, they retain "all the same angles and shapes, the same functions of shame and despair and joy" (Laird 30). As the BBC crew is leaving New Ulster, they witness the beginning of a conflict between the small cult and the local established authority. Commenting both on the real and the metaphorical Northern Ireland, Laird appears to speak to the issues of coexistence of different cultures and histories and the negative presence of the colonial power in previous centuries, as the small fictional island is thrown into complete chaos. At the same time, he speaks to the complex reality of incorporating different cultural experiences within an individual identity.

While Liz is the only character to fully migrate in the span of the novel, the commentary on identity and movement is also visible through the novel's exploration of Alison's and Stephen's relationship. Once Stephen's past is revealed, he suggests moving to Scotland, and Alison reacts as if that would mean moving to the other side of the world. She wishes to retain her connection to Northern Ireland. Even though she fears Stephen's past, she is even more scared of interacting with the outside world. Stephen's violent past is something familiar. Instead, in an attempt at normalcy, the two go on their honeymoon to a resort abroad, where they meet another Northern Irish couple. Throughout their conversation, Alison attempts to guess whether they are "Catholic or Protestant, Cathestant or Protholic" (Laird 187). The binary division between the two communities is still very much ingrained in her engagement with the world—it is again a type of knowledge she can draw on and feel safe with—and she uses it to classify even this experience abroad. Her inability to conclude which side the couple belongs to only provides frustration. While not a direct portrayal of emigration, this short scene similarly exemplifies Laird's narratives' interest in identity politics in and outside Northern Ireland. In the case of Alison's character, Laird portrays the fear that may precede and hinder the process of migration.

5. Conclusion

Nick Laird's novels are not necessarily exceptions when it comes to the engagement with themes of migration in recent Northern Irish fiction. While the topic is remarkably apparent in his texts, other authors similarly depict characters either on the move within their communities, contemplating a move outside that community, or migrating from the province completely. One of the most prominent contemporary fiction authors from Northern Ireland, Anna Burns, describes in her earliest novel *No Bones* (2001) a young female character, Amelia Lovett, who grows up during the Troubles and decides to leave for London in her early twenties. Just as in Laird's texts, Amelia experiences primarily a lack of understanding from her family, who only attempt to convince her to stay. Unlike Laird, however, Burns adopts a much grimmer and pessimistic description of the character's departure. After she leaves, Amelia suffers a mental breakdown and spends time in a mental facility. As the focaliser, she is described as continuously thinking of her life back home while experiencing "dual realities" of existing in both London and Belfast, during which "as long as she [doesn't] panic, ten times out of ten, Belfast always [goes] away" (Burns 284). The continuing presence of home, of the values imparted there, and the struggle to venture into the unknown after leaving are similarly present. The departure from Northern Ireland is initially perceived as an escape, but the weight of the past and the previous experiences and events in connection with the conflict ultimately catch up with the character.

Themes of migration and the impossibility to evade one's past likewise appear in David Park's notable novel *The Truth Commissioner* (2008). Focusing on an imaginary Truth and Reconciliation Commission taking place in the province, one of the novel's main characters, Danny, is portrayed as having previously left Northern Ireland because to his involvement with an unnamed paramilitary group during the Troubles. Described as having successfully settled in Florida, having found a job and a partner, Danny is forcibly brought back to Northern Ireland during the narrative to participate in the commission and discuss his actions during the conflict. Just as the characters in Laird's texts experience misunderstandings while settling in their new communities and use comparisons to their home to understand their surroundings, so does Danny in Park's novel. Upon his return, he similarly struggles to

reconcile his life after emigration to his forced appearance 'back home'. While not as prominent as Laird's focus on the topic of migration, Anna Burns and David Park, as well as others, showcase that this topic can indeed be observed recurrently in recent Northern Irish fiction.

The focus on migration and the topics connected to it are indeed most prominent in the two novels by Nick Laird. In both *Utterly Monkey* (2005) and *Modern Gods* (2014), the author portrays previous or ongoing movements that provide scenes of encounters with presumably new cultures and spaces. Readers are shown the developments, or changes, to one's identity through such encounters and the renegotiation of the relationship between an individual and their original community. Particularly in the context of Northern Ireland and its unique political and cultural history and present, Laird's texts provide a nuanced portrayal of identity in relation to migration. His characters' journeys highlight the complexity of leaving one's home—in Northern Ireland often strictly defined by community boundaries—and of venturing into the unknown while still addressing the continuing impact of the Troubles.

While Laird focuses on the Unionist community, he also interrogates the link between Unionism in Northern Ireland and Britain as a larger entity, and questions the simplistic connection between individuals from a Unionist background and the rest of the Union. Sara Ahmed recognises that home cannot always be associated with closeness and migration with unfamiliarity (340). By depicting the journeys and the complex connections that remain with his characters' space of origin, Laird's novels indeed problematise the simplification of home as safe and familiar and migration as a venture into unfamiliarity. Laird's characters experience both poles of home and away; their departure or exile is often more metaphorical than physical and frequently reveals feelings of exile in other ways as they navigate old and new connections and struggle to integrate their original community knowledge with the new experiences. By focusing on the topic of migration in the context of contemporary Northern Ireland, Laird ultimately adds nuance to the many depictions of the Troubles in recent fiction emerging from the province and provides crucial insight into an overlooked consequence of the conflict.

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An Introduction to Two Female-Oriented Popular Romances of the Early 1660s: S.C.'s *Cleocreton and Cloryana* and J.P.'s *Floridon and Lucina*

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Abstract: This article introduces two neglected popular romances indirectly addressed to (young) female readers in the early 1660s. The undated chivalric romance *Cleocreton and Cloryana* (ca.1661) was apparently written by a woman who concealed her identity under the initials S.C., while J.P.'s non-chivalric story of *Floridon and Lucina* (1663) was inspired by the ballad "Loves Paradice," also by J.P., who was probably related to the ballad-monger Martin Parker. The first section surveys scholarly approaches that may help contextualise mid-seventeenth-century popular romances and chapbooks, as well as female readers of this kind of publications, despite the lack of certainty in these matters. The next two sections concentrate on the romances. The analysis of *Cleocreton* considers the publication year, authorship, genre, and gender issues. The discussion of *Floridon* takes into account aspects as different as authorship, female agency, and race. This article ultimately proposes to pinpoint a significant group of popular prose-fiction acceptable for (young) female readers in a period when literacy and the book business were expanding, and the romance still bore the stigma of pernicious literature.

Keywords: Restoration fiction, women's readership, popular chivalric romance, female authorship, ballad, race.

Introducción a dos romances populares ingleses de principios de la década de 1660 orientados al público femenino: *Cleocreton and Cloryana* de S.C. y *Floridon and Lucina* de J.P.

Resumen: Este artículo presenta dos romances populares no estudiados por la crítica y que iban indirectamente dirigidos a (jóvenes) lectoras a principios de la década de 1660. El romance de caballería *Cleocreton and Cloryana* (ca.1661) aparentemente fue escrito por una mujer que ocultó su identidad bajo las iniciales S.C., mientras que la historia no caballeresca de J.P., *Floridon and Lucina* (1663), se inspiró en la balada "Loves Paradice", también de J.P., que quizás estaba relacionado con el baladista Martin Parker. La primera sección examina enfoques académicos útiles para contextualizar tanto los romances y *chapbooks* populares de mediados del siglo XVII, como su recepción por el público femenino, a pesar de las pocas certezas que tenemos sobre esta materia. Las dos secciones siguientes se centran en los romances. El análisis de *Cleocreton* considera el año de publicación, autoría, el romance caballeresco y asuntos de género. El estudio sobre *Floridon* trata diversos aspectos como autoría, balada, agencia femenina y raza. En última instancia, este artículo propone identificar un conjunto significativo de ficción popular aceptable para las lectoras en una época donde la alfabetización y el negocio del libro se expandían, y el romance aún portaba el estigma de literatura perniciosa.

Palabras clave: ficción narrativa de la Restauración inglesa, público lector femenino, romance caballeresco popular, autoría femenina, balada, raza.

1. Introduction

To qualify mid-seventeenth-century prose romances as "female-oriented" may strike readers as redundant or misleading since their tight association with the female public was firmly established at the end of the sixteenth century, prolonging that symbiosis from the medieval romances in verse. However, Helen Hackett's rethinking of that relationship in *Women and Romance Fiction in the English Renaissance* (2000) may help clarify that expression with respect to Renaissance prose-fiction, specifically in the early 1660s. Hackett contends that "[Lyly, Rich, and Greene] wished their works to be *perceived* as directed at gentlewomen. It appears that some sort of connection was developing between women and romance which had less to do with actual women's reading habits than with cultural perceptions of romance as 'women's reading' and cultural constructions of romance as a feminine genre" (10. Original emphasis). To substantiate her proposal, Hackett argues that, among other factors, these romances—with the notable exceptions of Margaret Tyler's translation of *The Mirror of Knighthood* (1578) and Mary Wroth's *Urania* (1621)—"were all written by men" (3), the rate of female literacy by the end of the sixteenth century "remains frustratingly elusive" (6), records of female reading of romances are scarce (6-7), and that these books were disapproved of as morally dangerous for children's, especially girls', education, owing precisely to some of their most alluring attributes: their fantasy, lies and "erotic matters" (10). Although the rate of literacy—or reading ability, at least—experimented a significant increase, these factors persisted relatively unchanged up until the early 1660s.

From Wroth's *Urania* to S.C.'s *Cleocreton*, Anna Weamys's *A Continuation of Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia* (1651) remains the sole large romance piece published by an English woman. Like S.C., she also masked her social identity behind initials ("Mris A.W."), thus lessening the risk of attracting a spiteful vituperation such as Wroth endured when she was infamously scorned as a "hermaphrodite in show, in deed a monster," resulting in *Urania*'s removal from circulation (Hannay 235). Romances continued to be dedicated to both sexes from 1620 to 1660, though some gender distinctions depending on the subject matter and on the status of romance books in relation to erudite publications can be observed. For example, in his dedication of Scudéry's *Artamenes, or, The*

Grand Cyrus (1653) to Lady Anne Lucas, Humphrey Moseley conceded that "Were it a Discourse of the most profound Learning that Humane Nature is capable of, and written in Greek or Hebrew, I would make its Dedication to your Noble *Lord* […]" (Scudéry *Artamenes*, A2). In line with this logic, the translators of La Calprenède's *Hymen's Praeludia* (*Cleopatra*) and other highly successful French heroic romances (published in folio in England) dedicated each new instalment to a different noble or gentle woman, with very few exceptions (the 1661 full edition of La Calprenède's *Cassandra* was dedicated to Charles II), thereby primarily addressing them to upper-class female readers, while often soliciting their patronage and acknowledging their generosity, which may suggest "royalist coterie circles" similar to the French salons during the Interregnum (Whitehead 121).

Those French heroic romances and the political turn of the native *à-clef* or allegorical romances (in the model of John Barclay's *Argenis* (1621/1625) reflecting the reign of Charles I, the Civil Wars and the Commonwealth ranked the romance as "serious" literature in the late 1650s and early 1660s (Smith 235). As Nigel Smith has argued, "romance articulated the modulating experiences and desires of the governing elite: it was a vehicle of aristocratic and gentry republicanism as much as it was a tool of royalism" (234. See also Kahn 627, and Zurcher 1). Yet, the traditional subgenres (Sidneian or Arcadian model, popular chivalric romance, popular non-chivalric romance, picaresque fiction, didactic romance, and utopian/imaginary voyages), patterns, and motifs remained inspirational for authors and attractive for the market, at least in the first decades of the Restoration period, and co-existed with successful subgenres such as the antiromance, criminal biographies, and hybrid, impure romance that emerged in the first half of the seventeenth-century.

What also persisted was the "poison *topos*" (Álvarez-Recio 5), concerns about the pernicious effects of this literature, and its inadequacy for the recreation of youth in general and of women in particular. For example, Robert Codrington, in *The Second Part of Youths Behaviour, or Decency in Conversation amongst Women* (1664), disapproves of women reading and praising those books:

> Some Mothers of Children, and others there are, who make a great scruple, that their Children should read

> the Books of the Heathen, such as *Seneca, Plutarch*, and others, in English, and yet they will give them full leave to read any lying Pamphlet. There are some again, who make a conscience to read the Books of the *Apocrypha*, though full of good Precepts, yet the History of *Parismus*, or *Ornatus* and *Artesia*, must be commended and read by them. (161-162)

Owing to the immense popularity of French heroic romances among the elite and to royalist cultural influence, prose-fiction reading became a relatively common—or socially accepted—entertainment for women by 1660. Interestingly enough, the anonymous author of the anti-romance *Don Samuel Crispe* (1660) affirms women read almost every kind of romances. In his dedication "To all the Madams, Ladies and Gentlewomen in *England*, *Scotland* and *Ireland*, and the Dominions thereunto belonging", he states: "I know, Ladies, […] there is a time when you exhilarate your selves with looking on the labours of S. *George*, *Palmerin* of *England*, *Bevis* of *Southhampton*, don *Quixot*, and the like" (A2). However, in the early 1660s, such new books decidedly targeted, albeit indirectly, female readers, most conspicuously *The Seven Wise Mistresses* (1663), contrived after the traditional and popular exemplary-tale collection *The Seven Wise Masters*. In the prefatory epistle, Thomas Howard mentioned its learned sources, defended its moral purpose, and strongly recommended the "histories" for the education—not specifically of girls—but of children in general to improve their reading ability (5Av-7A). Its reception was immense; Robert Hume listed it among the most widely disseminated titles "with twenty-two editions by 1798" (29). This article contends that *Wise Mistresses* was not a rare case of prose-fiction specially oriented to (young) female readers, though it did not address them directly either on the title page or in the paratextual sections. Two romances (albeit much less successful, if at all) were equally effective at appealing to female readers and deterring the opposite sex through different strategies: S.C.'s *Cleocreton and Cloryana* was written by a woman, while J.P.'s *Floridon and Lucina* was presented on the title page as intertwined with J.P.'s ballad "Loves Paradice," which describes its namesake garden, and Lucina's emotions for the absence of, and later re-encountering with, her unnamed sweetheart.

2. The (Young) Female Reader of Romances in the Early 1660s

In 2017, Robert Hume maintained that:

> We need to be studying what readers at the time bought. The teleological approach so long favoured—in which the scholar looks for the anticipations of the forms and titles that interest us in a later period—is not without value, but it almost inevitably skews our view of the subject matter. Beyond a small number of familiar titles, pre-1740 fiction remains largely *terra incognita*. (30. Original emphasis)

This observation becomes even more meaningful regarding the 1660s and 1670s. On the one hand, this period's production is overshadowed in scholarly criticism by Elizabethan achievements and the post-1640 rise of political romances, and by the long-eighteenth-century rise of the novel. On the other hand, we have scant evidence of women readers and buyers of fiction besides the well-known remarks of Dorothy Osborne and Mary Hatton Helsby, both in the early 1650s. Elucidating female readership of fiction becomes even more problematic when the social stratification below the gentry, and the distinction between young and adult women are considered. As Sasha Roberts has acknowledged: "the historical record of women's reading remains frustrating in its silences" (5). Grenby only mentions one woman, Mary Collier, who declares she read chapbooks in her childhood (278), but that was a century later, in 1762. He also remarks that "if we can be fairly certain that children read chapbooks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we cannot be as confident that girls consumed equal quantities to boys" (278).

In 1964, Lawrence Stone gave reasons to speculate that "early seventeenth-century England was at all levels the most literate society the world had ever known" (68). Nonetheless, as David Cressy laments, "Many of the gradations of illiteracy, from total ignorance of the written word through partial illiteracy to full and fluent skill, are lost to history" (2). Passive or semi-literacy (ability to read) was wider spread than active literacy or ability to write because it was taught first, and many children left schooling before they acquired writing ability beyond, perhaps, signing with initials. Cressy reckons that "By the 1690s female illiteracy in London had been reduced [from about 90 percent in 1660] to 52 percent ± 6 percent, while it lingered around 80 percent in the

provinces" (146). Margaret Spufford cites that girls were taught "to read, knit and spin and also needlework," but concludes that there is "absolutely no way of knowing how many women below the level of the gentry in England learnt to read" (35).

In *Women's Reading Habits and Gendered Genres* (2019), Hannah Jeans has shown that romances do not prominently feature in seventeenth-century women's libraries, which held devotional and theological books, together with a variety of other matters—among them, herbals, medical tracts, conduct literature, poetry, gardening, history, politics, law, and mathematics (32, 34). Jeans also discusses Puritan Richard Baxter's and Anglican clergyman Richard Allestree's objections to romance reading. From a religious perspective, it "represented an improper indulgence of leisure time, which women must put aside in order to become devout and fulfil their role in society" (216). As Jeans reminds us, "it was adolescence and young adulthood when women were thought to be in most danger of being corrupted by their reading habits" (243). But she also highlights the opposite attitude: "there were increasing arguments for its potential benefits, and attempts to understand its popularity among consumers. Romance reading came to be seen by some as holding educational value, and there was an increasing appreciation of empathetic reading habits" (242). While Thomas Howard foregrounded the educational benefits of *Wise Mistresses*, the authors of the titles under focus carefully avoided writing anything offensive to female readers, whether young or adult.

Chapbooks, also known as small or little books (Spufford xix), "covered a marvelously wide range of materials" (Simons 178), including "editions of the second generation of chivalric romances produced in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries by writers such as Richard Johnson and Emmanuel Forde" (Simons 179). Both *Cleocreton* and *Floridon* fall into this category of cheap publications—quartos probably sold at *2d. - 4d.* (Spufford 98)—widely enjoyed by readers of all social classes, and extensively distributed throughout the country by hawkers and pedlars. In the early 1660s, there was an unusual wave of new titles and reprints of romance chapbooks, including *Dorastus and Favvnia* (1660), *Montelion King of the Oracle* (1663), *The Destruction of Troy* (1663), *Don Bellianis of Greece* (1663), *Palmerin of England* (1664), *Palladine of England* (1664), and *The Fifth Book of Amadis* (1664)—

sold by Charl(e)s Tyus (often spelt "Tias" in scholarly literature), the bookseller of *Cleocreton*. Robert Hume has reckoned that "between 1660 and 1700 […] printers generally ran off anything from 500 to 1500 copies" (28-29). The market for chapbooks was immense and highly profitable. Margaret Spufford, in her invaluable *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* (1981), has examined Charles Tyus's business in depth to amazing results. For example, she states that "Tias's total chapbook stock, including both the reams ready to make up and the 10,000 copies ready to go out, was probably around 90,000 books," and remarks that he "is not known as an outstanding figure in the English trade" (98). Despite these astonishing figures, there are hardly any extant copies (and records) of the two romances analysed here. Unlike ballads, popular fiction in chapbooks offered little appeal for high-class libraries or collectors. Copies of both *Cleocreton* and *Floridon* are held at the Huntington Library, while the British Library and the Worcester College Library (Oxford) also have the first title. A copy of *Floridon* existed in a private library according to Arundell Esdaile, writing in 1912 (225), as does the apparently sole specimen of *Simon and Cisley*, also by J.P. (whether the same author of *Floridon* or not), which has survived in the Vulgaria section of Samuel Pepys's library at Magdalene College (Cambridge).

The 1662 Licensing Act limited the number of both printers and booksellers, increased control of publications, and restricted imports of books that could be offensive to the Church of England, members of the government, or any private person (Ezell *Oxford*, 127-128). Transcripts of Stationers' Registers do not record *Cleocreton* or *Floridon*—though the latter bears the *imprimatur* issued by Roger L'Estrange on "November 9. 1663"—perhaps because, as Alfred Pollard has suggested, such trivial books were not worthy of being recorded (98).

The 1660s' popular romances were printed in blackletter, which was used in teaching reading and in printing Bibles. It is an important feature to consider in seventeenth-century popular fiction since, in both romances, blackletter is used for the narrator's story while roman typeface is reserved for dialogues, soliloquies, letters, poems, and so on. In 1953, Charles Mish proposed that "black letter in the seventeenth century can be used as a determining criterion—one sufficient, if perhaps not necessary—to decide for which audience, upper- or

middle-class, a given work was produced" ("Black" 630). He observed that the transition from the old English to the new roman typeface took place by 1600, while in the Restoration period it was a "real anomaly" ("Black" 628), though it continued to be used until the turn of the eighteenth century. He argued that romances in roman type offered innovative fiction in more sophisticated form and style, addressing the more educated upper classes, while blackletter fiction "must indicate the conservatism of the middle-class reading public, which […] continued to consume stories not only old-fashioned in content but old-fashioned in appearance. Black letter then must have come to be a symbol of time-tested material and therefore a guarantee of either respectability or the satisfactory meeting of expectation, or both" ("Black" 629). It must also have reduced the poison-*topos* anxiety attached to romances, and appealed to a less schooled population, including adolescents and young adults of both sexes; but, once again, there is little evidence of popular romances directly addressed to women, whether young or old. Though more the author's wish than evidence of actual female reading, Francis Kirkman dedicated his adaptation of the second part of *Don Bellianis* (1664) "To my loving Sister Mary Kirkman, The Wife of my Brother Thomas Kirkman: And to my dear Daughter, Elizabeth Kirkman" (A3). Conversely, it could be argued that *Cleocreton* and *Floridon* were conceived to primarily appeal to women though, again, we lack textual evidence and must rely on other sources regarding what they enjoyed.

Anne Falke has revised and enlarged Mish's suggestions in her study of Emmanuel Forde's romances which, as she contended, "were chiefly written to appeal to women and girls" (246). Falke makes a further distinction among the blackletter romances: "In accord with gradual change in popular beliefs, English writers consistently eliminated or reduced the fantastic and magical elements in their medieval sources. They corrected any deprecatory references to tradesmen, and generally tried to provide models which were Renaissance, bourgeois, and Protestant, rather than medieval, aristocratic, and Catholic" (244). By comparing Forde's romances with those of Richard Johnson and Henry Robarts, Falke endeavours to underline the potential appeal of his romances to women and proposes a number of traits, which are useful here as theoretical tools, though not to suggest the romances under focus were influenced by Emmanuel Forde, but to argue they were written to appeal to female readers. Anna Falke remarks that

Forde's stories provided "more love and courtliness," and "Love, not military adventures or the opportunity to 'gaine Fame,' is what prompts Forde's knights" (246). About the female characters, "Forde's heroines occupy a good deal of the plot, and their characterizations receive much of the author's attention" (247), they are much more active (248) and are courted and won elegantly (248-249). In his romances, "Forde was exploiting the fantasies and aspirations of girls and women, while Johnson sought to gratify boys' and men's similar imaginative needs by creating a world of strong masculine dominance," and he was also concerned with "the obstacles to love that a girl must endure," such as the obedience due to her father in matters of love and marriage (249), but was not "interested in battles, only to the bare minimum necessary to further the plot" (245). Falke describes his style as "low-key" (245), but his romances "contain a much greater 'interest in the courtly and sentimental in action and speech,' a feature Mish correctly cites as characteristic of elite romances, but which is also characteristic of books appealing to women" (250). Her comparative analysis leads her to propose that, despite the lack of external evidence to demonstrate the concurrence of Forde's romances with feminine tastes, the internal evidence seems "conclusive" (250). The "female-oriented" romances introduced in this article are in line with this set of features.

3. *Cleocreton and Cloryana*

Nowhere is *Cleocreton* more cited than in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and two of the seven entries appear as first recorded in this romance: "outwit (1)" dated "?1630" [sic] and "skylight (3.a)" dated "?c1660" [sic]. The disparity in the publication year of the extant copy responds to Donald Wing's replication of the date proposed by Pollard and Redgrave in their Short-Title Catalogue (STC). In 1967, Mish reconsidered it by listing the romance in 1661. He claimed that "although the STC dates the book [1630?] it is likely that a date of ca.1660 is more nearly correct" (*English* 36. Original brackets). The main reason to support this dating lies in Charles Tyus's business activity, from 1656 to 1664, whereas J[ohn] B[eale], the printer proposed in the STC, was active from approximately 1612 to 1641. The initials J.B. could refer to John Best whose *Christian-mans Calling* (1662), *Brief Chronicle of the Late Intestine Warr* (1663), and *History […] of St. George* (1664) show

the same ornament as the romance on page A2 and similar factotum initials. Moreover, though Tyus did not usually advertise books, his 1664 reprint of *Palladine of England* announces *Cleocreton* as "a new History lately printed" (159). Therefore, the year of publication must have been 1664 or not long before, probably 1660 or 1661, since *Cleocreton* was bound with six other romances, and placed after Tyus's 1660 reissue of *Dorastus and Favvnia*, in William Clarke's "*Pheander*" *Sammelband* (Worcester College Library, Oxford), which has 1661 stamped on the spine (Armstrong 90).

Whether or not we must also credit the claims of the dedication, "To Her discerning and most Knowing Brother, Mr. E.C." (Ar), signed by "Your sister and servant, S.C." (Av), is another matter. Unlike Weamys, who dedicated *A Continuation of […] Arcadia* to the Perpoint sisters, S.C. reverses Sidney's addressing *Arcadia* to his sister by dedicating *Cleocreton* to her brother. This raises very different implications as it reinforces—rather than challenges—the established gender politics for women because her transgressive act of writing a romance remains within the family and domestic realm, and her "servant" voice emerges into the public arena of printing through her judicious and cultivated brother. The brief dedication reveals no other major or controversial gender issue, except that S.C. refers to her romance as her "Cloriana [sic]," whereby she cloaks the fact that her imagination equally conceived the hero and the amorous story, an unacceptable, if not shameful, fantasy for a mid-seventeenth-century English woman, which a comparison with Cavendish's treatment of her male characters in *The Blazing World* may evince. At any rate, the dedication meets its purpose of concealing the author's social identity to the point of virtual anonymity while modestly asserting her sexual identity.

Yet, Guyda Armstrong has questioned S.C.'s gender when she describes her as "either female or pretending to be" (95). Margaret Ezell has fitly stated that "women who chose to hide behind certain masks were complicit with the cultural forces that constrained them" ("By a Lady" 66-67). Nevertheless, feminine authorial masks (such as "by a lady" and the like) proliferated after 1680, as far as prose-fiction is concerned. In the early 1660s, male authors of romances also masked their identity behind similar labels, total anonymity, or names, such as the signatory of the prefatory epistle in *Wise Mistresses*, Thomas

Howard, who remains unidentified. Ezell also discusses both the commercial and persuasive powers of "projecting a female presence" as rhetorical artifact: "a female voice from behind the feminine mask […] was a means of engaging the desired consumers of the texts […]—an authoritative woman speaking to women. […] it might well have been used by a man in order to attempt to shape the mentality of women, to reinforce socially […] acceptable roles as virgin, wife, and widow" (74). The dedicatory note of a female author to her brother fulfils both objectives: the commercial appeal to women and the conformity with the established sexual politics, whether written by a man who knew well what his female contemporaries enjoyed in romances, or by a woman as the note states and the story strongly suggests.

Cleocreton takes place mainly at the Persian emperor's court and, to a lesser degree, in Hungary and Tunis (Italy and Germany are also settings of incidental side-stories), in an unspecified remote past, evoking a medieval environment with classical deities. It also contains the conventional garden scene, shepherdess attire, supernatural elements, oracle, pirate attack, tournament, side-stories, cross-dressing, dissembling, and so on. Quite significantly, however, these traditional resources occur in a marginal or incidental manner in the plot, yet never to redirect or further the course of events, but mainly to enhance the dynamics of courtship, which constitutes the core matter. *Cleocreton*, thus, seems to outmode received forms of romance, and proposes a narrative dominated by the discourse of love and emotions, mostly centred in the comfortable world of the court, which may also suggest true female authorship. The ladies are never abducted, imprisoned, threatened with rape, or murdered. Instead, inconstancy, absences, and sudden requests of marriage from the wrong candidate arouse their anxieties, as in a novel of manners. The romance avoids religious matters, Restoration politics, or any other serious subject, and, though it portrays virtuous models to imitate and evil plotters to reject, it promises pleasure and entertainment, especially for youth. In fact, the young characters are given prominence, while the mature ones are usually identified by their royal dignity, and the lower class few by their activity, or kinship.

Like Heliodorus's *Aethiopian History*, it begins in medias res, at the break of day. Strolling along the Persian shore in an attempt to overcome his melancholy, Prince Albyazer encounters a vessel adrift,

with no pilot. Strikingly, he does not see a young lady, but a *Pietà*-like mother, the Queen of Hungary, grieving over her dying son, Cleocreton, in her lap, and his trusty dwarf Galtazet. The dwarf, a frequent character in the chivalric tradition, here softens the perception of the knight's masculine prowess and mimics his debased condition as an exiled prince. He contrasts with the giant who protects Meaga, the evil woman who, with the aid of her old aunt's "Devilish Art" (13), has bewitched the King of Hungary to the point of his disowning his queen and two sons, and whom Cleocreton considers a tyrant. Once the Persian emperor has given them hospitality and the prince recovers, Galtazet narrates the harrowing events at the remote Hungarian court (12-17). S.C. relegates love stories with witchery, violence, murders, and battles to side narratives, and foregrounds modern and sophisticated manners of love affairs at the Persian court.

Unlike the King of Hungary who fell in love with his future wife only "by fame" (9), the courtship of Cleocreton and Cloryana (the Persian emperor's daughter) evolves by steps from their first acquaintance (11-12): gazing and blushing (23), becoming sick and disquiet (23-25), disclosing their emotions to confidants (25, 27), Cleocreton's writing a note to tell her she has conquered him (27), Cloryana's boasting of such a conquest (30), dancing (32), talking about love while Calsey plays the lute (33, 35-39), Cloryana's declaring her love to Cleocreton (41), and presenting each other with their respective pictures (41, 48). The portraits take on a dearer Neoplatonic value beyond that of their jewelled frames and artistic craft as memory tokens of their mutual love: "as she was to remember him by his Pourtraiture, so he might do the same for her by her Picture" (48). Besides the main characters, Albayzer (Cloryana's cousin) loves Philopeet (niece to the King of Corinth and resident at the Persian court); Muxorb (the most valiant of the warriors sent by the King of Corinth when he demanded Philopeet's wardship) falls for Calsey, sister to Albyazer. The plot revolves around the courtship and obstacles faced by the three couples in Persia, and by Prince Fortus of Hungary and Lady Freesa in Tunis, until their respective marriages. The subplot in the first half is concerned with the news from Hungary and the need to "rout the wicked Meaga out" (28).

In the climactic central part of the romance's five-act structure, Cleocreton departs for Hungary to retrieve his father from Meaga's

influence. En route, he visits his uncle, the King of Tunis, whose daughter, Mersea, falls in love with him and, impersonating the role of the villain, plots to separate him from Cloryana. Mersea intercepts the correspondence between the lovers and counterfeits Cleocreton's letter to Cloryana, which claims he no longer loves her. But Cleocreton discovers Mersea's treachery. Meanwhile, in Persia, Cloryana is requested by the Emperor of Calydon for his son (who secretly marries another woman) and suggests her father consult the Oracle of Delphos, which enigmatically features her future husband as a "Metamorphosed Maid" (68). Now in Hungary, Cleocreton triumphs and is reinstated as the lawful heir. On his return to Persia, he enters the palace with Galtazet, both in women's clothes, not to be commended by the emperor for his prowess, but to reassert his truthfulness and constancy to Cloryana by this act of self-humiliation. Both realise that he is the person the Oracle has predicted; however, when he asks Cloryana to marry him, she declines (80). In his despair, he thinks of killing himself; but a vision of Venus assures him of a gratifying denouement, whereby he resolves "if there be any hope, why should not I employ all my endeavours to procure me the Paragon of the world?" (81).

In the next phase, the King of Hungary comes to Persia to fetch his wife, who later reluctantly attends the execution of Meaga and her children (86), and Cleocreton pacifies a Hungarian town (Cebria). Meanwhile, Mersea falls to plotting again, this time by writing to the Emperor of Calydon with false news of the Persian emperor having promised Cloryana to the Hungarian Prince. However, when the Persian emperor learns that the Calydonian prince is already married, he immediately opens war against Calydon. Only the opportune intervention of Cleocreton saves both the Persian emperor and his empire, making Calydon tributary to Persia, and Cleocreton, who departs without revealing his identity (145), "a man reserved by the Gods, to do wonders in the World [… and] none so fit a husband for […] Cloryana" (145-146). Yet, Cleocreton hurries to support his brother, Fortus, against the Prince of Hecate, who had requested the hand of Lady Freesa, only to return to Persia this time in "the habit of a Pilgrim" (154). Eventually, as Mersea kills herself by jumping into the sea (153), Cleocreton will rule over Hungary, Tunis and, by marrying Cloryana, Persia.

Despite the warring episodes in the last pages, S.C. avoids combat and violent events to the disappointment of potential male readers, and provides only brief passages or short summaries revealing Cleocreton's growing prowess and skills, such as his report to Cloryana about his victory in Hungary which he enlarges by detailing how he came by female disguise, and incidentally adding his fight against the pirate Almacus (76-79). Also, when a joust is agreed to clear up the conflict of Philopeet's wardship, the knights must win the pictures of the ladies, since the Persian emperor has declared the tournament a "serene exercise" (41), with strict orders against bloodshed: "you shall shed no blood here, but stay, and I will send you the Pictures of all the Ladies of my Court that hath beauty, and break your Spears in the honor of your Ladies" (44). Similarly, in the confrontation between Fortus and Assyrtus, Prince of Hecate, for Lady Freesa, the King of Tunis commands "I beseech you be not so bent to spill your blood in my Kingdom" (92). Conversely, S.C. describes in fine detail furniture and outfits (11), Cloryana's attire reminiscent of a shepherdess (27), the knights' apparel and shields (43-44), the "Revolet," or rivulet (48-49), and the delightful garden and its magnificent room (83-84), and so on.

Falke's description of Forde's language can also be applied to S.C.'s plain style and modern diction matching the courtly environment. It is rich in figurative language and evocative images, such as when a lion lays its head on Cloryana's knee, recalling Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. In addition, *Cleocreton* is not divided into chapters or single stories; instead, the narration unfolds in a balanced rhythm orchestrated by a clever combination of the teller's and the characters' speeches, scenes, subplots, settings, crises, and resolutions.

The reception of *Cleocreton* was apparently unremarkable. Thomas Passinger, Charles Tyus's apprentice who ran his bookshop after his death by marrying his widow, Sarah, underlined the novelty of the romance by adding "very" to "lately printed" on the book-advertisement page of *The Book of Palmestry* (1666 and 1676) with other chivalric romances. However, on the advertisement page of Thomas Robins's *Sir John Barley-Corn* (1675), *Cleocreton* is listed alongside Forde's *Parismus* and several garlands of love poetry, which suggests Passinger was trying to attract female readers, indicating perhaps that it had proved unsaleable among consumers of chivalric romances, or that it was a

reprint now lost. However, it was not forgotten by William Winstanley in *The Essex Champion* (1690?) as Billy holds a copy in his library—destined for the fire by Old Thomasio with other knight-errantry books (21)—and fancies Cloryana as a paragon of beauty and Cleocreton as a token of a famous and renowned knight (24).

4. ***Floridon and Lucina***

J.P.'s *Floridon* is a short, simple, and trivial romance, with many woodcut pictures that illustrate broadside ballads, except for the frontispiece Royalist-wreath. The printer, Thomas Mabb, honestly warned about its poor literary merits in his note to the reader by ambiguously appraising it through *via negativa*, that is by acknowledging "a great deal of worse matter" and by declaring he has "known [books], as bad as this, which hath been kindly accepted" (A3v). Apparently, it was neither advertised by bookseller William Gilbertson (a specialist in broadside ballads), nor reprinted. The extant copy at the Huntington Library was not considered by J.L. Gaunt in his 1978 article "Fiction and the Ballad Market in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century" (nor other studies regarding Restoration fiction), despite the romance's title page indicating it contained a description of "Loves Paradice," which is also the title of a ballad by J.P., whose identity remains unknown (he is not John Phillips, John Milton's nephew, the satirist to whom the second part of the anti-romance *Don Juan Lamberto* is attributed).

The J.P. who wrote *Floridon* was undoubtedly the same *ballatter* who composed "Loves Paradice" (dated by EEBO as 1663. ESTC R181372, English Broadside Ballad Archive, EBBA 31931), since he quotes extracts from it. The ballad spotlights feminine experiences and anxieties by focusing on the heroine. "Lucina" (l. 51) is the only name given by the poet who uses the generic word "dear" (l. 54) for her partner. Also, the romance soon discloses her mind to the reader when, at the end of the first chapter, the narrator reproduces the eighth stanza (ll. 57-64)—the sole poem in the romance—to quote Lucina's ditty both lamenting and comforting herself for the absence of her "True-Love" (l. 59), who is, of course, called "dear Floridon" in the romance (9).

It could be argued that J.P. is related to the famous balladist Martin Parker. The pictures of a vessel on page 21 and of five men at a tavern

table on page 44 also adorn a famous ballad entitled "Neptunes Raging Fury" (ESTC R181454, EBBA 31788), also printed by Mabb and signed by J.P., which is an improved version of Parker's "Saylors for My Money" (ESTC S5147, EBBA 20297). Hyder Rollins refers to J.P. as "some unknown writer" (119), yet EBBA ascribes the highly popular updated version to Martin Parker. Moreover, Parker's "The Distressed Virgin" (ESTC R181448, EBBA 37220) recalls the story, albeit not the sad end, of Mariana in *Floridon*.

Though Mabb genders the author only once as "him" (A3r), this person wished for a discreet appearance in public both as a fiction and ballad writer, rather as a woman would. However, *Floridon* was most likely written by a man because, as Sandra Clark has observed, "There is no evidence to refute the general assumption that the writers of the ballads were all male." Clark specifically mentions Martin Parker as one who wrote "paired ballads, setting out [gendered] antithetical views on the same subject." When Clark comments on J.P.'s "A Fairing for Maids" (ESTC 181370, EBBA 37222), she says "it consists of the advice of a woman offered as a present to women contemplating marriage," but assumes the author was a man.

Floridon takes place in an unidentified past in "the province of Arcadia" (10), near a temple devoted to Diana, though Sicily and Florence are also mentioned. The characters are not courtly or aristocratic, but three middle-class or gentry couples: Floridon and Lucina, Isabella and Chrisipus, and Sir Malpas (a knight) and his betrothed yet forlorn Mariana, and a gang of thieves. The romance displays the common fictional sites (garden, wood, cave, castle, road) and some typical episodes (two abductions, imprisonment, (Scythian) pirates and shipwreck). It is told by an unnamed first-person narrator, albeit extradiegetic and omniscient.

The romance tells instructive love stories of constancy and virtue, and of the sexual and sentimental dangers a woman may face—more appropriate themes for ladies' recreation than stories of battles or heroic deeds, as the narrator makes clear in the introductory description of "loves paradice," a garden "frequented by none but amorous lovers," where "rough Martialists" and "Mellancholy Saturnists" have no admittance (8).

The story proper starts when the narrator, walking in Love's Paradise, overhears Lucina's lamenting ditty for absent Floridon. The eponymous couple plan to marry but he is captured by a gang of outlaws and taken to a cave, a dystopian counterpart of the garden. For most of the story, the hero remains imprisoned and completely inactive. In the cave, the thieves also retain a Sicilian woman, Isabella, who narrates her life to Floridon. She had married a rather poor man, Chrisipus, but they were separated in a shipwreck. The captain of the thieves has fallen in love with her and expects to be accepted, but she repeatedly rejects him. Indeed, Isabella controls the captain's passion, looks after Floridon, and takes the initiative when she spies an opportunity to escape with him from the cave—not the other way round as would be expected in traditional romances.

After Isabella's story, the narrator returns to Lucina's lament in Love's Paradise. A knight and "person of great authority" (23), the villain Sir Malpas, who never fulfilled his promise to marry Mariana, loves Lucina, who rejects him wrongly blaming him for Floridon's disappearance. He abducts her and imprisons her in his castle under the strict surveillance of an old woman. Mariana, another pro-active female character, visits Sir Malpas and curses him to suffer the same misfortune that he had made her suffer. Chrisipus eventually finds his uncle, Sir Malpas, who by then has decided to move Lucina to Florence. On the way, they are attacked by thieves, who are defeated, thereby enabling the two couples to reunite. Fatally wounded, Sir Malpas repents of the mischief he has caused, declares his nephew Chrisipus heir to his wealth and estates, and is forgiven by Lucina and Floridon, and also by Mariana just before he dies.

The female characters' actions, curses, and calls for justice, and their resistance to, and endurance of, the physical, moral, and sexual oppression of the male villains (the captain of the thieves and Sir Malpas) reveal the powerful female agency in the romance, leading to Floridon's release, and to Sir Malpas's repentance and moral conversion. Floridon and Chrisipus (the good male characters), however, remain ignorant and passive, except for their brief fight against six thieves.

Chapter 12 closes the romance with a description of Floridon and Lucina's wedding, surely to please maidens. Part of the ceremony involves a new princess of "Love's Paradise" being chosen, but there

are too many candidates. Strikingly, as a solution, it is agreed that one of the musicians, a "blackamore boy" (46), should decide. He is clearly a servant or a slave who cannot yet command English: "[the boy was] ordred by his Master (whose Language he best understood) to take out that Lady by the hand, which he liked best of all that company" (47). His favourite is one "whose hair and eye-brow's were as black as a Raven" (47), thus challenging the general taste. Afterwards, the new princess chooses the one she wishes to be the prince, and they "both were crowned with delicate Garlands, richly beautified with fragrant Flowers" (47). Though this trivial romance is set in Arcadia and addressed to young ladies as examples of constancy and virtue, the servant/slave musician blackamoor leaves a record of the growing black population in Restoration England, at a time of colonial expansion in Africa and a burgeoning of slave trade. According to Imtiaz Habib's description of Mingoe (recorded in Pepys's *Diary*), the blackamoor boy also seems to function as "an exotic pet, albeit one with useful skills" (224), performing the happy-ending humorous anecdote. However, by means of this stratagem, J.P. deconstructs the established standard of feminine beauty in romances and makes every woman eligible through the male gaze to be the most beautiful among a group of ladies.

5. Conclusion

Although the publication year of *Cleocreton* has been narrowed to 1660-1664, and *Floridon*'s indebtedness to ballads has been shown, the masked authors' identities remain unknown. Together with *Wise Mistresses*, both romances constitute a notable sub-corpus of early 1660s' popular fiction overtly appealing to young ladies (and dissuading male readers) through external aspects: authorship, ballad source, and title, respectively. In that sense, the stories do not disappoint. As already discussed, they contain narratives that give pre-eminence to female characters and their interests and, above all, dissipate morally embarrassing or offensive elements and situations. Thus, they overcome or reduce pervasive concerns about the genre's allegedly corrupting effects by providing morally acceptable fiction, which was more suitable for ladies than for men (though, in the end, it all depended on what was bought, as Hume suggested). From a literary perspective, *Floridon* offers poor literary merits. Yet, *Cleocreton* deserves some attention for, among

other aspects, the centrality of the young ladies' world, its plain—albeit elegant and polished—style, the development of the protagonists' courtship, the five-act structure from exposition to denouement through a climactic central part, and the balanced, rhythmical combination of discursive modes, settings, and events.

Notes

[1] Two more titles should be added: E.F.'s *The History of the Life, Reign, and Death of Edward II* (written in 1627, published in 1680, and attributed to Elizabeth Cary in the twentieth century), and Hester Pulter's *The Unfortunate Florida* (c.1650s, published in 2014).

[2] Many prose-fiction books had no dedicatee (such as picaresque stories). Didactic romances were dedicated to men. A political romance (if Bayly's *Herba Parietis* can be considered such) was dedicated to a woman in 1650, and an anti-romance (*Don Samuel Crispe*) in 1660.

[3] In Robert Hume's words, "authors and readers of the time thought of fiction […] as a congeries of disparate and overlapping types: 'history', 'letters', 'tale', 'romance', 'secret history', 'memoirs', 'true relation', and the like" (26). The tension between history and romance became a remarkable issue of critical debate in terms of moral teaching. George Mackenzie, in the prefatory essay to his à-clef political romance *Aretina* (1660) "An Apologie for Romances, contended that "[history] teacheth us onely what was done, and [romance] what should be done" (7). Also in 1660, George Havers, the translator of the fourth part of Scudéry's *Clelia*, highlighted one definition of History—"the Image or Picture of Life"—and explained that "Histories are like pictures, either drawn according to the resemblance of some reall example, or meerly made out of the invention of the Writer" (Scudéry *Clelia*, A2). Thomas Howard, however, refers to the exempla in *Wise Mistresses* as "histories," claiming that they are taken from renowned writers of the past, although in fact they are popular didactic tales or legends, following the model of the *Wise Masters*.

[4] *The Famous and Delectable History of Cleocreton and Cloryana; Wherein is set forth the Noble and Heroick Actions of Cleocreton Prince of Hungary, His Wonderful and Warlike Atchievements in sundry Kingdoms. Herein is also declared, his constant love to the most beautiful Princess Cloryana, the onely Daughter of the Emperor of Persia*. "London. Printed

by J.B. for Charls Tyus, at the three Bibles on London Bridge." Wing (second edition, 1994) C121. ESTC S122307. Format: 4º. Pages: [4], 103, but irregular paging beyond p. 49. One initial woodcut depicting the main characters, and another of a knight on horseback on the last verso page, which also appears in the EEBO digital facsimile of the 1664 edition of *Palladine of England*.

[5] *The Pleasant and Delightful History of Floridon and Lucina, Illustriated with an admirable Description of Loves Paradice. Wherein you may behold, the abundant Felicity, that true Lovers enjoy, in the Chaste Imbraces of their Dearest Loves, And the sad Effects that mostly commonly attends Faithless and Unconstant Lovers. With Variety of other Passages never before Printed or Published*. "London, Printed by T. Mabb, and are to be sold by William Gilber[t]son, at the Bible in Gil[t]spur Street, 1663." Wing P64. ESTC R9318. Format: 4º. Pages: [6], 48. Two woodcuts at the beginning and another 22 small woodcuts (some are repetitions, and all decorate different broadside ballads) illustrate the body text, though none are related to the story events.

[6] For an in-depth examination of seventeenth-century women's reading activity, see Hannah Jeans.

[7] This also applies to the Iberian Chivalric romances. However, the new mid-seventeenth-century editions mainly updated the English spelling, but the 1664 edition of *Palladine of England* also changed the plot of chapters XI-XIV and XXIII-XXV to narrate the hero's encounterings with Florabella and Rosamonde of France, respectively (the 1700 edition of *Palladine* follows this version, not the original 1588 translation).

[8] A crucial difference between *Cleocreton* and other chivalric romances is precisely that the "exciting" episodes occur elsewhere, "off-stage," and are usually reported by a character, not by the narrator.

[9] Cleocreton is so young that he is believed by the Ancient Gentleman's Daughter when he tells her "My self is also a young Maid and I am now seeking a sweetheart of mine" (78), while the Emperor of Persia does not consent to Cloryana's parting to Calydon because "she is too young" (61).

[10] The opening scene of Forde's *Ornatus and Artesia* shows the hero seeing Artesia's naked breast.

[11] Similarly, Calsey's story of Italian Lady Trandia (34-36) that recalls an Italian novella of secret marriage and violent death, or Cleocreton's casual encountering with the German emperor's daughter abducted by

Almacus, who becomes a pirate captain when the emperor banishes him (79), are fittingly placed to illustrate a potential course of events in the main plot when pride, inconstancy, and disobedience prevail.

[12] Gender roles are strictly maintained according to the established sexual politics. This is best illustrated when Lady Freesa is crowned Queen of Calchos and "she took it off again, and with her own hands Crowned the head of King Fortus" (152), unlike Sabrina in *Wise Mistresses* who continues ruling her empire after marrying King Alexander.

[13] The wreath, placed opposite the title page, shows the miniature pictures of Charles II and George Monck, and the national flowers of Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales, and France. It must also have decorated the poem collection *The Loyal Garland*, as it appears in the fourth edition—the earliest extant copy (Thomas Passinger, 1673).

[14] Most of Parker's production dates before ballad-singing was forbidden in 1647, after which his subsequent work became untraceable: "Accordingly, there is no record of what ballads Parker wrote during this period, though it is highly improbable that he had ceased to write" (Rollins 131). Parker died around 1656; however, a short, twelve-page quarto, prose romance by him (*The most admirable Historie of […] Arthur King of the Britaines*) entered the Stationers' Registers in April 1660, but Rollins does not explain why it was published four years after his death (135).

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Waste in Verse: Forms of Waste in Contemporary North American Poetry

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Abstract: This article examines the intersection of waste, language, and contemporary North American poetry, arguing that waste is not merely a material crisis but a rhetorical and ideological construct. Drawing on various waste theories, the study explores how poets Martín Espada, Rita Wong, Evelyn Reilly, and Adam Dickinson engage with waste not only as a thematic concern but as a formal and linguistic strategy. Espada exposes the bureaucratic erasure of human disposability through acts of naming; Wong dissects the corporate euphemisms that obscure environmental violence; Reilly mirrors the endurance of plastic through poetic excess and fragmentation; and Dickinson reveals the infiltration of waste into the body itself. By treating poetry as a site of salvage, reclamation, and resistance, these works challenge the illusion of disappearance that underpins contemporary structures of exclusion and disposability. Ultimately, this article argues that waste and poetry share a crucial function: both unsettle categories, disrupt meaning, and refuse to vanish.

Keywords: Waste, North American poetry, Martín Espada, Rita Wong, Evelyn Reilly, Adam Dickinson.

Desechando versos: Formas de desecho en la poesía norteamericana contemporánea

Resumen: Este artículo examina la intersección entre desechos, lenguaje y poesía contemporánea norteamericana, argumentando que los desechos no solo son una crisis material, sino también una construcción retórica e ideológica. Basándome en diferentes teorías sobre los desechos, se analiza cómo los poetas Martín Espada, Rita Wong, Evelyn Reilly y Adam Dickinson abordan el desecho no solo como un tema, sino también como una estrategia formal y lingüística. Espada denuncia la deshumanización de las víctimas de migraciones forzadas llamándolas por sus nombres; Wong desarma los eufemismos corporativos que ocultan la violencia ambiental; Reilly refleja la persistencia del plástico mediante el exceso poético y la fragmentación; y Dickinson muestra la infiltración del desecho en el propio cuerpo. Al tratar la poesía como un espacio de rescate, reapropiación y resistencia, estos poetas desafían la ilusión de desaparición que sostiene las estructuras contemporáneas de exclusión. En última instancia, este artículo sostiene que los desechos y la poesía comparten una función crucial: ambos desestabilizan categorías, desmantelan los significados y se resisten a desaparecer.

Palabras Clave: Desechos, poesía norteamericana, Martín Espada, Rita Wong, Evelyn Reilly, Adam Dickinson.

Literature and poetry, even—or especially*—those animated by waste, are crucial for learning how to lead an ethical life.*

—Susan Signe Morrison

"That waste matters today," claim Brian Neville and Johanne Villeneuve, "will not be surprising, especially in the wake of a century whose career of destruction has irreparably altered our relation to the things and events of the past" (1). Yet waste matters not only in relation to the past, but also in the present, the future, and across disciplines. Recently, several scholars have elaborated on the subject of waste in the fields of philosophy, ontology and metaphysics (Scanlan 2006; Kennedy 2007; Viney 2014), ethics (Hawkins 2006); politics and economy (Humes 2012); waste disposal (Rogers 2006); or social history (Strasser 2000)—just to list some works that confirm John Scanlan's contention that "'garbage' (in the metaphorical sense of the detached remainder of the things we value) is everywhere" (8). This omnipresence of waste extends beyond material refuse and into language, aesthetics, and cultural narratives.

Drawing on theories from Scanlan, Zygmunt Bauman, William Viney, and Susan Signe Morrison, among others, this article examines how contemporary North American poetry engages with different forms of waste—whether human, environmental, or technological—not only as subject matter but as a site of linguistic and ideological struggle. Through the analysis of works by Martín Espada, Evelyn Reilly, Rita Wong, and Adam Dickinson, I argue that these poets expose how waste is not merely a material crisis but a rhetorical one, shaped by language that erases responsibility, obscures harm, and justifies disposability. Together, these poets show that waste is never merely discarded—it is narrated, contested, and redefined through acts of poetic resistance.

1. Waste in Theory

At the turn of the twenty-first century, scholars in several disciplines began to interrogate the inevitable detritus of relentless consumerism—trash, garbage, refuse, waste. Long treated as interchangeable, these terms have since been pried apart, their differences clarified by theoretical inquiry. Some have confronted waste in its raw materiality,

mapping its accumulation in landscapes both visible and unseen; others have traced its ethical, social, and political implications, revealing waste as both an object and a symptom, a product and a force. Recently, Sara Villamarín-Freire has examined how these perspectives converge, noting that "scholars share a common conception of wasted matter being a porous, malleable category, socially determined and thereby subject to temporal and spatial variation, and whose function is primarily related to processes of ordering and classification" (157). Waste, in this sense, is neither static nor absolute but is shaped by shifting material and social conditions, reinforcing the need to examine not only what is deemed waste, but how and why that designation occurs.

According to Morrison, waste "is always material (first) and figurative and metaphoric (second)" (8). William Rathje's *Garbage Project*, for example, treats waste as an archaeological artifact, a material record through which the patterns, contradictions, and deceptions of consumer behavior can be unearthed. Waste becomes an archive of excess that speaks to the habits of the present as much as to the ruins of the past. In *The Ethics of Waste*, Gay Hawkins shifts the frame, moving from the materiality of waste to the ethics and habits of discarding. For Hawkins, waste is not merely an environmental burden but a domain of embodied moral practice, shaped by affect, habit, and culturally specific routines. She writes that "our waste habits—all those repeated routines—leave their traces on our bodies and our environment" and actively "constitute an ethos and a sensibility" (15). Rather than focusing on overt structures of power or institutional exclusion, Hawkins reveals how waste practices are intimately tied to the formation of subjectivity—how we come to know ourselves through the everyday gestures of separation and disposal.

Where Hawkins foregrounds embodied habit, Stacy Alaimo foregrounds bodily permeability, theorizing transcorporeality as the continual movement of substances across human and more-than-human bodies. Waste, in this view, does not remain external: endocrine disruptors, heavy metals, and plastics travel through air and water, cross membranes, and accumulate in tissues. Transcorporeality reframes waste as a relational process rather than a stable object, making the boundary between organism and environment a site of inscription and risk. It

also clarifies why rhetoric matters: the terms by which we classify and manage "waste" organize who absorbs what, and where.

From this bodily scale, Bauman widens the lens to populations and institutions, arguing that contemporary capitalism does not merely generate discarded things; it manufactures discarded people. Modernity, he claims, "produces redundancy," systematically rendering individuals "superfluous, unnecessary, of no use" (12). Under globalization, entire populations are expelled from economic and social participation. These are the redundant, the displaced, the unemployable—figures who, stripped of both economic function and social recognition, become "human waste, with no useful function to play" (77) in the forward (?) march of history. Hence, exclusion is an intrinsic feature of the system: a mechanism of social disposal that pushes the unwanted to the periphery, beyond the visible and the legible. However, if modernity once had external dumping grounds—colonial territories, marginal spaces where surplus populations could be displaced—the global expansion of capitalism has now closed off these outlets. Today, redundant populations can no longer be exported; they are left to accumulate in refugee camps, slums, and zones of abandonment.

Other authors grant waste philosophical dignity, exploring its role in the history of reason and the ontology of time. Scanlan, for instance, conceives garbage as the structural excess of differentiation, the necessary residue of Western knowledge systems that function by classifying, organizing, and discarding. Garbage, he writes, is always produced in the act of distinction, "the bits, scraps, and leftovers of a variety of intact 'wholes'" (15), the waste of reason itself. Yet for Scanlan, garbage is not merely the detritus of categorization—it is also the shadow of temporality, the trace of history that modernity attempts to erase. In its obsession with cleanliness, order, and progress, modernity seeks to push waste out of sight, yet remains haunted by its inevitable return. As Scanlan notes, "[i]t is a history of disposal and tidying; of cutting off, chucking out, and of sweeping away the debris that lies on the territory of reason" (61). Much like the garbage that is removed daily from public view, the discarded remnants of knowledge vanish beneath "the presentation of an edifice of Reason as the perfectible, if not incorruptible, way of knowing" (61-62). In this way, Scanlan argues that garbage is neither simply material nor purely metaphorical;

it is an unsettling force that resists resolution, continually exposing the impermanence of meaning, the fragility of value, and the limits of knowledge itself.

In *Waste: A Philosophy of Things*, Viney understands waste as a fundamentally temporal phenomenon, arguing that it is not merely a problem of spatial displacement but a disruption of time proper. He introduces the concept of "waste-time," describing it as "a state of material being that is marked by temporal disorientation" (10). Viney claims that waste is not a static final state but an active temporal threshold, where discarded objects exist in an unstable tension between past use and future uncertainty. He describes waste as "both a material continuity and a temporal discontinuity" (29), emphasizing that not all waste results from an exhausted function—for example, some objects become waste without ever being used, while others remain suspended in ambiguous states of potential repurposing. Because waste persists beyond its intended utility, it not only lingers but also generates new relationships with time: it may decay, remain inert, or even return to circulation.

Unlike Bauman or Hawkins, Scanlan and Viney venture into the relationship of waste and art. Scanlan develops a "garbage aesthetics," focusing on waste as a conceptual and cultural force, particularly on how it disrupts systems of order and meaning. He acknowledges how twentieth-century artistic practices—especially those embracing refuse and discarded materials—challenge traditional ideas of artistic refinement. His discussion of modernity's obsession with categorization aligns with avant-garde artistic strategies that reanimate waste, from Joseph Cornell's assemblages to Duchamp's readymades. Yet, while his analysis of waste in art gestures toward literary fragmentation, he does not extend his framework to literature. This shift does occur in Viney, who moves from visual art to textual production, arguing that waste functions not just as a material or artistic concern but as a structuring force within literature itself. Crucially, Viney argues that waste is not just something we encounter—it is something we construct through acts of classification and narration, emphasizing that waste requires storytelling as a way to organize its temporal instability.

This dependability on language has Viney claim that waste operates as a structuring force within literature, influencing both composition

and interpretation. He focuses on modernist works like *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, arguing that waste is not merely a theme within the poem but a formal principle that governs its construction. The poem, he writes, is "intimately bound to the process of critical writing that was necessary for its composition, disclosing the textual variants that go into the writing of waste and a textual archaeology that refuses to be limited to the flotsam and jetsam that appears at the poem's surface" (96). The excised lines, abandoned drafts, and palimpsestic layering of voices within *The Waste Land* mirror the function of waste itself, where discarded fragments remain present, exerting influence even after their supposed elimination. Viney highlights that the poem's composition was a labor of "sifting, combining, expunging, correcting" (96), a process that foregrounds waste as a structuring principle rather than a mere theme.

All in all, these theorists circle the same fundamental idea: that waste is not just about things but about systems of exclusion, classification, and temporality. The divergences among them concern emphasis, scope, and terminology more than first principles or the basic architecture of their arguments. In conversation with all of them, Morrison brings these insights to bear on literature, and poetry in particular. The *Literature of Waste* is the most comprehensive study of waste in English literary history, covering a wide range of authors—from Chaucer to Swift and Sterne, from Whitman to A. R. Ammons and Maxine Kumin. What distinguishes Morrison's approach is not only her scope, but her framing of waste as a poetic and ethical force. Waste in her reading is not merely a theme, but a set of formal and affective operations: poetry reanimates discarded language, metabolizes cultural refuse, and produces what she calls "eucharistic fragments"—moments of grace salvaged from what has been cast aside. Drawing from Baudelaire and Benjamin, Morrison casts the poet as a ragpicker, or what she calls a spiritual homeopath, someone who would cure "the alienation and disgust we all too often feel toward our own and others' waste and decay" (196). For Morrison, this work is both literary and ethical: to write with waste is to recognize what culture denies, and to transform abjection into attention.

Her "gleaning aesthetics" centers on the practice of poetic salvage: the collecting of leftover words, abandoned genres, and forgotten voices into new constellations of meaning. Drawing on practices of historical

gleaning—from biblical law to rural survival—Morrison proposes that poetry engages in a moral economy of fragments, revaluing the castoff as a mode of care. Her concept of "compost poetics" pushes this further: poetry, like compost, decomposes what no longer serves, but preserves its energy in new forms. In this sense, metaphor is not ornamental but ethical: a method of working with what remains. As she writes, "[r] ecycled literary waste, such as digressions, leftovers, puns, parody, and intertextuality—all are peculiarly—even touchingly—human" (12-13). Unlike Scanlan and Viney, who theorize waste's presence in knowledge and narrative, Morrison shows how poetry enacts waste through structure, tone, and form, producing not just reflections on waste, but waste as poetics.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest that waste is not merely a thematic concern but a structuring logic—social, temporal, and linguistic. Whether theorized as exclusion, habit, rupture, or salvage, waste unsettles boundaries: between value and excess, between presence and disappearance, between the body and its world. In what follows, I turn to contemporary North American poetry not simply to observe how waste is represented, but to examine how poetic form itself engages with waste—as medium, method, and metaphor.

2. Waste in Verse

While poets have long flirted with waste, refuse, and decay—sometimes in starkly literal catalogues, as in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and at other times in grand imagistic proliferations, as in Wallace Stevens's "The Man on the Dump"—the twenty-first century has ushered in more terrifying consequences of human excess. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, an island of plastic waste twice the size of Texas, drifts in the ocean, while landfill cities like Bantar Gebang in Indonesia serve as both home and workplace for thousands of scavengers. Even Ammons's *Garbage*, a sprawling meditation on the cyclical nature of decay, fails to fully capture the scale of current waste crises or the ways poets now engage with them. As this section will show, contemporary poets approach waste not just as subject matter, but as method and form.

As discussed earlier, waste adopts its most harrowing form when it stands in for human beings proper, as when Bauman talks of an

"*acute crisis of the human waste disposal industry*" (6). This process of dehumanization is further reinforced through language. For example, Bauman examines the shift in terminology from "unemployment" to "redundancy," arguing that this linguistic change reflects a deeper ideological transformation. Unlike 'unemployment,' whose prefix "used to suggest a departure from the norm–as in 'unhealthy' or 'unwell,'" 'redundancy' suggests "permanence and hints at the ordinariness of the condition" (11). Furthermore, Bauman explicitly links waste rhetoric to how societies talk about marginalized populations, claiming that "[t]o be declared redundant means to have been disposed of because of being disposable–just like the empty and non-refundable plastic bottle or once-used syringe, an unattractive commodity with no buyers" (12). Unlike material waste, which can be physically managed, human waste lingers, haunting the borders of nation-states, confined to refugee camps, detention centers, and the open graves of the sea.

Espada's awarded book of poems *Floaters* is deeply engaged with political violence, memory, and the disposability of human life under systemic oppression. The book's title refers to a term used by the U.S. Border Patrol to describe migrants who have drowned while crossing the Rio Grande, reducing their bodies to nothing more than waste drifting in the current. The collection, which won the National Book Award, is a poetic act of resistance against state-sponsored dehumanization, calling attention to the ways in which language participates in exclusion and disposal. Nowhere is this clearer than in the title poem, which responds directly to the viral photograph of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria Martínez Ávalos, lying face down after drowning in June 2019. The image, widely circulated across media platforms, became an emblem of the violence faced by migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

In the piece, Espada critiques this linguistic disposal, calling attention to the callousness with which Border Patrol agents dismiss the drowned:

> Like a beer bottle thrown into the river by a boy too drunk to cry, like the shard of a Styrofoam cup drained of coffee brown as the river, like the plank of a fishing boat broken in half by the river, the dead float. And the dead have a name: *floaters*, say the men of the Border Patrol (6)

The passage lays bare the logic of dehumanization, where the drowned are not simply lost; they are discarded, swept into the same category as refuse, stripped of worth, left to drift beyond recognition. Espada's poem does not just echo Bauman's metaphor, it makes it gut-wrenchingly real. The bodies in the water, like plastic bottles, like Styrofoam cups, become part of the current, indistinguishable from the waste that floats beside them. Here, Bauman's theory of wasted lives is made visible in the most brutal way. In a world where exclusion and disposability dictate who is seen and who is forgotten, these deaths are not framed as tragedies to be mourned but as inevitable collateral—a consequence, rather than a crime.

Gillian Wylie has warned that Bauman's vision risks trapping the displaced in a purely passive role, as if their fate is sealed. She argues that "when no space is left for agency in the analysis and the system seems deterministic, the idea of humans as waste becomes irrefutable" (65). But waste, despite its connotations of abandonment, is not always inert. It lingers, resists, reemerges in unexpected places. And just as discarded matter has ways of disrupting the order that seeks to erase it, so too do the people whom Bauman's theory would label as 'wasted.' Espada's title poem "Floaters" refuses to let this process stand uncontested. If the state and its agents reduce migrants to waste, the poem fights back through invocation. To name is to resist disappearance, to insist on presence, to push back against the tide of dehumanization that treats the dead as an anonymous, discardable mass:

> And the dead have names, a feast day parade of names, names that dress all in red, names that twirl skirts, names that blow whistles, names that shake rattles, names that sing in praise of the saints: Say *Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez.* Say *Angie Valeria Martínez Ávalos*. (6)

Here, naming is an act of defiance. Espada does not simply honor the dead—he pulls them back into the world, refusing their disappearance, making us say their names aloud. In what Achille Mbembe calls necropolitics, the border becomes a death-world that normalizes exposure and withholds mourning; Espada's counter-naming interrupts that regime. The imperative "Say" is relentless, each repetition pushing back against the silence imposed by indifference or manipulation.

In an era where truth itself is fragile, not only words but even images are suspect. Even when the dead are named, their very existence is subject to manipulation and doubt. The poem opens with an epigraph quoting a Border Patrol Facebook group in which an agent cynically dismisses the viral image, writing: "I HAVE NEVER SEEN FLOATERS LIKE THIS, could this be another edited photo. We've all seen the dems and liberal parties do some pretty sick things" (6). The poet offers a chilling description of Óscar and Valeria's bodies, exposing the tension between visibility and erasure in the way their deaths are represented:

> No one, they say, had ever seen floaters so clean: Óscar's black shirt yanked up to the armpits, Valeria's arm slung around her father's neck even after the light left her eyes, both face down in the weeds, back on the Mexican side of the river (7)

This passage is not just a depiction of the dead; it makes visible the violence inscribed on their bodies. Unlike the viral photograph, which could be dismissed as a hoax or consumed as spectacle, Espada's poetic language fixes the image in the reader's mind. This form of 'necro-ekphrasis' does not soften but forces recognition. It is by capturing every unsettling detail—the twisted shirt, the waterlogged diaper, the way Valeria's arm clings to her father even after death—that the poem makes visible the brutal materiality of migrant death that political rhetoric and media discourse attempt to obscure.

To counter the dehumanizing claim that the image is a hoax, Espada restores what has been stripped away: Óscar and Valeria's history, their labor, their love, the very things that made them irreplaceable. "Say what we know of them now they are dead: Óscar slapped dough / for pizza with oven-blistered fingers. Daughter Valeria sang, banging / a toy guitar" (6). By invoking their names alongside these intimate details, Espada resists the state's rhetoric of disposal, which reduces the dead to mere bodies in the river, stripped of identity and past. But the poem does not stop at Óscar and Valeria; it refuses to leave Tania Vanessa Ávalos—the grieving wife and mother—silent and unseen. "There is another name / that beats its wings in the heart of the trees: Say *Tania Vanessa Ávalos*, / Óscar's wife and Valeria's mother, the witness stumbling along the river" (6). Through these invocations, Espada challenges the media's consumption of migrant suffering, replacing

anonymous victims with individuals whose stories demand to be told. Instead of a faceless tragedy, we encounter a father, a daughter, a mother left behind—a family whose lives extend beyond the moment of their death, resisting erasure through memory, poetry, and justice.

Bauman's terminology may be unfortunate, but his diagnosis remains incisive: modernity renders certain lives disposable. Yet, as Wylie cautions, this framing risks stripping the displaced of agency, reducing them to mere casualties of an inexorable system. Espada refuses this logic. "Floaters" does not accept the rhetoric of waste but dismantles it, insisting that the dead are not debris but names, histories, and lives that demand recognition. If dehumanization operates through erasure, then Espada's poem resists by forcing remembrance, ensuring that those lost are neither forgotten nor rendered abstract.

The global logics of disposability that Bauman and Wylie examine extend beyond human populations to waste economies, where discarded materials—just like redundant people—are cast off and displaced. If "Floaters" critiques the rhetoric of exclusion at the U.S.-Mexico border, Wong's "sort by day, burn by night" turns to the circuits of global e-waste, where cast-off electronics are funneled from wealthy nations to impoverished regions, making entire landscapes toxic. Waste does not disappear, rather, it migrates, much like the populations Bauman calls "human waste." Wong's poem forces the reader to recognize that, in a globalized economy, consumption and disposal are never localized. The wreckage of digital capitalism, disguised as progress, has a material afterlife, one that poisons those least responsible for it.

The poem centers on Guiyu, China, one of the world's largest electronic waste processing sites, where workers dismantle discarded computers, extract valuable metals, and inhale lethal toxins:

> circuit boards
> most profitable & most dangerous
> if you live in guiyu village,
> one of the hundred thousand people who
> "liberate recyclable metals"
> into canals & rivers,
> turning them into acid sludge,
> swollen with lead,

barium leachate, mercury bromide (46)

Like Espada, Wong underscores the importance of language, highlighting the rhetorical deception at the heart of global economies. In the line "liberate recyclable metals," the quotation marks invite the reader to confront the euphemistic absurdity of the phrase. Words like "liberate" and "recycle" connote freedom, renewal, and environmental stewardship, but Wong exposes them as mere corporate fictions masking environmental destruction and human suffering. Here, language itself is toxic, as it rebrands waste dumping as an ecological good, just as terms like "floaters" or "redundancy" obscure human loss.

This exposure of hidden toxicity is in line with Jussi Parikka's concept of the 'anthrobscene,' which dismantles the illusion of a clean digital world, revealing how technological progress is inseparable from material exploitation. As Parikka argues, "to call it 'anthrobscene' is just to emphasize what we knew but perhaps shied away from acting on" (12). Wong's poem directly enacts this revelation:

> o keyboard irony: the shiny laptop
> a compilation of lead, aluminum, iron,
> plastics, orchestrated mercury, arsenic, antinomy...
> sing me the toxic ditty of silica:
> *"Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-masse."**
> where do metals come from?
> where do they return?
> bony bodies inhale carcinogenic toner dust,
> burn copper-laden wires,
> peer at old cathay, cathode ray tubes.
> what if your pentium got dumped in guiyu (46)

The passage foregrounds the grotesque materiality of the digital, listing poisonous metals that are essential parts of everyday apparently harmless devices. What we type on, what we search with, what we consume through, all these devices are built on a foundation of waste. The very machines used to read Wong's poem are composed of elements extracted at a high human and environmental cost, only to be discarded and reabsorbed into an economy that turns past innovation into present pollution. The poem renders that loop as transcorporeal traffic, tracing how substances circulate across devices, waters, and bodies rather

than remaining a static inventory. This circularity—materials mined, processed, discarded, and inhaled as carcinogenic dust—renders digital capitalism fundamentally unsustainable. Wong forces the reader to acknowledge that there is no such thing as a "green" economy under the current system there is only displaced toxicity, outsourced destruction.

The closing lines of the poem recast Whitman's words in *Leaves of Grass* to challenge their optimism:

> what if your pentium got dumped in guiyu village?
> your garbage, some else's cancer?
> economy of scale
> shrinks us all
> global whether
> here or there
> collapses cancer
> consumes en-masse (47)

By echoing Whitman, Wong highlights the failure of democratic ideals under global capitalism. Wong's final lines collapse the distinction between "here" and "there," between producer and consumer, between the technological present and its catastrophic future. The digital age promised expansion and infinite possibility, but Wong reveals its true cost: a world collapsed under the weight of its own waste.

The scale of waste in Wong's poem is already immense, but it is still situated—we can point to Guiyu, to its acid sludge, its carcinogenic dust. Yet, as Reilly's poetry explores, waste is not only global but nearly incomprehensible in scope. *Styrofoam* digs into the eerie endurance of plastic—how it lingers, how it refuses to break down, how it unsettles any neat idea of waste just "disappearing." The collection's opening poem, "Hence Mystical Cosmetic Over Sunset Landfill," immediately establishes this paradox: "Answer: Styrofoam deathlessness / Question: How long does it take?" (9). This aligns with Viney's concept of waste-time, which argues that discarded materials are not simply removed from circulation but instead exist in a state of suspended decay, neither fully present nor entirely absent. The poem underscores this by dismantling the myth of biodegradability: "It is a misconception that materials / biodegrade in a meaningful timeframe" (10). Rather than decomposing, plastic undergoes fragmentation, breaking into smaller particles while

remaining chemically intact, accumulating across oceans, landfills, and even within human bodies. Through its recursive questioning and declarative assertions, the poem forces the reader to confront a waste system that is not linear but recursive, where disposal does not mark an end but an ongoing presence.

Reilly looks into this temporal disorientation by blending scientific jargon with the banal language of consumer culture, demonstrating how plastic waste originates not only an environmental crisis but a discursive and biological one. In Viney's terms, *Styrofoam*'s polymer temporality reads as waste-time: a material continuity with human-scale discontinuity, its fractured, postponing lines figuring plastic's temporal disorientation. The poem shifts registers from clinical precision—"Enter: 8,9,13,14,17-ethynyl-13-methyl-7,8,9,11,12,14,15,16-octahydro-cyclopenta-diol (aka environmental sources of hormonal activity)" (9)—to casual online product reviews: "*A low oven and a watchful eye turns bits of used plastic meat trays into keychain ornaments*" (10). This juxtaposition highlights the unsettling normalization the presence of plastic in daily life, where the same materials polluting oceans are also used in children's toys and household products. The reference to endocrine disruptors underscores how waste infiltrates not just landscapes but human biology, a concern that, as we will see, Dickinson's book *Anatomic* makes disturbingly explicit. Just as Viney argues that waste lingers in uncertain temporal states, Reilly shows how it also circulates through linguistic registers, where plastics are simultaneously toxins, commodities, and mundane objects of everyday convenience. By forcing these discourses to coexist, the poem unsettles the boundaries between contamination and consumption, making clear that waste does not remain separate from human life. Instead, it is metabolized, repurposed, and absorbed into both ecosystems and bodies.

The poem's closing section turns to the ocean as the ultimate site of waste accumulation, reinforcing the failure of human perception when faced with ecological transformation on an incomprehensible scale: "What the sea brought: poly.flotsam.faux.foam" (12). The fragmentation of words mimics the physical breakdown of plastic into microplastics, but rather than signaling decay, this fragmentation marks a new, insidious form of persistence. Reilly collapses the distinction between the natural state and the synthetic state, suggesting that plastic

has so thoroughly infiltrated marine ecosystems that it has become part of the sea itself. This blurring is underscored in the ironic reflection: "Gee, this.stationaryparticulatecloud actually improves the sunset" (12). Here, pollution is aestheticized, turning contamination into spectacle, just like waste-time warps our understanding of presence and disappearance. Just as Viney argues that waste resists resolution, the poem suggests that our visual world has already absorbed plastic into its atmospheric and oceanic registers.

"Hence Mystical Cosmetic Over Sunset Landfill" exposes the ubiquity of waste and how it has become so familiar that its pervasiveness is overlooked. Dickinson takes Reilly's criticism of the effects of microplastics on our organisms further, demonstrating how waste infiltrates the body itself. His *Anatomic* is a collection that turns the body into an archive that traces the ways in which industrial waste does not remain external but becomes part of our biological selves. By subjecting his own blood, sweat, and stool to chemical analysis, Dickinson enacts what Stacy Alaimo terms "trans-corporeality"—the recognition that human bodies are not discrete entities but porous sites of exchange, constantly absorbing and metabolizing the pollutants of their environments. As Alaimo argues, "human corporeality is inseparable from the more-than-human world" (2), a reality Dickinson makes explicit by cataloging the toxins, heavy metals, and endocrine disruptors within him. Through this methodological approach, Dickinson shows that contamination is never merely an ecological crisis but a lived, bodily experience that does not impact all bodies equally.

In the poem "The People of Grassy Don't Have a Mercury Problem, They Have a Drinking Problem," Dickinson directly engages with the legacy of corporate pollution and systemic neglect, centering on the mercury contamination of the Grassy Narrows First Nation in Canada. The title itself paraphrases racist dismissals, which reframed the symptoms of mercury poisoning as a consequence of alcoholism rather than industrial toxicity. The prose poem is structured around escalating layers of bureaucratic denial, each step further diffusing responsibility. Each assertion is hedged by a conditional, shifting blame further from the polluters: "There was talk that the waters were not polluted, and if they were polluted, then the company was not responsible" (65). Dickinson mirrors this rhetorical slippage in his syntax, using the phrase

"there was talk" as an incantation of official justification, a refrain that both signals the presence of wrongdoing and anticipates its dismissal. Once more, the poem reveals how environmental violence is not just material but discursive, imitating the language of reports and public statements that, rather than providing justice, serve to insulate power from accountability.

Indeed, beneath this ineffective drivel lies the broader history of settler colonialism. With the line "the fur trade was in there burning in a shooter" (65), Dickinson collapses time, connecting early colonial extraction to the present-day poisoning of Indigenous land and bodies. In the line of European trade networks that reshaped ecosystems and Indigenous livelihoods, contemporary industry continues this legacy by treating First Nations communities as expendable, another example of Bauman's "wasted lives." The poem suggests that the framing of mercury poisoning as a "drinking problem" is not an accidental misreading but an intentional distortion, one that shifts responsibility away from the industries and policies that have systematically exposed Indigenous populations to harm:

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

Here, Dickinson offers another example of language manipulation where a form of toxification is replaced with another: it is not mercury but alcohol "what goes in" the bodies, deflecting responsibility by implying uncivil behavior, unsurprisingly related to bodily fluids. "To create a self," explains Morrison, "you must discharge and reject that which is not you" (31), that is, 'savages' who urinate and throw up in the streets.

Near the end, the poet acknowledges his own role in the structures he critiques: "And here I have it in my blood talking, a settler methylated

by the privilege afforded by the problem's extremities shaking with poorly connected dreams" (65). Like many contemporary socially engaged poets, Dickinson includes a brief paragraph that helps readers understand the poem. Here, he explains that his "body is marked by certain demographic privileges," and that "that racism and economic marginalization can cause people to live in closer proximity to industrial pollution" (66). By testing his own body for pollutants, he demonstrates that industrial waste is not just external detritus but something that circulates within all of us, albeit unevenly. While Indigenous communities are directly poisoned, Dickinson's "methylation" remains metaphorical, an acknowledgment that environmental violence is distributed along racial and colonial lines. In positioning himself within this toxic network, Dickinson rejects the illusion of detachment, urging readers to do the same.

3. Conclusions

If waste is, as Scanlan suggests, the unavoidable byproduct of classification, then language itself plays a decisive role in shaping how we perceive, manage, and justify what is discarded. Poetry, a form that endlessly arranges, rearranges, and resists classification, must have an uneasy relationship with it. In this article, I have tried to show that contemporary North American poets transcend the conception of waste as an environmental crisis, exposing it as a rhetorical structure that insulates power, deflects accountability and obscures harm. The works of Martín Espada, Rita Wong, Evelyn Reilly, and Adam Dickinson present waste as more than material excess, making it salient as a discursive battleground.

Espada's "Floaters" reveals how the state weaponizes language to reduce victims to refuse, while his poetry staves off erasure through acts of invocation. Wong's poem dismantles the euphemisms of corporations, exposing how language becomes a site of contamination, but also involving readers in the pressing e-waste problematic. Similarly, Reilly's *Styrofoam* mirrors the unsettling endurance of plastic, demonstrating how poetry, like waste, accumulates, layers, refuses to decay. And Dickinson's piece pushes this further, showing how both toxic prejudices and heavy metals are found deep within our selves.

Ultimately, these poets do not seek to sublimate waste into metaphor or meaning, nor to offer it as the raw material for aesthetic redemption. Rather, they expose its unavoidable presence, and its capacity to infiltrate bodies, accumulate in language, and persist beneath the surface of political speech. Their work neither resolves nor transcends waste; it dwells in it, troubles its boundaries, stages its discursive evasions. What emerges is not a poetics of purification, but of entanglement; a refusal to discard what has already been cast off, and an insistence that what is deemed excessive, toxic, or abject remains central to how meaning, value, and harm are produced and sustained.

Notes

[1] Not to mention Carl A. Zimring and William M. Rathje's two-tome *Encyclopedia of Consumption and Waste* (2012).

[2] At stake are not only discursive categories but lived exposures. Environmental justice has long foregrounded how toxic burdens track lines of race, class, and migration—as in the work of Robert D. Bullard and Dorceta E. Taylor—making waste a question of labor, infrastructure, and political rights. Material ecocriticism has, for some time, treated matter as active and "storied," as developed by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, urging us to follow waste as it moves across bodies and environments.

[3] For an analysis of waste in Ammons's long poem, see Simal 2023.

[4] Image available at: www.npr.org/2019/06/26/736177694/a-father-and-daughter-drowned-at-the-border-put-attention-on-immigration

[5] Here, Timothy Morton's concept of "hyperobjects" becomes relevant: some ecological crises—climate change, microplastic accumulation, radioactive waste—are so vast in time and space that they exceed human perception. Wong unveils one of these hyperobjects (e-waste), but Reilly's work forces us to reckon with waste beyond the visible.

[6] A "shooter" is a small serving of strong alcohol, typically consumed quickly in one gulp. In Dickinson's poem, it functions doubly: as a literal image of drinking and as a metaphor for how historical violence—like the fur trade—continues to burn through contemporary bodies via industrial poisoning.

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Raters' Judgments Reliability in the Spotlight: Assessment Challenges in Pronunciation Research within ESP Teaching

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Abstract: Many researchers nowadays study pronunciation as a means to improving second language students' communicative skills. Native listeners' perception tasks are considered a reliable tool although their veracity has been questioned due to the listeners' subjectivity and/or the type of task performed. The present study investigates the effectiveness of explicit rhythm instruction to Spanish/Catalan bilinguals who were engineering undergraduates to improve their comprehensibility and fluency in English. For this purpose, seven native speakers of English rated the extemporaneous speeches of forty-two students before and after instruction via a 5-point scale. Students were divided into an experimental group, receiving explicit rhythm instruction, and a control group, which did not. Unexpectedly, results showed that the experimental group was less comprehensible after treatment, and that the control group improved more than the experimental group in terms of fluency. However, previous results obtained by different acoustic analyses suggested further improvement in experimental students' learning process. Hence, the use of a mixed-method assessment is encouraged to support human judgments.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), pronunciation teaching, rhythm instruction, pronunciation assessment, raters' judgments

La fiabilidad de los juicios de los evaluadores en el punto de mira: Desafíos de la evaluación en la investigación sobre la pronunciación en la enseñanza del inglés para fines específicos

Resumen: Actualmente, muchos investigadores estudian la pronunciación como medio para mejorar las habilidades comunicativas de estudiantes de segundas lenguas. Las pruebas de percepción con oyentes nativos se consideran una herramienta fiable, aunque su veracidad ha sido cuestionada debido a la subjetividad de los oyentes y/o al tipo de tarea realizada. El presente estudio investiga la eficacia de la instrucción explícita de ritmo en estudiantes de ingeniería bilingües español/catalán para mejorar su comprensión y fluidez en inglés. Para ello, siete hablantes nativos de inglés calificaron los discursos improvisados de cuarenta y dos estudiantes antes y después de la instrucción mediante una escala de 5 puntos. Los estudiantes se dividieron en un grupo experimental, que recibió instrucción explícita de ritmo, y un grupo de control, que no la recibió. Sorprendentemente, los resultados mostraron que el grupo experimental fue menos comprensible después del tratamiento, y que el grupo de control mejoró más que el grupo experimental en términos de fluidez. Sin embargo, resultados previos obtenidos mediante diferentes análisis acústicos sugirieron una mayor mejora en el proceso de aprendizaje de los estudiantes del grupo experimental. Por lo tanto, se recomienda el uso de una evaluación de métodos mixtos para respaldar los juicios humanos.

Palabras clave: Inglés para fines específicos, inglés como lengua extranjera, enseñanza de la pronunciación, instrucción de ritmo, evaluación de la pronunciación, juicios humanos

1. Introduction

How to assess intelligibility, comprehensibility, fluency or accentedness progress in pronunciation teaching research has recently caused a heated debate. After the emergence of Levis' (370) *Intelligibility Principle* as the main focus for second language instruction, pronunciation teaching researchers are currently relying on different tools that go beyond pure acoustic analysis to assess how effectively English as a Second Language (ESL) learners are making themselves understood. In fact, Derwing and Munro (7) renounce acoustic analysis, since intelligibility is essentially conceived by both the listener's perception and the speaker's production. Therefore, the communicative dimension of this type of assessment leads us to the use of evaluative tools that imply human judgments.

The most popular technique applied is the listeners' appraisal by means of tests that range from forced choice identification tasks and transcription exercises to examine intelligibility—i.e., the acoustic-phonetic decoding of the message—to scalar ratings that investigate comprehensibility—the effort required to reconstruct the message (for a complete list, see Thomson 18-20). These assessment tools are rather simple and user-friendly, which makes them an attractive device that, in principle, anyone can use without much difficulty, even if not linguistically trained (Isbell 90; Saito et al., "Using Listener Judgments" 459).

However, human perceptions could be influenced by their personal beliefs, context and previous knowledge. For instance, listeners may have different expectations for L1 and L2 speakers or competence standards according to the students' educational, professional, or socio-economic background, which can influence how lenient they are when evaluating. Besides, the raters' familiarity with the students' L1 and the peculiarities of the community's L2 speech can also affect their judgments (Derwing and Munro 117; Teló et al. 1025).

The evaluation task and the previous training received can also influence the results obtained: on the one hand, the use of different scales or settings (online vs. offline) might lead to more or less accurate decisions (Derwing and Munro 117); on the other hand, a more limited or broader understanding of the concepts to assess before conducting

the evaluation task can lead to different conclusions (O'Brien 738; Saito et al., "Using Listener Judgments" 456). These and other factors will be tackled in the forthcoming sections.

1.1. Coping with subjectivity

The use of human evaluators implies a certain degree of subjectivity in their judgments; thus, several techniques have been suggested to guarantee reliable outcomes. First, listeners may have a different idea of what *intelligibility* is about and focus on different pronunciation cues when rating. O'Brien (719) discussed the understanding of the dimension of *fluency*: while it could be understood from a narrow perspective as the 'fluidity of speech', it could also be interpreted in a broader sense as a synonym of proficiency (Lennon 389). Comprehensibility has also been considered a synonym of intelligibility when the latter is understood as general listening comprehension (Thomson 14). For this reason, it is crucial to provide clear instructions and a descriptive explanation of the items to evaluate before conducting the task. Additionally, initial training can also help listeners calibrate their judgments, even if they are working with inexperienced raters (Saito et al., "Using Listener Judgments" 458).

Second, listeners may be more or less familiar with the subjects' native language, which may lead to biased assumptions impaired by social prejudices or a previous awareness of the common mistakes that a specific group of speakers make (Derwing and Munro 117; Teló et al. 1025). Therefore, the knowledge and relationship the raters have with both the first (L1) and the second (L2) languages under study may influence whether they apply the scale in a more rigorous or flexible way (Isbell 107-108; Munro and Derwing, "Foreign Accent" 93-94; Munro and Derwing, "A Prospectus" 27-28; Southwood and Flege 336; Thomson 25). To further examine this issue, Teló et al. (1014) asked raters to comment on the criteria they had followed. In fact, gathering information about the listeners' beliefs and background can help better understand raters' leniency.

Third, other extrinsic agents such as fatigue, environmental noise, or family duties can also influence the listeners' opinions, since they act as distractions and alter the conditions under which the test is

performed (Munro and Derwing, "A Prospectus" 27; Thomson 24). Thus, it is important to recruit enough judges and present samples in a randomized order to diminish the negative effects of these phenomena (Nagle, *A Guide* 143-149). Furthermore, it is strongly advisable to establish appropriate conditions to take the test and conduct statistical analyses of reliability to ensure the consistency of the judgments (Munro and Derwing, "A Prospectus" 30-31).

A key issue concerning listeners is how to recruit them. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where generally the target language is not spoken, it is difficult to obtain a sufficiently large number of listeners to provide reliable estimations. Native speakers of the target language tend to be scarce, and L2 speakers might not meet the established standards of the study: for instance, raters might be required to assess L2 speakers' comprehensibility, but results may vary if these speakers are teachers of the target language or not, due to their knowledge of both the first and the second languages. Nagle ("Developing" 10) introduced the possibility to use online tools such as Amazon's *Mechanical Turk* to crowdsource raters, an option that is worth exploring in detail, since it allows researchers to target a specific listener profile. Platforms like *Prolific* or *PsycoPY* are also frequently used with this purpose. However, this means of recruitment might lead to other problems, such as the raters' availability to take the test in person, since many might not live in town or in a nearby city. A potential solution to the problem is to request raters to participate remotely through online surveys; however, controlling some of the extrinsic agents mentioned before could become an arduous task.

1.2. The use of numeric scales

On the other hand, the test itself may undermine the listeners' appraisal as well. Numeric scales are among the most commonly employed tools to assess pronunciation, since they offer the possibility to quantify perception. However, their effectiveness has been the focus of extensive research and discussion.

A 9-point scale, favored by Derwing and Munro, has become the standard scale in comprehensibility studies (Thomson 19). Earlier, Southwood and Flege (346) had rejected the use of small numerical

scales, such as 5- or 7-point scales, in an accentedness study, arguing that variance cannot be estimated above a certain level on these scales and may therefore lead to a ceiling effect. In contrast, Isaacs and Thomson (154) examined the raters' evaluation process in depth and found out that some raters considered a 9-point scale confusing due to the wide range of possibilities it offers, while they thought that the 5-point scale did not give rise to as many doubts. In a recent study, Nagle applied a many-facet Rasch analysis to examine the severity of raters' evaluating comprehensibility, fluency and accentedness via a 9-point scale. Based on the findings obtained, Nagle concluded that the scale steps were compressed for all three items tested, suggesting that a 5- or 7-point scale would have been more convenient due to the homogeneity of the speakers ("Developing" 19).

Other possibilities beyond the use of Likert scales have also been explored. For instance, Saito et al. ("Re-Examining" 145) effectively applied a 1,000-point continuous sliding scale for pronunciation assessment purposes. Therefore, using one scale or another could also be decisive to obtain trustworthy results.

1.3. Towards a mixed-method assessment

As previously discussed, thorough testing of the validity of rater-based assessment tools and their application help alleviate potential misconceptions and misguiding results (Harding 36-38), but full neutrality cannot be guaranteed. Ghanem and Kang (115) and Van Moere and Suzuki (149) pointed out that one of today's challenges in second language pronunciation research is to reconcile the communicative veracity obtained from listeners' judgments with the scientific objectivity of instrumental measures. Technological advances like speech recognition software are a potential solution, since they can offer more consistency, transparency, and accessibility to the assessment (see Babaeian 63-65 for a review). However, more research needs to be conducted to prove its reliability (Kang and Ginther 6). Meanwhile, a practical solution is to conduct studies based on a mixed-method assessment that uses already-tested instrumental tools, such as acoustic measurements, combined with listeners' perceptions, which have already helped to provide more evidence for detecting the linguistic aspects that influence comprehensibility and fluency (Derwing et al., "Second

Language Fluency" 655; Isaacs and Trofimovich 475-476; Kang et al. 554; Lennon 387; Nagle, *A Guide* 135-136; Riggenbach 423; Saito et al., "Re-Examining" 141).

1.4. Rhythm as a comprehensibility and fluency enhancement

Rhythm anticipates syntactic and lexical information and helps organize speech in a language (Derwing and Munro 60-61). In fact, rhythmic patterns evoke an acoustic illusion known as isochrony that might affect intelligibility, comprehensibility and fluency when communicating in a second language, both in terms of production and perception (Celce-Murcia et al. 131; Derwing and Munro 60-61; Levis 127-128). Hence, if the L1 and the L2 differ considerably as far as rhythm is concerned, misunderstandings and communication breakdowns tend to arise. L2 learners are not usually conscious about the rhythmic differences between their mother tongue and the target language; consequently, it is difficult for them to correct their own speech and try not to transfer the L1 rhythm when speaking in the L2.

Spanish/Catalan natives studying English often face this issue. While stress plays a crucial role in the length of syllables in English (among other factors), it does not in Spanish or Catalan, whose syllables last approximately the same regardless of whether these are stressed or unstressed (for a detailed description of different language rhythms, see Dauer 51-52). A pronunciation teaching study that has aimed at examining the effectiveness of teaching rhythm to Spanish EFL learners is Chela-Flores' (122). The experiment consisted in teaching word-decontextualized rhythmic patterns to tertiary students in Venezuela for a semester. Apparently, subjects perceived and recognized words with the taught rhythmic patterns considerably better after instruction, but they were tested just under controlled circumstances. Besides, neither the assessment process nor the tools used were described.

Differences in rhythm have been acoustically measured by means of different rhythmic metrics. The use of one rhythmic measurement or another will often depend on the rhythmic feature to analyze. As previously mentioned, duration is a parameter that distinguishes Spanish/Catalan from English. After investigating the metrics that could better capture the rhythm acquisition of L2 speakers of Spanish

and English, White and Mattys ("Calibrating Rhythm" 520; "Rhythmic Typology" 253) concluded that the proportion of vocalic interval durations in a given sentence (%V) and the variation coefficient indices for vowels (VarcoV) were the most reliable, both related to syllable length. Based on this assumption, the project presented hereafter performed acoustic analysis with the two measurements.

1.5. The project: Previous findings

The main goal of the project is to examine the effectiveness of explicit rhythm instruction to improve Spanish/Catalan ESP students' comprehensibility and fluency. Participants were divided into an experimental group, which received explicit rhythm instruction, and a control group, which did not (for a detailed description of the treatment, see the following section). Previous studies associated with the project aimed at investigating the L1 negative transfer after instruction first (Quesada Vázquez, "Pronunciation Instruction" 163; "Rhythm Instruction to Enhance ESP Students' Prosody", forthcoming; Quesada Vázquez and Romero, "The Improvement" 104; "ESP within ESP" 209). To this end, measurements of VarcoV and %V were obtained. Broadly speaking, it was concluded that, despite a lack of definitive statistical significance, students who received explicit rhythm instruction exhibited higher VarcoV values and lower %V values after treatment, which reflects a more target-like rhythm and, hence, a reduction in their L1 negative transfer. In fact, a significant effect size was revealed when VarcoV values were considered, which supports the impact of explicit rhythm instruction in the students' performances.

Additionally, pausing was also investigated (Quesada Vázquez, "Rhythm Instruction to Improve ESP Students' Fluency" 63), as it is also thought to influence L2 prosody, especially when fluency is considered (Lennon 413-414; Riggenbach 438; Wood 1). To this end, the total number of pauses and the number of unfilled pauses students made were examined. Results showed that both groups decreased the number of pauses (both the total number and the unfilled ones), but the experimental group made fewer after instruction. Besides, the statistical analysis conducted based on ANOVAs showed statistical significance for time and group, but not for their interaction.

This paper attempts to examine whether explicit rhythm instruction is also beneficial for students' comprehensibility and fluency. In this line, the following research questions are formulated:

RQ1: To what extent does explicit rhythm instruction influence students' comprehensibility and fluency?
RQ2: To what extent do objective (acoustic analysis) and subjective measurements (listeners' ratings) correlate?

2. Methodology

A classroom-based study (Derwing and Munro 84) was designed to test the effectiveness of explicit rhythm instruction within the ESP classroom to improve students' comprehensibility and fluency. A longitudinal experiment was conducted: a ten-week pronunciation module was created and embedded within a compulsory technical English course taught from February to May 2017 to first-year engineering undergraduates at Rovira i Virgili University (Tarragona, Spain). Although all the participants took pronunciation instruction, some of them took explicit rhythm training (experimental group) while the others did not (control group).

The experiment followed a pretest-posttest design to assess the progress of the subjects. All the students were recorded individually before and after instruction in three isolated rooms at the university library with two Sony PCM-M1O and a Zoom H4nsp recorders. For both the pretest and the posttest, students were requested to read ten sentences and a text aloud, introduce themselves, and give their opinion on social networking. While previous research has focused only on the acoustic analysis of read aloud sentences, the present study examines students' extemporaneous speeches, i.e. their opinions.

2.1. Participants

The pronunciation module was designed considering the 298 students enrolled for the course. However, only those who attended 90% of the sessions were taken as final participants of the study due to its longitudinal nature. Unfortunately, the number of participants

decreased dramatically owing to absenteeism, so only 42 students (21 experimental; 21 control) were the final subjects.

The "introduce yourself" exercise of the assessment test was used to gather information about the participants' age and linguistic background. All the students in the experimental group were 18-year-old first-year undergraduates who accessed university from high school, while there were five students in the control group who were over eighteen (two 19-year-olds, two 20-year-olds, and one 21-year-old). One of the 19-year-old students and the two 20-year-old students were taking the course for the second or third time. Most participants were balanced bilinguals of Spanish and Catalan coming from different cities in Catalonia. One student from the experimental group was from Venezuela and another from the control group was from Madrid, both having Spanish as their dominant language. Additionally, four students reported a different mother tongue: two Arabic, one Portuguese, and one Bulgarian. However, all of them had pursued primary and secondary education and taken the university access examination in Catalonia; thus, their command of both Spanish and Catalan was high.

The placement test that students had to take at the beginning of the course as part of its regular evaluation system shed light on their initial English level. Students exhibited a broad range of English proficiency levels within the groups: for the experimental group, ten students had a pre-intermediate level, six an intermediate level, and five an advanced level; for the control group, four students had a pre-intermediate level, eleven had an intermediate level, and six had an advanced level.

2.2. Procedure

For ten weeks, all the students received pronunciation training for thirty minutes a week. Instruction was "scaffolded": the first sessions dealt with features influencing the pronunciation of the basic unit of speech (the word); then, the following sessions covered the pronunciation of longer utterances (the sentence); and finally, the last sessions focused on more complex units (the discourse).

On the other hand, each individual session followed Celce-Murcia et al.'s (36) steps aimed at teaching communicatively: The first part of

each session consisted of a description and analysis of the item to work on. The teacher's explanations were complemented with videos, images, and kinesthetic activities; the second part was based on a perception activity in which students were encouraged to identify the target item; the third and final part of the session consisted of a series of production exercises, starting with controlled/guided training and finishing with communicative practice. This approach was used in both experimental and control sessions; the only difference in treatment was thus the explicit explanation and practice of rhythm instruction.

The materials and exercises used for the instruction, available on Mora-Plaza et al's *Tools* repository, were especially created for this experiment using online resources (videos, images, etc.), or adapted from pronunciation books and research papers, modifying rhythm activities to use technical vocabulary. These changes attempted to encourage students' motivation (Anderson-Hsieh 201) while adapting the content of the module to the students' needs (Dudley-Evans and St John 3). Moreover, the grammar and lexicon used in the sessions had already been taught in class; hence, students were familiar with the content, which facilitated the learning process.

2.3. Data analysis

An online Google form was designed to record students' answers to section #4 of the pronunciation test (i.e., students' opinions on social media)—forty-two for the control group and forty-two for the experimental group—before and after instruction, to assess students' progress on comprehensibility and fluency. An individual audio file was created for each of the opinions. By using *Audacity* 2.2.2, audios were normalized at -1 dB. However, a few audios were still too quiet and required further volume adjustment to ensure a comfortable listening level without distortions. On the other hand, files were cut into forty-five seconds when the contributions were too long (Derwing et al., "Evidence" 404). When possible, the beginning of the opinion segment was selected for assessment; otherwise, the part with fewer hesitations and pauses was used. The end point was established at a natural pause in the argumentation.

The beginning of the form featured instructions for the listeners on how to carry out the test and explanations of the concepts to analyze, based on Derwing and Munro's (76) and Wood's (9) definitions of comprehensibility and fluency, respectively: *comprehensibility* was defined as how easy the listener found it to understand the speech, while *fluency* was operationalized as the extent to which the speaker delivered the speech in a fluid way, without hesitations, pauses, false starts, repetitions or fragmentations.

Seven native speakers of English (two men and five women) were recruited to judge the students' extemporaneous opinions. They came from different English-speaking countries: four from the United Kingdom, one from Canada, one from the United States of America and one from Singapore. Listeners were also requested to provide their age and nationality, the years of residence in Catalonia, and the years of teaching English as a foreign language. They were all considered skilled listeners due to their experience in teaching English as a foreign language to Spanish/Catalan speakers in Catalonia. Nevertheless, the length of teaching experience varied considerably, between one and thirty-five years (M = 17.43; SD = 14.8). All of them were living in Catalonia at the time they took the test, so they were familiar with the Catalan and Spanish accents to some extent, although their length of residence varied greatly, from moths to years (M = 15.86; SD = 15.32). They all participated voluntarily in the project.

The questionnaire was divided into seven sections, each of which contained twelve audios. All the audios, both pre- and post-treatment, were randomly distributed within the form using *Research Randomizer*; however, the same order was presented to all listeners. For each file, listeners opened a link where they listened to the audio and then had to decide how comprehensible and fluent that student was by using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1—"not at all"—to 5—"totally". A short scale was considered suitable to ensure user-friendliness (Isaacs and Thomson 154; Nagle, "Developing" 19). Raters listened to the recording once and were asked to assess it twice, once for each dimension (comprehensibility and fluency).

Listeners had to take the test online due to the inability to bring all of them together in the same place on the same day. The limitations of the online form, which did not allow to save the answers to take a

break, forced listeners to take the test in one sitting. The test lasted approximately one hour and a half. Therefore, the fatigue factor could not be controlled for and will be considered when analyzing and discussing the results.

2.4. Statistical analysis

Several analyses were performed in order to test the effectiveness of the instruction to improve students' comprehensibility and fluency. First, intra-class correlation coefficient ICC tests were run on the listeners' scores to guarantee the reliability of the results. Second, Friedman tests were conducted to study the general impact of the instruction, as not all the data obtained from the ratings were normally distributed (see following section). Lastly, Spearman's and Kendall's Tau b coefficients were calculated to further examine the relationship between both comprehensibility and fluency and previous acoustic analysis. For all the tests, the alpha value was set at .05.

3. Results

An intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) test was computed to examine the reliability of the raters for comprehensibility and fluency separately. A two-way random effect model based on mean ratings and consistency assessed the uniformity of the scoring. Results reported a good mean estimation (α = .873) along with a good-to-excellent 95% confidence interval (IC = .826-.910) for comprehensibility scores, and a good mean estimation (α = .895.) along with a good-to-excellent 95% confidence interval (IC = .857-.926) for fluency scores. Hence, scores were considered reliable.

Table 1 illustrates the means of the raters' scores for both comprehensibility and fluency. Marks were distributed according to time (T1 = pretest; T2 = posttest) and group (experimental; control). Regarding comprehensibility, the control group was considered to improve slightly, while the experimental group showed certain signs of deterioration. Therefore, the comparison of the means suggests that the control group was more comprehensible after instruction than

the experimental group, even though scores are approximately equal, oscillating between 3 and 3.3 scores.

Table 1. Raters' mean scores (M) and standard deviations (SD) for comprehensibility and fluency ratings

	Control group				**Experimental group**			
	T1		**T2**		**T1**		**T2**	
	M	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
Comprehensibility	3.05	0.74	3.11	0.71	3.29	0.63	3.27	0.66
Fluency	2.81	0.77	2.86	0.72	2.98	0.59	3.01	0.70

As for the fluency ratings, both groups tend to improve after treatment: the control group appears to perform better than the experimental group after instruction, though the difference is very small.

To further investigate the students' comprehensibility and fluency progress according to the type of treatment received, four Friedman tests were performed (see Table 2). As mentioned in the previous section, data were not normally distributed for all the levels of the variables: for comprehensibility scores, the experimental posttest variable does not show a normal distribution (W = .884 , p = .018); for fluency scores, both the experimental pretest (W = .904, p = .041) and posttest (W = .902 , p = .038) variables do not show a normal distribution. None of the tests run shows statistical significance.

Table 2. Friedman tests of comprehensibility and fluency scores

	Group	**X^2**	***df***	***p*-value**	**Kendall's W**
Comprehensibility	Control	.429	1	.513	.020
	Experimental	.059	1	.808	.003
Fluency	Control	.800	1	.371	.038
	Experimental	1.471	1	.225	.070

Spearman's and Kendall's Tau b coefficients were also calculated to investigate the extent to which comprehensibility and fluency results correlated. As displayed in Table 3, all four tests show statistical

significance. Hence, the tests suggest that the students' level of comprehensibility is related to their level of fluency.

Table 3. Comprehensibility – fluency Pearson Spearman's and Kendall's Tau b correlation coefficients

		Spearman's		**Kendall's**	
Group	**Time**	**rho**	*p*	**Tau b**	*p*
Control	1	.891	.01**	.759	.01**
	2	.893	.01**	.770	.01**
Experimental	1	.710	.01**	.588	.01**
	2	.755	.01**	.625	.01**

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Correlations between ratings and the different acoustic measurements conducted (VarcoV, %V, total number of pauses and unfilled pauses) were also analyzed. As shown in Table 4, correlations between comprehensibility scores and VarcoV values indicate statistical significance for the experimental group in the pretest [$r_s(19) = .537$, $p = .012$; $\tau b = .361$, $p = .026$]. Regarding correlations between fluency scores and VarcoV values, no statistical significance is found (see Table 5).

Table 4. Comprehensibility – VarcoV Pearson Spearman's and Kendall's Tau b correlation coefficients

		Spearman's		**Kendall's**	
Group	**Time**	**rho**	*p*	**Tau b**	*p*
Control	1	-.047	.840	.015	.927
	2	.419	.059	.300	.064
Experimental	1	.537	.012*	.361	.026*
	2	.350	.120	.194	.234

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 5. Fluency – VarcoV Pearson Spearman's and Kendall's Tau b correlation coefficients

		Spearman's		**Kendall's**	
Group	**Time**	**rho**	*p*	**Tau b**	*p*
Control	1	-.049	.834	-.014	.928
	2	.273	.231	.203	.212
Experimental	1	.189	.411	.132	.422
	2	.206	.371	.129	.427

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Interestingly, the control group reveals a negative correlation in the pretest for the relationship of VarcoV values with comprehensibility [r_s (19) = -.047, p = .0840] and fluency [r_s (19) = -.049, p = .834; τb = -.014, p = .928], respectively. Both VarcoV values and scores are supposed to increase if an improvement is detected; thus, a negative correlation might suggest that the lower the students' VarcoV values, the better their comprehensibility and fluency, challenging the idea that better rhythm adaptation leads to better prosody (for a full discussion, see the forthcoming section).

Correlations were also performed for %V values and comprehensibility and fluency ratings, respectively (see Tables 6 and 7). Only the correlation between comprehensibility and %V for the control group in the pretest displays statistical significance [r_s (19) = -.467, p = .033; τb = -.285, p = .017]. %V is thought to decrease if students adopt a more English-like rhythm; hence, a negative correlation between %V and comprehensibility and fluency scores was expected. By contrast, the correlation between %V and comprehensibility scores for the experimental group after treatment is positive [r_s (19) = .030, p = .897; τb = .025, p = .879].

Table 6. Comprehensibility – %V Pearson Spearman's and Kendall's Tau b correlation coefficients

		Spearman's		Kendall's	
Group	**Time**	**rho**	*p*	**Tau b**	*p*
Control	1	-.467	.033*	-.285	.017*
	2	-.067	.772	-.054	.738
Experimental	1	-.196	.393	-.153	.344
	2	.030	.897	.025	.879

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 7. Fluency – %V Pearson Spearman's and Kendall's Tau b correlation coefficients

		Spearman's		Kendall's	
Group	**Time**	**rho**	*p*	**Tau b**	*p*
Control	1	-.293	.198	-.246	.123
	2	-.005	.984	-.020	.903
Experimental	1	-.393	.078	-.233	.156
	2	-.072	.756	-.050	.760

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Finally, correlations between pausing and comprehensibility and fluency ratings were also examined. Correlation tests were first run to investigate the relationship between the total number of pauses and comprehensibility and fluency scores, respectively. Results show that the total number of pauses and comprehensibility ratings are significantly correlated for the control group before [$r_s(19) = -.595, p = .004$; $\tau b = -.406, p = .012$] and after [$r_s(19) = -.613, p = .003$; $\tau b = -.442, p = .007$] treatment, but not for the experimental group (see Table 8).

Table 8. Fluency – total number of pauses Pearson Spearman's and Kendall's Tau b correlation coefficients

		Spearman's		**Kendall's**	
Group	**Time**	**rho**	*p*	**Tau b**	*p*
Control	1	-.595	.004**	-.406	.012*
	2	-.613	.003**	-.442	.007**
Experimental	1	-.089	.703	-.045	.783
	2	.198	.389	.125	.444

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

The total number of pauses and fluency are also significantly correlated for the control group in Time 1 [$r_s(19) = -.575$, $p = .006$; $\tau b = -.402$, $p = .012$] and Time 2 [$r_s(19) = -.494$, $p = .023$; $\tau b = -.334$, $p = .041$], while the experimental group did not reveal statistical significance (see Table 9). Again, all the tests show a negative correlation except for the experimental group after treatment for both comprehensibility and fluency.

Table 9. Fluency – total number of pauses Pearson Spearman's and Kendall's Tau b correlation coefficients

		Spearman's		**Kendall's**	
Group	**Time**	**rho**	*p*	**Tau b**	*p*
Control	1	-.575	.006**	-.402	.012*
	2	-.494	.023*	-.334	.041*
Experimental	1	-.228	.321	-.179	.279
	2	.065	.781	.050	.760

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

A similar behavior is observed when correlations between unfilled pauses and comprehensibility and fluency ratings were run (see Tables 10 and 11): while the control group exhibits statistical significance for both dimensions in Time 1 [comprehensibility: $r_s(19) = -.671$, $p = <.001$; $\tau b = -.487$, $p = .003$; fluency: $r_s(19) = -.629$, $p = .002$; $\tau b = -.433$, $p = .007$] and Time 2 [comprehensibility: $r_s(19) = -.636$, $p = .002$;

τb = -.474, p = .004; fluency: r_s (19) = -.496, p = .022; τb = -.346, p = .035], the experimental group does not indicate statistical significance. Besides, the experimental group reveals positive correlations for both comprehensibility and fluency after treatment.

Table 10. Comprehensibility – unfilled pauses Pearson Spearman's and Kendall's Tau b correlation coefficients

		Spearman's		**Kendall's**	
Group	**Time**	**rho**	*p*	**Tau b**	*p*
Control	1	-.671	<.001**	-.487	.003**
	2	-.636	.002**	-.474	.004**
Experimental	1	-.145	.530	-.106	.520
	2	.231	.314	.140	.392

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01.

Table 11. Fluency – unfilled pauses Pearson Spearman's and Kendall's Tau b correlation coefficients

		Spearman's		**Kendall's**	
Group	**Time**	**rho**	*p*	**Tau b**	*p*
Control	1	-.629	.002**	.433	.007**
	2	-.496	.022*	-.346	.035*
Experimental	1	-.243	.288	-.191	.252
	2	.045	.847	.030	.854

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The descriptive analysis of the comprehensibility scores showed that the overall performance of the experimental group slightly worsened after instruction, although both groups—experimental and control—were observed to remain almost stable. Regarding fluency, both groups displayed improvement after training: the control group appeared to improve somewhat more, but again changes were minimal for both groups. In addition, Friedman tests revealed no statistical significance,

while both dimensions—comprehensibility and fluency—showed high correlations for all the levels of the variables under study. Hence, these findings suggest that explicit rhythm instruction did not enhance students' comprehensibility and fluency (RQ1).

Nevertheless, previous studies related to the project showed improvement for the experimental group when acoustic measurements were applied: overall, learners appeared to increase their VarcoV values and decrease their %V values, showing a better adaptation to a more stressed-timed rhythm (Quesada Vázquez, "Pronunciation instruction" 163; "Rhythm Instruction to Enhance ESP Students' Prosody," forthcoming; Quesada Vázquez and Romero, "The Improvement" 104; "ESP within ESP" 209). Besides, they were also observed to improve their pausing, which should lead to more fluent speech (Quesada Vázquez, "Rhythm Instruction to Improve ESP Students' Fluency" 63).

Concerning the correlations between subjective measurements and acoustic analyses (RQ2), different observations could be made: As for the relationship between comprehensibility and fluency and VarcoV, only comprehensibility and VarcoV values for the experimental group in Time 1 showed statistical significance. Additionally, VarcoV values and comprehensibility and fluency, respectively, were negatively correlated. These findings challenge the belief that a better adoption of a more target-like rhythm will boost students' comprehensibility and fluency, as suggested by several researchers in the field (Celce-Murcia et al. 131; Derwing and Munro 60-61; Levis 127-128). However, a different behavior was observed when considering %V correlations: in this case, the control group in Time 1 showed statistical significance when the relationship between comprehensibility and %V was studied, whereas it was the experimental group in Time 2 that revealed a positive correlation.

Therefore, VarcoV and %V behaved differently. White and Mattys ("Calibrating Rhythm" 520; "Rhythmic Typology" 253) considered both metrics reliable, which is why both were analyzed in this project. However, Quesada Vázquez ("Rhythm Instruction to Enhance ESP Students' Prosody," forthcoming) observed that they do not correlate and that VarcoV values tend to yield stronger results. Further research should be conducted to reach more robust conclusions. Nonetheless, both rhythmic metrics showed signs of improvement, while subjective

ratings did not. Perhaps the length of the treatment was not sufficient to produce large-scale changes, but it begun to take effect on a smaller scale: an adoption of a more target-like rhythm indicates that explicit instruction can be beneficial, though students might need more practice to show improvement in their overall prosody (Quesada Vázquez, "Rhythm Instruction to Enhance ESP Students' Prosody," forthcoming).

Regarding pausing, significant results were found for both the total number of pauses and unfilled pauses when correlated with both comprehensibility and fluency results for the control group before and after treatment, but not for the experimental group. Besides, the experimental group showed positive correlations after treatment for both dimensions. These findings, together with the positive correlation found when %V was examined, appear to suggest that there might have been some difficulties with the subjective measurements, particularly when the performances of the experimental group were rated. A potential explanation is the existence of a ceiling effect due to the choice of experienced raters, since when examining individual ratings closely, experimental low-level students obtained rather high scores for their pretest performances (see Quesada Vázquez, *The Introduction of Rhythm* 142 for further information). Listeners were ESL teachers that had lived in Catalonia and were therefore familiar with the Spanish/Catalan language and the most common mistakes the speakers of those languages make when speaking English. Although the instructions specified that they should rate as natives and not as second language teachers, the familiarity with the language may have eased the degree to which they understood the speech and, thus, their criterion could have become more lenient (Harding 38; Isaacs and Thomson 139). Southwood and Flege (347) brought up this possibility when analyzing accentedness of Italian speakers of English. This fact, hence, could explain why low-level students obtained higher scores than expected.

The type of scale chosen could also have influenced ratings. For this study, a 5-point rather than the standardized 9-point scale was preferred because it was expected to be more user-friendly, as it simplifies the scope, leaving less room for doubts and hesitations. However, Southwood and Flege (346) had already warned about the possibility of a ceiling effect when a short scale like a 7-point was used,

recommending the use of longer scales. Therefore, the choice of scale could partly explain the existence of a ceiling effect as well.

Indeed, the test suffered from different limitations that could have influenced the results. It should also be borne in mind that the test was conducted remotely. The main drawback of this type of assessment test is the impossibility of controlling the context in which it is performed: for example, the quality of the audio may not have been appropriate due to the conditions of the equipment, or external factors such as the presence of family members or other duties could have interfered in the performance. Munro and Derwing (25) already warned about the drawbacks of listeners carrying out assessment tests at home. Ideally, it would have been more convenient to bring all the raters together in the same space and have them complete the test under the same conditions. However, incompatibility in the raters' schedules made this unfeasible, making the design of an online form the only viable alternative. Other researchers in the field (Kang et al. 557) have used an online test before, but little was reported about its performance constraints. They did specify, though, that they used a trial sample that was not included in the analysis to create a reference that guided the raters' criterion.

Other researchers also used checks by embedding native samples (Derwing et al., "Evidence" 400; Derwing et al., "Second Language Fluency" 663; Isaacs and Thomson 141). Trial or native samples to control the listeners' partiality were not included in this study's test, because raters were both native speakers and EFL teachers; hence, they were considered to have sufficient training to apply the right criterion. However, it is undeniable that providing a native sample could have helped prevent overrating: due to the disparity of levels within the groups, it would be easy to consider an average speaker as very fluent and comprehensible after listening to a low-level student who is clearly struggling. Therefore, a native speech sample would have acted as a benchmark of what constitutes a truly strong performance, recalculating the perception of learners' speeches. Consequently, the choice of not using native samples in the test could explain why some speeches were overrated, thereby causing the ceiling effect phenomenon.

Although the limitations of an online form affected the conditions of the performance, there are further factors that should also be taken into consideration. As previously mentioned, fatigue could also have

played an important role in raters' judgments. The total duration was calculated at one and a half hours due to the large number of recordings under assessment and, since the form did not allow to save scores during the process, raters had to listen to all the recordings in one sitting. Munro and Derwing (27) pointed out the threat that fatigue could pose in rating tasks and recommended that assessment sessions should not exceed one hour, with appropriate breaks in between. Therefore, it is highly possible that fatigue influenced the scoring (Thomson 24). Again, an in-person assessment would have allowed to divide the task into different sessions and, hence, alleviate fatigue (Derwing et al., "Evidence" 401; Munro and Derwing, "A Prospectus" 29; Saito et al., "Second Language Speech Production" 224), but the circumstances of the experiment made it unfeasible.

Despite a thorough examination of the available options and the potential variables influencing the rating test before conducting it, factors such as the online nature of the form, the type of listeners, fatigue, and the chosen scale are assessment issues that may have affected the performance of the rating test. For this reason, if the project had just relied on raters' judgments, results would have completely failed to support an improvement in students' performances, especially when rhythm was explicitly taught. However, further examination via acoustic measurements has allowed not only to detect problems with the rating test, but also to discern certain tendencies that support a positive effectiveness of the pronunciation module.

Last, but not least, results revealed a significant correlation between comprehensibility and fluency scores, supporting Levis' (27) claims on their tight relationship, in that disfluent speech can break the native listener's train of thought when interpreting the message and, as a consequence, hinder comprehension.

5. Future research

After examining the various limitations that human ratings can pose when used as an assessment tool in pronunciation teaching research, the use of a mixed-method approach is strongly encouraged (Nagle, *A Guide* 135-136; Teló et al. 1025). This could involve different types of quantitative data (i.e., rater judgments and acoustic measurements, for

instance) or combining both quantitative and qualitative data (e.g., rater judgments and students'/teachers' questionnaires and/or interviews). This type of assessment will limit the drawbacks of perception tests and, while providing a wider picture of the learning process, lead to more conclusive and reliable findings.

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Bridging the Gap Between Pandemic Fiction and Reality: Community and Solidarity in Val McDermid's *Resistance*

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Abstract: Best known for her *tartan noir* fiction, Scottish author Val McDermid enters in 2017 the realm of pandemic fiction. Her radio drama turned graphic novel *Resistance* still bears the imprint of the essential features of Scottish crime written by women. A bacterium which has grown resistant to antibiotics decimates the world's population, forcing us to redefine communities and solidarity among groups. The scenario created, both improbable and alarmingly plausible, allows for the exploration of human reactions in the face of disaster. This article discusses the role of literature, and more specifically pandemic literature, as a means of psychological escape as well as social criticism, and explores its possibilities as facilitator of survival during societal collapse by means of collective action and solidarity.

Keywords: antibiotics, community, pandemics, resistance, solidarity, Val McDermid.

Acortando la distancia entre la ficción pandémica y la realidad: Comunidad y solidaridad en *Resistance*, de Val McDermid

Resumen: Reconocida especialmente por su ficción *tartan noir,* la autora escocesa Val McDermid se adentra en 2017 en la ficción pandémica con *Resistance*, en forma de drama radiofónico convertido en novela gráfica en 2021, sin por ello dejar de lado los elementos esenciales de la novela negra escocesa de autoría femenina. Una bacteria que ha desarrollado resistencia a los antibióticos es la causa de la diezma de la población global, lo que obliga a una redefinición de qué es comunidad y solidaridad entre grupos. El escenario creado, tan improbable como alarmantemente plausible, permite la exploración de las reacciones humanas ante el desastre. Este artículo analiza el rol de la literatura, más concretamente de la literatura pandémica, como medio de escape psicológico y de crítica social, y explora sus posibilidades como facilitadora de supervivencia durante el colapso de la sociedad a través de la acción colectiva y la solidaridad.

Palabras clave: antibióticos, comunidad, pandemia, resistencia, solidaridad, Val McDermid.

1. Introduction: Bridging the gap between fiction and reality

Science fiction has experienced a huge surge of interest in the last few years. Amid the panic and confusion caused by Covid-19, reading and viewing audiences were drawn to apocalyptic narratives, spiking the sales of classics such as Camus' *The Plague*, and the number of downloads of films and series set in pandemic and post-pandemic contexts. Fiction became suddenly too close to reality and this highlighted the question

of whether it is merely a way to escape it, or to reflect on it. In this article, I align with those who maintain pandemic fiction is not simply a form of entertainment, but a necessity owing to its capacity to help understand and process real crises by exposing how quickly the familiar can collapse. However, before considering why pandemic fiction can reveal itself as more than a mere leisure activity, the concept of literature must be examined. Literature is a complex notion: there is not just one way to understand it. These "pieces of writing that are valued as works of art"—according to the *Oxford Dictionary* definition—, can take many forms and be interpreted in various ways.

Professor of Scottish literature Alan Riach proposes in his *Scottish Literature: An Introduction* (2022) seven different ways in which to answer the big question: "what is literature?" In order to do so, he takes into consideration that, whatever form it takes, literature is made up of three main components, namely: "[l]anguage, stories and music." These elements help create two different "areas of sensual apprehension ... the visual and the aural," which are, in turn, "portals to reality" (26). Riach defines literature as a branch of the creative arts, whose most prominent genres are poetry, fiction and drama, and views it as a convergence of energies, namely personality, history and substance. Riach also asserts that literature functions as a form of communication and negotiation "that tells truths", engages in acts of resistance against normative values, and participates in an ongoing dialogue (26-32). Even though the notion of truth remains a controversial one, fiction can be regarded under this light as a manifestation of reality, as a link between fantasy and fact.

This description of literature as aesthetic representation of reality aligns with the understanding that, broadly speaking, fiction and lies are not synonymous, even though they both belong to the realm of the unreal. As stated by Jane Doherty and James Giordano, fiction "intends to provide an illustration [...] of reality" (1), very much in keeping with Riach's aforementioned notion of "portal to reality", from the perspective of the imaginary and hypothetical. As readers, we are required to enter into a fictional pact that enables us to immerse ourselves in an unfamiliar world, one in which the laws of physics may not apply, history may diverge from the account of events with which we are familiar, and the characters we encounter are either entirely fictitious or represented in ways that may not be strictly faithful to historical fact. However, we can

understand them and be able to empathise with their experiences. In these hypothetical situations, where we lie "between history and myth" (Riach 29), not only are we seeking comfort and escaping from reality as a way of coping with emotions, but also inadvertently improving our chances of survival.

This article does not aspire to analyse cognitive science studies in depth. However, the gap between the representation of reality by means of literature and this unexpected application can be bridged by looking into psychological studies on episodic memory—i.e., the conscious retrieval of personal experiences together with their context. Researchers from Harvard University laid out in 2008 some major concepts regarding the involvement of episodic memory "in our ability to carry out simulations," as those brain regions—such as the hippocampus—associated to recollection of past events were discovered to be "similarly engaged when people imagine future experiences" (Schacter et al. 39). These future scenarios I propose to be equivalent to those presented in literary works of fiction, more specifically pandemic fiction, for the purpose of this article. This is in line with the idea of "prospective brain," a term coined by Schacter et al. in 2007, and whose function is to make use of the stored "information from the past and the present to generate predictions about the future" (660). It seems, then, that our ability as readers to cross over to the literary world may well prepare us for real world scenarios involving the experienced alternate reality and make us better equipped to deal with disaster, as "[e]xperts have long recognized the important role than mental simulation can play in solving problems" (Taylor et al. 429).

In recent years, a picture of a sign in a bookshop window has gone viral—pun intended. It states that the post-apocalyptic fiction section has been moved to Current Affairs. It reads as dark humour, which is in itself a coping strategy with the grim context of Covid-19, but it also exemplifies the close relationship between fiction and reality. As suggested by Doherty and Giordano, we turned to such stories "in ways similar to those reasons for which [we] turn to the news" (1). There is a psychological need to understand, to neutralise the uncertainty. Pandemic fiction is a representation of fear and vulnerability, and our ability to empathise with the characters stems directly from our own anxiety about the unknown and the recognition of our own

defencelessness. In this sense, it could be stated that pandemic fiction is not merely fiction about pandemics, but a portrayal of contagious uncomfortable emotions. This very act of representation helps make sense of them, thus contributing to regulate them.

1.1. Literary canon(s) and margins. The case of Scottish pandemic fiction written by women

Traditionally, literature has been categorised in terms of canon and margins. There are genres, literary works, and authors, that have been deemed canonical, while others have been relegated to the periphery and regarded as less significant. But what exactly constitutes a canon? Alan Riach dedicates a chapter in his *Scottish Literature, An Introduction* to define this widely used term. He identifies it as "a form of cultural empowerment" and acknowledges how this power can be exercised in two antagonistic ways: it can be limiting, but it can also

> work as effective resistance to foreclosure and oppression intended by others... A canon can be a good thing because it prompts curiosity and can lead to worthwhile company. It can also be a bad thing because the others are sometimes out to exert their power over you or colonise you. (986)

Several layers can be found in this power dynamics. This is not only question of genre, but it has a geographical and a gender component as well. Val McDermid's *Resistance*, focus of this article, could easily be labelled as non-canonical according to all three. Firstly, because both of its forms—namely, radio drama and graphic novel—are non-traditional mediums, unlike more established literary forms such as the novel, poetry, or essay. Secondly, as a narrative of Scottish authorship, it occupies a marginal position relative to "English, Anglo-American, or Anglophone literature(s), including post-imperial literatures in English" (Riach 979). Thirdly, Val McDermid is a female author, which situates her within patriarchal margins, and *Resistance* stems from a literary genre that has been seen as written *by* men and *for* men, or even boys, yet it has been still considered minor: science fiction (Green and Lefanu 1985: 1). Even though this genre has enjoyed the public's favour and grown exponentially in the past few decades, hence facilitating the

diversification of its subgenres, its cultural and literary value have been denied for a long time.

As a source of entertainment, literature provides readers with psychological tools to navigate the challenges of the real world. It is a form of escapism and a way of coping. Moreover, science fiction—in whatever form it takes, from the depiction of seemingly unattainable futuristic *x*topian scenarios, to alternate realities that look uncomfortably realistic as seen, for instance, in the TV series *Black Mirror*—acts as an apparently innocent vehicle for cultural and critical thought. It uses its imaginary component to subtly conceal its socio-historical foundation and critique. Despite the challenges, these narratives, especially when "drawn from media often dismissed as unserious and trivial," in Peter Y. Paik's words, "are capable of achieving profound and probing insights into the principal dilemmas of political life" (1). Science fiction can also be described, as Patrick Parrinder already suggested in 1980, "as a 'thinking machine' which provides an outlet to visualize *what could be*, and therefore allows both reflection on *what is*, and some idea for planning *what to do next*" (Doherty and Giordano 1). In the following pages I will analyse how Val McDermid offers with *Resistance* both entertainment and food for thought to her audiences.

2. Val McDermid and the intersection of crime and pandemic fiction

Scottish author Val McDermid shares birthplace with renowned economist Adam Smith in the east coastal town of Kirkcaldy, in the county of Fife, and a taste for crime fiction and versatility as a writer with her contemporary Louise Welsh. Best known for her *tartan noir* and with millions of copies of her books sold all over the world, she was even labelled Queen of Crime by audiences. This is a moniker which shocked the Agatha Christie Estate, whose representatives sent in 2022 a cease-and-desist letter as they trademarked the expression, first used to describe the pioneering twentieth-century crime writer. A quick look at McDermid's upbringing and education, as well as her preferred genre is deemed necessary to fully understand the work at hand: the radio drama turned graphic novel *Resistance*. Even though *Resistance* falls most notably under the category of pandemic narrative, the development of plot and characters is inextricably linked to her other literary works.

Tartan noir is not simply a way of referring to crime fiction made in Scotland. It has a set of definitory characteristics that separate it from the work of authors such as Edgar Allan Poe or Agatha Christie herself. As stated by Yildirim Özsevgeç, its writers' main aim

> is to dwell fearlessly on the social context of crime without ignoring the narrative and to focus on life's gloomy and even dark side. Another striking feature of almost all the Tartan-Noir is the protagonists' defiance of authority, which, according to the Scots, is the cornerstone of their national identity. (107)

Interestingly enough, a genre that has been traditionally male dominated has seen in the last few decades a steep increase in the number of women authors, with writers of the stature of Louise Welsh, Denise Mina or Val McDermid herself. This phenomenon goes parallel to another interesting feature of *tartan noir*: female-centred storylines when written by women authors. These protagonists, very much like the writers who give them life and voice, are strong individuals who break away from gender stereotypes, doing their detective work while offering their view on social issues and standing up for the oppressed. Growing up in a working-class family and publishing during Thatcherism gave her a clear insight into the workings of patriarchy, and the challenges that she faced clearly translate into her characters. It is typical of her to even exaggerate and parody gender roles. To this day, she has raised her voice against any social or political issue she deems unjust, not just by means of fiction, but in interviews and social media, from Westminster politics to the Caledonian Sleeper train services.

Her humble upbringing did not prevent McDermid from attending Oxford University, and she became the first state school student to attend St Hilda's College, where she is now an Honorary Fellow. Even though "[her] school didn't even want her to apply … [she] had one supportive teacher and parents who realised that education was the way to a better life," as she told *The Daily Mail* in 2020. As she also acknowledges in that interview, challenges are not to be seen as problems, but as opportunities, a philosophy very much in keeping with the etymological development of the word "crisis" as a decisive point, which can also be applicable to the apocalyptical backdrop of *Resistance*.

More specifically relevant to her depiction of the female protagonist of *Resistance*, the reporter Zoe Beck, is the fact that, after graduating, McDermid worked as a journalist in England. In an interview with Jane Hamilton for *The Daily Record*, in 2021, the author recalls her time as a reporter in the seventies, "when the newsroom was dominated by men and female reporters were tasked with the 'soft' stories." McDermid rebelled against not being able to work on the "hard" stories, challenging the prevailing misogyny. Like her, Zoe is also a journalist who is already exasperated by having to cover stories that are not important. In a similar twist of fate, albeit much more dramatic in the fictional world of *Resistance*, both writer and character stumble upon a big story: McDermid covers the death of Pope John Paul I and Zoe finds herself at the epicentre of a pandemic outbreak. While McDermid then moves on to covering crime stories—and writing them—, Zoe's investigations turn her into a sort of detective herself, like McDermid's most notable characters, as she sets to unearth the origins of a pandemic that is rapidly sweeping the world and decimating its population.

3. The context of Val McDermid's *Resistance*

Val McDermid's *Resistance* appeared as a radio drama only a few years before the outbreak of Covid-19, as many other works of fiction including Louise Welsh's *Plague Times* trilogy of novels (2014-2017), films like *Contagion* (2011), or long-standing TV series such as *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022), just to cite a few recent examples. Our fear of vulnerability has accompanied us well before we had to deal with a real global outbreak. Not surprisingly, it was precisely during the different stages of lockdown in 2020 that there was a surge in the interest towards pandemic fiction, as we seemed to be living in a grey area between the factual and the fictitious.

Resistance was first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 3rd, 10th and 17th March, 2017. It was later adapted into a graphic novel, in 2021, illustrated by Kathryn Briggs, and with certain changes introduced, such as the Prime Minister being depicted as a man in the radio script but a woman in the graphic novel. These three episodes were aired as part of the 'Experimental Stories' collaboration between said broadcaster and the Wellcome Trust Broadcast, Games and Film, an association which put together themed workshops to lead to radio dramas. Val

McDermid worked, together with radio producer Susan Roberts and microbiologist Christopher Dowson (University of Warwick), on the topic of antimicrobial resistance. She then opted for an apocalyptic storyline when writing her script for the Dangerous Visions series.

According to Meroe Candy, from the Wellcome Trust team (Sansom 706), these dystopian dramas were to be understood as pure entertainment and with no straightforward didactic message intended. However, it is difficult not to extrapolate lessons from such realistic, albeit worst-case scenario, accounts. This clash between pure entertainment and a discussion of major issues is also portrayed in *Resistance*, both in its radio and written versions. Its female protagonist, the journalist Zoe Beck, takes her job seriously—as noted in the previous section—and resents her profession turning into sheer entertainment. There is quite explicit criticism aimed at mass media in her comments and laments about her work, as can be observed in the following interaction between her and her husband:

> 'Oh Jamie, remember when I used to do real stories?'
> 'I remember. At least celebrity fluff doesn't obsess you
> the way investigative journalism used to.'
> 'It "obsessed" me, as you put it, because it mattered.' (10)

Zoe longs to cover stories that are important but feels trapped working at an outdoors event, the Solstice Festival, where the journalists were 'looking for the story—whatever passes for a story in a post-factual-world' (9). Little did she know then—nor did everyone else—that a place which she had already perceived as unhealthy and with no adequate sanitation would be ground zero for the pandemic that would serve as context for this story. Neither could she anticipate that the reason behind the upcoming disaster was grounded in something that for decades has been allowing human beings to feel safer against disease: antibiotics.

3.1 From resistance to resilience and the importance of empathy

Alexander Fleming, winner of the Nobel Prize for his discovery of penicillin, warned in a 1945 interview with *The New York Times* about the possibility of bacteria growing resistant to the drug, especially

when "self-medication and all its abuses" are concerned. "The greatest possibility of evil," he said, would be the use of "too-small doses" which would lead to microbes learning how to resist penicillin instead of clearing up the infection. This could be passed on to other individuals until the drug will not be able to save someone with an infection. As quoted in the newspaper, "[i]n such a case the thoughtless person playing with penicillin treatment is morally responsible for the death of the man who finally succumbs to infection with the penicillin-resistant organism" (21).

Noah Rosenblatt-Farrel argues that even though antibiotics have "rendered easily treatable many formerly deadly infections", it is also true that many have indeed seen their efficacy diminished or even lost (245). He is, however, optimistic as to how an appropriate response may help the same drugs already in use regain effectiveness. Rosenblatt-Farrel comes to this conclusion based on the fact that not all resistance has to do with the misuse of antibiotics and that there is a variety of mechanisms through which infections are fought; he also takes into account a wealth of studies which suggest that a reduction in the use of antibiotics results in the reduction of resistance to them as well (246, 250).

Val McDermid's character Zoe is, perhaps, not so optimistic. She reproduces Alexander Fleming's above stated concern, as Fleming himself acknowledged "he was handing us a loaded gun." Bereaved over her own losses, Zoe laments the renowned bacteriologist did not decide to "[flush] his Petri dish down the toilet instead of presenting us with the false promise of a world free from infection" (108). The fictional journalist proceeds to compare the world's current situation with that of Victorian times, when people had grown so accustomed to death that the illusion of immunity did not allow the population to take life for granted, leading them to a more stoic approach to existence. Interestingly, this *loaded gun* turns the table of resistance from physical back to psychological, as paralysing emotions are "a luxury we couldn't afford anymore" (108).

Resistance is defined in its third entry of the *Oxford Dictionary* as "the power not to be affected by something." We can be protected from bacteria and, in turn, bacteria can become unaffected by antibiotics. But these are not the only types of resistance that permeate McDermid's

work, as it can be perceived in spheres other than the physical, most notably psychological and political.

In connection with our physical and mental health, another related term can be extrapolated from Zoe's reflection above: *resilience*, or the ability to recover quickly. Michael E. Peters discusses this concept of resilience in his 2022 analysis of Camus' *The Plague*, paying special attention to its connection with human response to catastrophe. According to Peters, this capacity, together with

> the adaptability, strength and flexibility to overcome vulnerabilities especially of the weak, the attitude to mentally or emotionally cope with a crisis, to cope with pain and discomfort and ultimately to contemplate and face death especially one's own is a common set of related themes for those who want to highlight the ability of human beings as a species to transcend hardship (1)

However, resilience in the face of disaster is not just an individual strength. Self-preservation seems to be a first psychological response, whereas group preservation comes in second place, followed by blame-placing and justice-seeking (Peters 2).

This raises the question of the extent of our interdependence, an issue which is highlighted when a global tragedy, such as a pandemic, strikes. The outbreak of the fictional bacterial disease called Erysipelas, or the Sips, confronted the world population with the democratic and transnational nature of a virus, as did Sars-Cov-2 in 2020: it does not discriminate and travels across borders. According to Bryan Walsh in his 2020 article for the BBC "Covid-19: the History of Pandemics," there is nothing, from natural disasters to war, that has killed more than disease, and this is partially due to this difficult to control defining characteristic of microbes. After all, what is a pandemic if not something common to *all people* (from Greek *pan* plus *demos*)? Questions such as whether we are all on the same boat or just in the same ocean, or the issue of social responsibility versus individual interest, were raised and have proved to be rather controversial.

Yet this was not the first time such issues appeared in the collective consciousness. Other tragic events, at first sight not as far-reaching as

a pandemic, have been thought-provoking and show the connection between health and politics from a variety of angles. Let us take, for instance, the 2015 Charlie-Hebdó massacre, when jihadist gunmen took the life of twelve people at the offices of the satirical magazine. Sandro Galea, dean and professor at the Boston University School of Public Health, reflects upon the damaging impact of hate and hate crimes on public health on an article published on the wake of said attack, which serves as an example of societal shock and its various consequences—from the loss of innocent lives at the hands of terrorists to the growth of Islamophobia. According to Galea, prejudice and discrimination not only cause assault, but also have an impact on mental and physical health. They lead to mental health disorders such as psychological distress and depression—which can in turn lead to suicide—, substance abuse and even poor pregnancy outcome. Social justice cannot be then removed from the equation of public health. As observed by Galea, "health is a shared and universal aspiration. A desire to maximize the health of populations should galvanize us. It should push us to engage with the social fractures that threaten our potential to become healthier people."

If empathy is a necessity for a resilient society, in its broadest meaning, the difficult question of how to make it a reality needs to be addressed. Fear is a powerful force which causes human beings to react in order to survive, even if that sometimes means going against the group's interests—take, for instance, panic buying resulting in shops depleted of basic goods, or neighbour vigilantism taken to an extreme. In order to regulate the chaos that ensues after disaster, authorities face the need to take a stance on how to keep the order while ensuring the wellbeing of the citizens. New laws and regulations may be enforced, such as the establishment of curfews and regulated mobility. However, can the population just be forced to do the right thing, or do we need to be encouraged to by, for example, the use of punishment? After all, a sort of nihilist psychological response may result in rebellion if citizens feel cornered, creating a new set of problems.

Nudge theory, on the other hand, is based on the idea that it is possible to alter people's behaviour while individuals still keep the ability to maintain freedom of choice. It relies on the moral encouragement to do the right thing rather than on the enforcement of laws and the

prescription of punishment when they are not followed. Question remains whether nudge theory can be successful in terms of collective responsibility under such dire circumstances as a pandemic. A plague certainly provides a moral opportunity for the population to face the possibility of sacrifice for the sake of the greater good, as Michael A. Peters suggests (755), and empathy plays a crucial role in it.

Podcast host and former politics and philosophy lecturer Sean Illin also analyses the relevance of Camus' *The Plague*—and, by extension, of pandemic literature—, and the lessons that can be extrapolated from it. Most notably, he draws our attention to the fact that "we should see ourselves as members of a community, not as atomised actors" in his article "This Is a Time for Solidarity" (2020). He highlights three main principles which lead to the configuration of a resilient society: empathy, love, and solidarity. The presence, or lack thereof, of these principles, which according to him "make every society worthwhile", are not only relevant in Camus' novel, but can also be analysed across all pandemic fiction. They are most certainly pertinent in MacDermid's *Resistance,* as are the aforementioned concepts of *community* and *solidarity,* which will be developed in the following section.

4. Spaces of solidarity within and outside the community

Communities are social bodies: they are made up of people who relate to one another in various ways in order to function. Any given community works both horizontally and vertically, as there are peers but also hierarchies and authority figures. This establishment of roles and relations does not mean that communities work seamlessly and without conflict. There is a great variety of reasons why their members can be subject to instability, friction and vulnerability.

The attention of this article is focused on the extremely disruptive nature of pandemics beyond a public health level. Val McDermid's example provides a clear view of how the catastrophic snowball effect of a globally spread illness destroys not only the health of the population, but also has the capacity to alter social and political structures. It has already been pointed out that microbes, such as viruses—or, in this case, bacteria—are democratic and transnational, they have levelling properties. In a case like the context depicted in *Resistance*, they do so

to the extent of even destroying the vertical structure, as can be seen in the following excerpt from the graphic novel:

> In an unprecedented move, the Prime Minister has announced that the government can no longer function at a national level. In her shock statement, Eleanor Clooney blamed the Sips, the apparently unstoppable epidemic that has now claimed millions of lives worldwide.
>
> Mrs Clooney said, 'It has become clear that in spite of your government's tireless efforts to maintain civil society, we are faced with an impossible task. Just as the Sips attacks the systems of the human body, so its effects have destroyed the body politic. (134)

This destruction of the body politic also means the redefinition of societal norms and community all over the globe. Let us focus on the origins of the concept first. The word *community* derives from Latin and, as Naomi Silver describes, the root word *communis*, meaning *common*,

> breaks down into two possible derivations identified in the OED. The first, *com* plus *munis* (what is indebted, bound, or obligated together), is thought to be more philologically accurate, while the second, *com* plus *unus* (what is together as one), carries the status of folk etymology. (2001: 204)

According to this view, the most neutral meaning is merely an aseptic generalisation of the idea of togetherness, while the first derivation suggested carries a sense of obligation. In my opinion, the fact that this is the most "philologically accurate" of the two, also implies that a feeling of necessity lies at its core. We are social beings who need each other in order to survive, a necessity that permeates all aspects of existence, from everyday situations to a much bigger scale. Still, the issue is much more complex than that of the individual versus the collective. As coalitions are formed, different layers and degrees of belonging to a group appear. In a post-national political community as that on which a pandemic sheds light, a redefinition of borders (physical or otherwise) is bound to have a polarising effect.

It is worth revisiting the question, raised in the previous section, of how the instinct for self-preservation activates prior to that of group preservation and its connection to the notion of an obligatory sense of community. Conventional solidarity may appear as it "grows out of common interests and concerns ... of a sense of 'we-ness' of groups involved in a common struggle or endeavour" (Dean 115). Complex questions regarding altruism and selfishness arise here, especially as our reaction to pain and suffering is a key element that provides us with common ground for solidary responses. There are, hence, reactions and automatic responses, but also decisions: group preservation is also required for our survival, but it demands conscious changes in behaviour. Solidarity implies commitment, motivation for action as one of the key factors that shape solidary relations, and Steinar Stjernø argues that solidarity moves away from individual interest to contribution to those in need (Scholz 726). For Richard Rorty, progress towards human solidarity implies solidarity not being rooted in human essence, but it being seen 'as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation' (192).

Fear, when understood as a catalyst for such responses, reveals what we genuinely value and wish to protect, much like the act of tossing a coin to make a decision, only to realise we had always known the outcome we desired. However, an important question arises in moments of widespread, legitimate fear: that of who we should turn to. The simplest answer would be to turn to authorities: not just to those in command and having legal power, but also to experts on the matter, especially when our health and survival are concerned. There might be conflicting interests, however: politicians' and scientists' views may not align and that can, in turn, make the general population go from seeing "Jesus in a labcoat" to live in a state of mistrust (Doherty and Giordano 2), a predicament which is present in *Resistance* as well.

While the protagonist of *Resistance* is on her quest to find the origins of the disease, so as to clear the name of her friend Sam, accused of having started it by selling subpar sandwiches at the Solstice festival, there is a scientist specialising in infectious diseases, Dr Aasmah Siddiqui, who is on her own search for answers and solutions. Dr Siddiqui, another strong female character, finds herself fighting for

research funding as those with the money do not seem to be aware—or are in plain denial—of the urgency of the situation. As she tries to explain how the world is facing "the perfect storm", the director of the Life Sciences Centre is more focused on the fact that "[n]ot everybody succumbs" and that because they cannot yet answer the questions of what proportion of the population can survive it and how this particular bacterium mutates and spreads, "what [she is] saying sounds to funders like scaremongering to ring-fence more money, more prestige for [her] team" (63-64). It can be argued that the jump from seeing "Jesus in a labcoat" to losing confidence in scientists is not surprising when "[p]eople are dying and scientists—scientists for heaven's sake—are more worried about their personal prestige than about solving the problem" (65), as Dr Siddiqui laments in this exchange about the indifference shown by Big Pharma—i.e., the corporate pharmaceutical sector and their influence, often seen under a negative light, on healthcare.

Three main groups can be identified amid the propagation of the fictional disease of the Sips: the general population, the science community and the political class, with the last two becoming inextricably linked. As Dr Cheryl Laurie, who works hand in hand with Dr Siddiqui, tells Zoe, "[t]his is way beyond science now. This is political" (71). However, the type of political solidarity—as defined by Sally Scholz in *Political Solidarity*—displayed by the political class in *Resistance* is parasitical and rhetorical, as moral discourses do not necessarily imply moral practices.

Economic arguments are behind the lack of development of new antibiotics, as there is a socioeconomic structure that prioritises wealth over health. New antibiotics are not profitable enough, and pharmaceutical companies "are not in the business of altruism": "Statins, blood pressure stabilisers, corticosteroids, diabetes medication / That's where the money is. Antibiotics are a loser. All those millions to develop and then most people only take them a few times in their lives" (85). There also seems to be miscommunication between scientists and politicians, as the latter do not accept the seriousness of the problem: "by the time we politicians started listening to what the scientists were telling us, the damage was done. We were all to blame, even though we didn't understand the damage we were doing" (144).

Finally, when worse comes to worst, public figures face the conundrum of keeping their prestige or facing the music. Politicians are first denying the importance of the problem and then fleeing trying to save their own lives and avoiding taking responsibility, while the rest only get "[t]he end of any semblance of democracy" and "slip back to a tribal era" with the added problem of not knowing who their tribes are anymore (135); scientists are "ashamed of not having anything to say except, 'We don't know how to stop this on its tracks'" (68).

This takes us back to the idea of obligation, but not just as a forced community, but also as forced solidarity. In public health, for instance, there is a punitive sense of "solidarity by code" for practitioners, with an ethical oath taken by physicians promising to do no harm, a Hippocratic Oath by which they are supposed to abide. Interestingly enough, this well-known promise is not originally part of the oath, but taken from another of Hippocrates' works, *Of the Epidemic*s, very much in tune with the topic at hand. Among the general population, there also appears the question of voluntary versus obligatory compliance to safety measures, recommendations and regulations, for the greater good. But when this epidemic becomes a pandemic and then a wipeout new communities emerge, and people begin to find out who their tribe is. In Anna Triandafyllidou's words, a pandemic "opens up possibilities for a new understanding of citizenship or of membership to a political community that is post-national" (5).

Apocalyptic and postapocalyptic fiction in general, and pandemic fiction in particular, frequently depict societies (re)emerging following the collapse of former systems, with redefined borders and the dissolution of traditional nation-states. Although *Resistance* is no exception, it offers only a brief glimpse into what the "new normal" entails for the survivors, with mere snippets of the transition into the reformed societies, which offer an interesting insight into human reactions and interactions in the face of fear, with apocalyptic references that are easily accessible to the general public (*The Walking Dead* without zombies; *Game of Thrones* without dragons).

At the outbreak of the pandemic, the most relevant instances of people's reactions are the visceral attacks on Sam, who appears to be patient zero. Facing illness, a mob sets to burn down Sam's sausage shop, which eventually leads him and his family out of town. They remain

united in the face of adversity, and it is not until he finds himself alone that he offers himself as a guinea pig. Zoe, on the other hand, sees the big picture from the beginning and fights for the greater good. There is one, almost anecdotal, moment in which she does react in fear and protection of both herself and her youngest child. As a woman collapses in the supermarket, she flees the scene, which makes her question the type of person she has become. However, it is in her nature to prioritise the search for truth over her own safety and her family's, which cost her to end up transmitting the illness to her husband and children while remaining immune. Interestingly, Sam's and Zoe's different approaches result in the same outcome: they both end up burying their loved ones.

The kindest side of the science community is represented in *Resistance* by Drs Saddiqui and Laurie. Both Aasmah and Cheryl (usually referred to as Chezza), are scared for both themselves and the future of humanity. They feel frustrated as they cannot access the necessary funding and they do not give up even after there is nothing that can be done to avoid disaster. They join forces with other scientists from Germany, Australia and the United States, creating a new international community whose bond is not based on ego or profit.

As the narrative progresses, brief glimpses of the general population's reactions are shown. There are instances of communities being closed to strangers, measures enforced using violence. Empathy is not exercised in favour of a more survivalist, kill-or-be-killed, approach which prioritises self-preservation: "No strangers means no Sips" (89). At the end, a small, hopeful, community is created, which contrasts with previous desperate examples. The survival of the members of this new community is based upon covering their basic physical and psychological needs. Frontiers are not closed and new members are welcome to join, showing overcoming of fear and prejudice.

5. Conclusions

In *Resistance*, a single disease is responsible for reducing the human population by over 99.9% in only a few months, a dystopian scenario which feels unlikely, yet realistic. Microbiologist Christopher Dowson stated that "[t]he end of civilisation presented here is perhaps a metaphor for the end of modern medicine that would be the certain

result of widespread total antibiotic resistance" and Clare Samson concludes that everyone needs to work together, "and that includes an informed an engaged public" (706). Even though *Resistance* was not scripted with the intention of spreading a didactic message, it does confront the public with a scenario that is familiar enough to provoke critical thinking, and fictitious enough to create a comfortable context for episodical simulation. The first-person and dialogical approach facilitates this process as well, as it is difficult not to empathise with the characters and wonder what we would do if faced with the same dilemmas—even more so after 2020.

It has been discussed how literature in general, and science fiction (dystopian fiction and pandemic fiction) in particular, are a means of entertainment as well as a vehicle for cultural and critical thinking. In such realistic stories, especially after having lived through a pandemic, it seems inevitable to wonder whether we are doomed, as the picture that is painted is that of powerlessness—after all, the illness stops not because a cure is found, but because it ran its own course. In an interview published in 2017 by *The New Statesman*, same year in which *Resistance* was aired, McDermid replied "[i]t's hard not to think so, but I remain optimistic" when asked that question (62). The ending of the story contributes, in my opinion, to that optimism. Rather than providing an extensive or detailed account, the narrative chooses to present brief, impressionistic snapshots of the global changes without fully elaborating on their implications. It only gives its audience a few clues, a sense of "to be continued" which opens a realm of possibilities for all the characters and leaves much to the audience's and readers' interpretation. The uncertainty that accompanies the emergence of a transformed reality is thus emphasised, but with a taste for hope, as the survivors are seen as living in harmony and helping each other survive the aftermath of this traumatic experience. Crises prove to be decisive points, and challenges are opportunities to start anew.

According to McDermid, to show violence is sometimes necessary, "what it is and what it does" and she is "not here to bring comfort and joy" (Foster 28), and literature is something that makes you care and sensitise you (Riach 594). It is said in *Resistance* that "sometimes the only way to survive the end of the world as we know it is to pretend it's just not happening" (143). This is true, to an extent, as it provides

psychological relief. However, pandemic narratives can play that role and still prepare us to act when needed and, hopefully, even prevent apocalyptic outcomes as they can act as cautionary tales. Group preservation may be a secondary instinct, but it is coalition which has the potential to save us.

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Recesións / Reseñas
Reviews / Rezensionen

Valeiras Fernández, Andrea. *Sigue siendo la hora del té: El País de las Maravillas en la cultura popular*. Universitat de València, 2024. 218 páginas

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Sigue siendo la hora del té: El País de las Maravillas en la cultura popular, by Andrea Valeiras Fernández, published in 2024 by the Universitat de València (UV), provides a thorough account of the many reimaginings across different media of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and its characters across time and up to the present day. The book provides a detailed review listing and explaining every reimagining of the *Alice* narrative imaginable, from theatre and cinema to fashion and marketing. This comprehensive study highlights the enduring influence of Carroll's work on global popular culture, offering a nuanced analysis of how Alice has permeated virtually every aspect of contemporary media and consumer culture.

Valeiras Fernández structures her study into ten chapters, beginning with theoretical foundations (Chapters 1-3; 17-50) and historical context (Chapter 4; 51-68), followed by medium-specific analyses—theatre and opera (Chapter 5, 69-78), cinema (Chapter 6, 79-124), other audiovisual media (Chapter 7, 125-140), and merchandising (Chapter 8, 141-154). The concluding chapters examine broader cultural influence (Chapter 9, 155-186), and present some final reflections (Chapter 10, 187-192). Following this progression, the author thoroughly examines *Alice*'s evolution across disciplines.

The publication of this volume arrives at a time when Carroll's classic continues to inspire new adaptations, remakes, and re-interpretations across the globe, making it a particularly timely contribution to the field of cultural studies. Valeiras Fernández's meticulous research demonstrates not only *Alice*'s persistence in cultural memory but also its remarkable adaptability to changing social contexts and technological developments.

This review will focus on two main aspects: the extent to which Valeiras Fernández's literature review engages with existing scholarship

on the topic, and the ways in which it offers innovative insights into the reception of the novel and its numerous cultural offshoots. Moreover, certain particularly innovative sections of the volume will be examined, such as the study of Alice in television, comic books, manga, and video games—or, as Valeiras Fernández classes them, "other media" (125-140)—as well as the enthralling account that the researcher provides of all the merchandising stemming from Carroll's most iconic character (141-183). The extension of this analysis succeeds at highlighting the remarkable adaptability of Carroll's original narrative across different cultural contexts and media formats.

In considering the distinctive features of Valeiras Fernández's 2024 volume in relation to earlier publications, it is worth noting that numerous studies have explored the cultural impact of *Alice in Wonderland* at both micro and macro levels. For example, a substantial body of scholarship has examined the imagery and iconography associated with *Alice* (for instance, Bandera Gallego, 2014; González Vera, 2011), as well as its psychology (e.g. Barker, 2024; Pollare, 2024; Schilder, 1938). *Alice*'s cultural impact has even reached architectural studies (although not included in Valeiras Fernández's book, Houghton, 2003 is a good example of the versatility of this classic). What sets this specific research work apart is its ambitious scope and its ability to synthesize diverse perspectives into a consistent narrative about *Alice*'s cultural evolution.

The body of research surrounding *Alice in Wonderland* is extraordinarily vast, spanning multiple disciplines and methodological approaches. Valeiras Fernández acknowledges this extensive bibliography while adding her own unique perspective to the ongoing academic conversation. Regardless of the field of study, it appears that someone, somewhere, has already explored its connection to Carroll's narrative. One of the most notable strengths of *Sigue siendo la hora del té* lies in its extensive compilation—not only of numerous iterations of *Alice*, but also of publications in which *Alice in Wonderland* serves as a point of reference for fields as diverse as art, architecture, mathematics, forensic science, and a wide array of other, often unexpectedly related, disciplines.

This comprehensive-compilation approach serves a crucial function in the current academic landscape, where specialization often leads

to the fragmentation of knowledge. By bringing together different interpretations and applications of Carroll's work, Valeiras Fernández creates valuable connections between seemingly disparate fields. This interdisciplinary perspective reveals how deeply embedded Alice has become in our collective cultural consciousness, transcending the boundaries between high and low culture, between academic discourse and popular entertainment.

Valeiras Fernández offers the most comprehensive account to date of the novel's reception across a range of formats—some of them, unexpected—, which is where its innovation lies. As mentioned above, the classification that the author draws to organize the contents of the volume (theatre and opera, cinema, other media, merchandising, etc.) gives us an idea of the wide range of cultural byproducts that she has examined for this review. In this regard, the structure enables readers to trace the evolution of *Alice* across various media, while simultaneously revealing how the distinct characteristics of each medium have influenced the narrative's form and reception. Earlier chapters lay crucial groundwork for this. Chapters 1-3 (17-50) frame *Alice*'s status as both an academic and popular work, while Chapter 4 (51-68) provides the context for its Victorian influences before diving deep into the many different adaptations the novel has been subject to.

The examination of theatrical adaptations (Chapter 5) of Carroll's novel is particularly noteworthy, as it reveals how the physical constraints and possibilities of the stage have influenced interpretations of *Wonderland* throughout different eras. These theatrical renditions range from faithful Victorian productions (5.2, 71-73) to avant-garde experimental pieces that deconstruct the original narrative entirely (5.3, 74-78). Valeiras Fernández masterfully analyses how the staging challenges presented by Carroll's fantastical world have inspired creative solutions across different periods and theatrical traditions (e.g., the Royal Opera House ballet, p. 74).

The cinematic analysis presented in the volume (Chapter 6) spans from early silent film adaptations (6.1, 82-85) to modern computer-generated imagery (CGI) spectacles (6.4, 109-119), offering insights into how technological advances have shaped our visual understanding of *Wonderland*. This section provides a fascinating chronicle of how film technology and *Alice* have evolved together. From the earliest

silent adaptations, which relied heavily on theatrical conventions, to Tim Burton's CGI pageant, each iteration reflects not only changing aesthetic sensibilities but also developments in filmmaking technology.

Valeiras Fernández expertly connects these technological advances to the changing visual representation of *Wonderland* across different decades, demonstrating how the collective image of this fictional realm has been profoundly shaped by these films. Chapter 6 stands out as a major strength of the book. The author provides a fascinating chronicle, connecting the evolution of film technology to the shifting visual language of *Wonderland*.

The "other media" category (Chapter 7, 125-140) is arguably the most innovative one, though it is also the one where the researcher might have benefitted more from further developing her insights. A single paragraph (pp. 135-136) addresses three distinct manga adaptations of Carroll's novel—an area that offers considerable potential for cultural analysis and could have benefited from a more expansive and innovative discussion.

The text also exhibits a degree of imprecision in its treatment of certain adaptations as, for instance, *Pandora Hātsu* (also known as *Pandora Hearts*) (Mochizuki, 2005-2016), which is said to present the white rabbit as Oz, a young boy in love with Alice (136), while the reader is not really led to believe so anywhere in the story—there is one character, Jack, who does seem to be in love with Alice and who looks very similar to Oz, which could explain the author's mistake—. This mischaracterization points to a potential limitation in the methodology—the challenge of thoroughly analysing such a vast corpus of adaptations across multiple languages and cultural contexts. On the topic of this specific manga adaptation of the story, it is worth mentioning that it comprises many other interesting elements that could have been mentioned in *Sigue siendo la hora del té*. For example, the Cheshire Cat is a relevant character, later revealed to be a manifestation of Alice's former pet cat; another two characters also very clearly reference Carroll's Dormouse.

Despite that, Valeiras Fernández's analysis of Alice's self-presentation is particularly insightful—the clothes she wears, her attitude, and even her race are changed in these works to make her "more palatable to

the Japanese taste" (Nichols, qtd. in Valeiras Fernández 135). This observation opens important discussions about cultural adaptation and the universality of Carroll's characters, while it also raises questions about the nature of cultural translation.

The transformation of Alice's appearance and characterization across cultural boundaries represents one of the most fascinating aspects of the character's enduring appeal. Valeiras Fernández briefly touches upon how different cultures have reshaped Alice to reflect their own aesthetic preferences and narrative traditions, although this aspect of the adaptation process could have benefited from a more thorough theoretical framing: How do these transformations relate to broader patterns of cultural appropriation and localization? What do they reveal about the essential qualities that make Alice recognizable across such diverse interpretations? These questions, while implicit in the text, could have been more explicitly addressed. While the study mentions early manga adaptations making Alice wear a kimono, the exploration of cultural translation aspects comes off as brief and superficial, without delving into why the changes were made or how they reflect specific Japanese cultural contexts or artistic movements.

In the "Other Media" section, the author also examines video game adaptations referencing *Alice*, and in this case, her analysis is notably more detailed. The comprehensive list of works that the author mentions in this section is extensive, although there are some notable exceptions, like the horror-adventure game *Alicemare* (Miwashiba, 2016), where Alice becomes the young Allen, a boy who loses his parents and ends up at a hospice, or the role-playing game *Wonderland No More* (Anderson *et al*., 2011), which is available as well in printed book format and which takes place in a Wonderland tarnished with the years after Alice's departure.

The video game adaptations deserve particular attention for their interactive nature, which allows players to not merely observe but actively participate in the various interpretations of *Wonderland*. This transformation from passive readers to active participants represents perhaps the most significant evolution in how audiences engage with Carroll's creation. The games mentioned range from faithful adaptations to radical reimaginings, where each one offers unique perspectives on what it means to "fall down the rabbit hole" in the digital age.

This chapter represents one of the book's most significant and original contributions. By going beyond traditional media (i.e., film, theatre) and into manga, comics, and video games, Valeiras Fernández manages to expand the map of *Alice*'s cultural territory. Her inclusion of these formats is highly valuable. The detailed examination of video game adaptations is especially insightful. Valeiras Fernández highlights the paradigm shift these represent—the move from passive consumption to active participation in *Wonderland*—which is arguably one of the most transformative developments in the story's reception.

In Chapter 8, Valeiras Fernández provides a section devoted to the different merchandising created for or around *Alice in Wonderland*. It is, of course, impossible to provide an exhaustive survey of all existing products, as their number likely surpasses what can readily be conceived. Still, it is fascinating to know that Carroll's character has been used to sell almost anything, from office supplies to kitchenware, makeup and, of course, games and toys.

This section catalogues merchandise across subchapters: books (8.1, 141-144), homeware (8.2, 145-146), stationery (8.3, 147), toys (8.4, 148-150), fashion (8.5, 151) and others (8.6, 152-154). While necessarily selective, this cataloguing of Alice-branded merchandise is both interesting and valuable, demonstrating the prevalence of Carroll's characters in consumer culture. However, it remains mainly descriptive, and does not apply a critical lens, with minimal exploration of the implications of this commodification: How does mass merchandising shape the public perception of *Wonderland*? Are there tensions between Carroll's original vision for the story and its modern corporate exploitation?

All in all, *Sigue siendo la hora del té* stands as what is probably a landmark study in the field of cultural adaptation and reception theory of *Alice in Wonderland*, offering great value to both scholars and enthusiasts. Valeiras Fernández's work distinguishes itself through its ambitious interdisciplinary scope, studying adaptations across theatre, cinema, manga, video games, and merchandising into a cohesive narrative—an accomplishment unmatched by earlier studies in terms of scope and detail. Its originality lies especially in exploring less-known areas, particularly interactive media (e.g., video games) and non-Western reimaginings (e.g., Japanese manga).

While certain sections might benefit from a deeper analysis, particularly in the treatment of manga adaptations, Valeiras Fernández has authored an invaluable resource for understanding how *Alice in Wonderland* has maintained its cultural relevance across time, media, and national boundaries. The volume's comprehensive approach to documenting *Alice*'s cultural footprint not only provides a thorough account of existing adaptations but also offers a framework for understanding how classic literature may evolve and remain relevant in an ever-changing cultural landscape. Scholars will undoubtedly find this work an essential starting point for their own investigations into the enduring influence of Carroll's story, even as new adaptations continue to emerge.

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Mora-Rioja, Arturo. *Poetry in English and Metal Music: Adaptation and Appropriation across Media*. 2023. Palgrave Macmillan, 331 pages

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The strong relationship between music and poetry is a fruitful field of research which has been often commented upon from a scholarly viewpoint. From Classical Antiquity until our present day, many philosophers, musicians, writers, and scholars have written about this topic. Yet there is still much to investigate within this area. Arturo Mora-Rioja's volume offers a fresh perspective to delve further into such a vast research field, namely the study of the connections between poetry and heavy metal music. Though there have been some previous studies regarding such a connection, these have been few and far between and mostly dedicated to specific case studies, such as Sederholm's 2012 work. Nonetheless, thus far the existing literature has not provided readers with a comprehensive analysis of how heavy metal transforms poetic language, since previous studies have mostly privileged other music genres. Mora-Rioja's volume stands out, thus, as an ambitious project which aims to bridge the gap in scholarship by offering readers a comprehensible account of the interplay between poetry and metal music.

Acknowledging the controversy around metal music as a genre, Mora-Rioja addresses metal as a social and political phenomenon as well as a scholarly field. As metal music followers are "more loyal" and their "scrutiny of the music is thorough and leads to a stronger embracement of its sources" (5), the transformative process of adapting poetic language to metal music entails its recontextualisation into a new contemporary political context. After a brief introductory section which stands as the first chapter of the volume, Mora-Rioja explains the rigorous taxonomy which will be applied to the analysis of metal songs in the subsequent chapters, drawing from previous studies while creating new categories that suit his research aims. Through a close reading of the lyrics and a careful examination of the music, the author invites the readers to participate in his process of an in-depth exploration of the interrelation between poetry and metal music through a wide variety of case studies.

In the second chapter, the author focuses more directly on the process of transformation of poetry into metal music. In order to offer a clear structure, Mora-Rioja subdivides the chapter into different categories and presents readers with examples for each one. First, he deals with reproductions of heavy metal songs which set poetry to music, maintaining those poems as the lyrics of the songs, in varied case studies such as those with texts by Wordsworth, Dickinson, W. B. Yeats, and T. S. Eliot. The second category is retelling, i.e., cases of songs which rephrase the words of the source poem maintaining its plot and setting. An illustrative case in point is Iron Maiden's adaptation of the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Coleridge, where the band shortens the source text while lengthening the poem with the addition of new original lines by the band to embellish the narrative. The final inclusion of clear tables listing the transformations of each case in every chapter is one of the strong points of this book, since it facilitates an easy grasp of the main examples studied.

Re-elaboration is the third category, where the author engages with musical appropriations which borrow and recreate a poem, while they divert from it at some point so as to offer their own story. The first case study presented is Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and its adaptation by Delain in 2016, where the band retains Wilde's imagery while telling a different story about a toxic love relationship. This is followed by other examples with poems by Chesterton, Longfellow, William Hamilton, all of them with adaptations regarding religious aspects.

Mora-Rioja then moves on to reorientation, a category which addresses the appropriation of narrative poetry with changes in the addressed person or object of the source poem. This is clearly exemplified in Iron Maiden's reorientation of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" by Lord Tennyson: lyrics are here told from the perspective of a British soldier in the first person, strengthening the contemporary political message of the source poem in a new context. These examples contrast with the case of citation, which are those cases of appropriation that insert fragments of a poem into the lyrics of a song disregarding the meaning of the source text.

Chapter three changes the scope as it concentrates on just one poet, namely Edgar Allan Poe. Though heavy metal adaptations of

Poe's poetry have received some scholarly attention (see Smith 1990; Sederholm 2012), Mora-Rioja decides to address each adaptation according to its category, thus offering a deeper exploration of the transformative process behind each song. Beginning with reproduction, the author centres on Poe's poem "Alone" (1829) as an illustrative example for metal bands to convey feelings of alienation. While discussing reorientation, the author studies different metal songs, such as Iron Maiden's song based on "Eldorado" (1849), which updates the content of the poem to speak to a world affected by the 2008 economic crisis. Most interestingly, an entire section in this chapter is devoted to Poe's "The Raven" (1845), a poem that frequently features in popular culture and has a strong musicality due to its sonority, rhythm and rhyme scheme, as well as its use of various figures of speech. The author offers detailed analyses, from Chris Violence and his *Edgar Allan Poe's The Raven: A Trash Metal Opera* to the retelling seen in Conducting from the Grave's "Nevermore." He concludes the chapter emphasising the relevance of Poe and his works in today's society, and the reasons why metal music feels particularly drawn to him due to "[h]is poetry's concern with deep, dark human feelings" (167).

Chapter four goes back in time in order to focus on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, probably a surprising source of inspiration for several metal bands, but one that has "a privileged place" (212). The epic poem with its Biblical references might seem at first glance an odd choice for a metal music song, given that the genre tends to either use those Biblical references to warn listeners about sin or to deal with Milton's Satan as an "image of rebellion against the established order" (184). Mora-Rioja sets about to demonstrate the pervasiveness of *Paradise Lost* in metal music as a complex case of adaptation, as the bands usually transform the poem in many different ways with very different purposes.

The next chapter is fully devoted to the war poets, as war is "a common theme in metal music lyrics" (225). In his conclusions, Mora-Rioja highlights Wilfred Owen as metal music's favourite War Poet, which points to the opposition to armed conflicts expressed by heavy metal renditions. Most bands, in fact, use the technique of proximisation so as to bring the source text closer to the audience, thus recontextualising the hypotext.

Especially relevant is the sixth chapter, which well demonstrates the originality and relevance of Mora Rioja's study. It aims to summarise the author's findings by offering a quantitative analysis of the data and concluding that "[t]he presence of poetry in English in metal music is pervasive" (253) and an extended practice within the community. Presenting a number of tables with data, the author shares some final remarks concerning the examined transformations in 72 songs as well as all the identified metal songs (an impressive 384 in total). Mora-Rioja finds citation and reproduction as the most commonly used categories of transformation, while reorientation is the least employed one. Interestingly, Milton's *Paradise Lost* is the most frequently referenced poem in metal music, followed by Poe's "The Raven." In fact, the author points out that Poe is the most referenced poet in metal songs, which is in line with other scholarly works such as Sederholm's (2012).

In addition, Mora-Rioja insightfully points to the "lack of concern for female authors" and ethnic diversity in metal music (254-255), as evinced in the fact that, in his volume, the only female poet that features is Emily Dickinson, while the entire corpus comprise white authors only. Another noteworthy fact is that metal bands seek the critical approval associated with literature from the canon, for they transmediate older poems but not contemporary poetry. In a very visual and concise way, Mora-Rioja thus summarises and closes his study by providing a critical analysis of the quantitative data gathered.

The book offers six appendixes featuring different tables listing the corpus divided into transformation categories, into chronological order or country of origin, as well as further cases of transformation of poetry into metal music.

All in all, Mora-Rioja does not settle for merely providing an insightful and innovative study of the relationship between poetry and heavy metal. On the contrary, he transcends that by describing how the taxonomy employed could be further extended to other cases of adaptation and appropriation to become aware of its intrinsic value and validity. *Poetry in English and Metal Music* is, thus, a rich source of new perspectives and inspiration for scholars working on adaptation studies. The major strength of this publication lies in the way in which it fills a gap in current scholarship, especially since most adaptation studies tend to focus on and cultural products other than poetry.

Hoping to bridge adaptation studies and metal studies, Mora-Rioja successfully provides us with a highly valuable contribution that paves the way for further research on the topic of the connections between literature and music. This is a welcome and resourceful contribution to this very complex and engaging topic.

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Mora, María José and Manuel J. Gómez-Lara, editors. *Thomas Durfey's Love for Money, or The Boarding School (1691): A Critical Edition*. Peter Lang, 2023. 239 pages

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> "If the Renaissance is the Golden Age of English comedy, the Restoration is the Silver" (J. Douglas Canfield 211).

Though ignored or found distasteful in the nineteenth century, Restoration comedies have received both validation and attention for about a century now. Scholars initially studied and praised the work of the classic big names (e.g., George Etherege, William Wycherley and William Congreve) and gradually brought attention to the talent of less-known authors (Aphra Behn in particular). In the last six or seven decades there have been quite a few revivals of plays by Behn, John Vanbrugh, Edward Ravenscroft, Otway, Mary Pix, etc. However, there is one Restoration playwright that remains largely "forgotten", as John McVeagh puts it: Thomas Durfey. While he is not as forgotten as McVeagh suggests, this playwright still deserves greater attention from both scholars and theatre practitioners.

Thomas Durfey was rather popular in his time, particularly in the 1670s, very prolific (as the more professional writers used to be), certainly pragmatic in his approach to things, mocked by some fellow writers (see McVeagh 1, 14), and attacked by the Non-Juror Jeremy Collier (who also criticized John Dryden, Congreve and Vanbrugh; see Wheatley 351). Certainly, writes McVeagh, he was "by no means a terrible writer" but essentially "an entertainer" (14-15). Although intended as praise, this commentary may ultimately do Durfey a disservice. Durfey may have aimed to please both playgoers and patrons, and although there are signs of his adapting to the changing tastes at the turn of the century—from libertine comedy to the exemplary or "humane" comedy defined by S. S. Kenny—his plays also share a common thread: a tendency to critique libertinism (see Wheatley; Gómez) and a certain sympathy for female characters oppressed by husbands or lovers; actually, a woman's perspective is dominant in many of his plays (see Hughes 187-90, 200-01). Durfey may approach farce more obviously than other playwrights, but we should neither be as prejudiced as John Dryden regarding farce

and "low comedy" (in the Preface to *An Evening's Love*) nor take for granted that all farce is sheer innocuous entertainment. The editors of this excellent and much-needed edition of *Love for Money* express the hope that it will contribute to the ongoing reassessment of Durfey's literary merit (19). This is a hope I fully share.

Restoration comedies are not documentary reflections of their time; rather, they are cultural artefacts shaped by specific systems of production and constrained by theatrical conventions and prevailing fashions. Nonetheless, they reveal not only the literary preferences of their authors and the expectations of their audiences, but also the social transformations, anxieties, and tensions characteristic of one of the most dynamic periods in English history. There remains a clear need for modern editions of many Restoration texts. Although a considerable number of plays and poems—including most of Durfey's—have been digitally scanned and made available over the past two decades, a reliable scholarly edition is always preferable. A case in point is the 2014 edition of *The Marriage-Hater Matched*, edited by María José Mora and Manuel J. Gómez-Lara, with the collaboration of Paula de Pando. The edition under review offers another compelling example of what a modern edition should achieve, enhancing our appreciation of Durfey's talent for comedy and the nuanced perspective underlying the farcical facade.

This edition collates various copies of the first quarto (Q1) and four later editions, and the text has been modernized rather prudently, only to the extent necessary to enhance readability and internal consistency. Some instances of such modernization include changes in punctuation, the standardization of character names, and similar minor changes. The editors offer a fully annotated text, where only a few notes appear to be redundant or perhaps unnecessary (e.g., about Mars and Apollo [49, 143]), though most of them are very useful and explanatory. They also provide an introduction to Durfey's life and career, the theatrical context of the play and its stage history, and obviously its plot, aesthetic values and partially didactic nature.

Some works from the Restoration period have an important connection with topics from the time, and *Love for Money* is one of those works, on which the remainder of the present review will focus: the work alludes to the political issues derived from the Revolution of 1688,

namely Jacobitism. Durfey's contemporary and fellow playwright John Dryden, a committed Tory, alludes to the illegitimacy of the new regime in *Amphytrion* (1690). Durfey, once a staunch Tory supporter of James II, seems to have accepted the *de facto* joint sovereigns, William III and Mary II, with notable enthusiasm. The reader may enjoy *Love for Money* without this background knowledge, but a thorough analysis of the play requires some contextualization. While no editorial introduction can substitute for a sustained critical essay, the editors provide a concise yet well-documented analysis, addressing both the play's anti-Jacobite tone and its overtly corrective character—features characteristic of Durfey's later works. The editors state that Durfey "is veering towards exemplary comedy" but still makes humour predominate (24, 29-30).

Love intrigues are an essential element of comedy, Restoration comedy included, but there is certainly an evolution in the period: the gay-couple pattern of the 1660s was followed by the more libertine, satirical or politically involved versions of the 1670s, in which cuckolding was a homosocial game, and the pattern eventually evolved into a more exemplary version in the marital-discord comedies of the 1690s and the sentimental reformed-rake trend popularized by Colley Cibber. In *Love for Money*, Durfey creates two intrigues and two types of masculinity. The lead male character, Jack Amorous, played by William Mountfort, is a witty rake that has, in the editors' words, "a touch of the gull" (24) and is very different from both the clever predatory seducers of the 1670s and their later softer versions (e.g. William Congreve's Mirabel). Amorous is, like those previous seducers, a witty schemer and womanizer; unlike them, he is rather a dupe. The other hero, Young Merriton, represents a more gentlemanly alternative to the old-school gallants, and he is involved in a rather romantic love intrigue. We should bear in mind that many plays of the earlier decades paired two different kinds of heroes and created very different double plots (e.g., Young Bellair and Dorimant in George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* or Belvile and Willmore in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*). Besides, Durfey's Mirtilla, the virtuous heroine and a victim of the surrogate-father villain, Sir Rowland, may remind us of Etherege's Emilia or Behn's Florinda. Nevertheless, in the 1670s, the romantic plot used to be clearly a secondary line of action, whereas the libertine's successful intrigue was the major source of humor and entertainment.

Intrigue and ridiculous comic characters are the major source of entertainment in this play, and the turn toward farce and low comedy suggests a greater reliance on the performers, in contrast to high comedy, which depends more heavily on the playwright's skill in crafting witty dialogue than on physical humor or clownish antics (one of the reasons why Dryden preferred high comedy). The editors provide an analysis of the cast (34-36), which proves very useful. Particularly interesting is that Lady Appleton was played by Anthony Leigh. The Jacobite woman, a believer in the divine sanction of the monarchy, "teaches the true doctrine of passive obedience at home" (I. 396-7), so as she is the actual head of her family, she provides a domestic version of a monstrous model for the body politic. Her masculinization seems to work both as a comic device and as a part of the anti-Jacobite propaganda. It is yet another indication of Durfey's skill in balancing two aims: entertaining his audience through humor while simultaneously critiquing abusive authority, corruption, and deceit.

To sum up, the well-rounded analysis of the play presented in this edition proves that *Love for Money* has plenty of layers, from political satire, farce, and romance, through to humor and a corrective nature.

All in all, this excellent edition enhances both scholarly and general appreciation of the play and may well contribute to its potential revival on stage. It is, without doubt, an engaging, humorous, and thought-provoking work.

Notes

[1] In the 1670s, Durfey wrote for the two companies and not exclusively for the Duke's Company, and though he had sided with the Tories during the Exclusion Controversy in the late 1670s, after the Revolution of 1688, he did an about-face turn in his political agenda, which might show a change of mind, or rather some eagerness to please the Whigs in power (see Hughes 338).

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Caro Partridge, Eneas, editor. *Edward Ravenscroft's Mamamouchi, or The Citizen Turned Gentleman (1672): A Critical Edition*. Peter Lang, 2024. 309 pages

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Ravenscroft's first play, *Mamamouchi* was inspired by Molière's *The Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, but it is much more than a translation, as Eneas Caro Partridge shows in this welcome new scholarly edition from Peter Lang. In Molière's play, the wealthy cloth merchant Monsieur Jourdain aspires to remake himself as a gentleman by learning gentlemanly refinements, such as dressing, fencing, philosophizing, and dancing. A variety of instructors happily take Jourdain's money to train him in aristocratic social performances, secretly snickering at his ambitions and incompetence. His pretensions hinder the happiness of his daughter, who wishes to marry a man whose status does not meet Jourdain's standards, and also leave him vulnerable to a comic manipulation. The suitor courts the daughter in the guise of the son of a Turkish sultan, a trick that dazzles the social-climbing father. Ultimately, Molière's play underscores the relative stability of French social hierarchies through Jourdain's gullibility, comic ineptitude, and inability to raise his status.

Ravenscroft's fascinating *Mamamouch*i suggests that the English status rules might be a little wobblier. His version prioritizes plentitude over streamlined elegance, but, like other Ravenscroft plays, it raises genuine anxiety about status. In Ravenscroft's most well-known play, *The London Cuckolds* (1681), young gentlemen seek to seduce the wives of citizens but sometimes get humiliated themselves. In *Mamamouchi*, Ravenscroft runs with Molière's original conceit, omitting the character of the citizen's wife, who in Molière's version provides the voice of reason against her husband's ambitions. Jorden competes with his son, Young Jorden, for Marina's hand. His daughter, Lucia, loves Cleverwit, but Jorden has arranged a marriage for her to the unappealing Sir Simon Softhead, a move he believes will bring status to his family. Young Jorden and Cleverwit contrive to win love and money by distracting Jorden with two alternative temptations: first, a German Princess (in reality, Betty Trickmore, a servant of Marina, in disguise) is held out as a potential royal marriage partner for Jorden, offering even more

prestige than Marina; and second, the Great Turk (Young Jorden in disguise) offers to make Jorden a "Mamamouchi," which he explains as a high status position in the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish plot, as Partridge explains, has its origins in Molière's implied reference to the Ottoman Emperor's visit to the French court. The English were also fascinated by Ottoman power: some ten years later, Aphra Behn would put a fake Turkish plot to similar use in *The False Count* (1682), although in Behn's play, the younger lover uses a Turkish disguise to terrify the older man into allowing the seduction of his wife.

Mamamouchi is an intriguing precursor to the full-fledged comedy of manners, and in this respect, it is, as Partridge contends, more than a farce, as others have suggested, and merits great scholarly attention. Many critics identify George Etherege's *She Would If She Could* (1668) as the first spark of this genre. In *She Would*, Etherege eliminates the heroic plot that accompanied his earlier comedy and focuses on a relatively narrow bandwidth of well-off but generally not titled characters as they compete for love, sex, money, and status. In Etherege's more refined comedy of manners style, characters rarely state their status ambitions explicitly. In *The Man of Mode* (1676), we have to pay careful attention to notice Dorimant's financial motive in pursuing Harriet. Even Sir Fopling Flutter does not announce that he is training for the aristocracy; in fact, Etherege displays Sir Fopling's *lack* of training to comic ends, such as when he cannot perform the promised caper. In William Wycherley's *The Gentleman Dancing-Master* (1673), Sir James Formal confidently asserts his self-created identity as Don Diego. In *Mamamouchi*, by contrast, Jorden meets with his music master and dancing master to learn the arts of refinement. He also consults them about his wardrobe, reporting that his tailor "brought home this Indian gown, cap, and slippers. How do you like 'em?" (I.i.9). It is hard to imagine that this scene, in which Jorden asks his servants to approve his various fashion items and social skills, did not inspire one of the best moments in *The Man of Mode*, in which Sir Fopling Flutter displays his French fashions. The difference is subtle but revealing: Fopling's social peers are mocking him in very subtle ways, so gently (at least on the surface), that sometimes they seem like they are simply enjoying a nuanced conversation about fashion. In Ravenscroft's comedy, Jorden is being self-consciously flattered by people who are making money

from promising something that they cannot deliver: to turn him into a gentleman.

Despite a generic destiny that dictates this transition will never take place and much hilarity will ensue on the road to this failure, *Mamamouchi* is suffused with the anxious possibility that the line between citizen and gentleman might be more fragile than it seems. The tricksters in Ravenscroft's play tempt Jorden with the possibility of marriage to a "German princess", a reference that, as Partridge notes, would have entertained audiences with the connection to Mary Carleton, who presented herself as an aristocrat so persuasively that she married into English high society. While she was eventually unmasked, her early success shows the fragility of the distinction, and her imprisonment the high stakes of such class impersonation. The increasingly global mixing experienced in England also brought many people into contact with different systems of status, an anxiety-provoking development that Ravenscroft exploits in the Turkish plot. Ravenscroft's Turkish plot acts out a clearly anxious fantasy that a foreign power could bestow great status on an English citizen, something that we might say was already happening through the enormous wealth some merchants acquired through trade. Jorden is so desperate to make this leap that he signs his estate over to his son when he learns that a Mamamouchi cannot own property. It is not hard to see why *Mamamouchi* succeeded on stage, especially with the right performers. Mamamouchi offers numerous entertainment opportunities, featuring songs and dance performances. The scenes with the fake Great Turk and his entourage must have been spectacular. The role of Jorden provides considerable opportunity for amusement over his comic gullibility, stemming from an obsession with social ambition, which is destined to be humiliatingly corrected. In the end, though, the marriages for love take place, Sir Simon and Jorden get to laugh at each other's foolishness, but Young Jorden returns part of the estate he tricked his father out of, and Sir Simon vows to change his ways.

Partridge's edition recovers this highly entertaining and socially insightful play by an underrated author. The edition includes a wealth of information about the play and the author: a brief discussion of Ravenscroft's life and works, a discussion of the sources for *Mamamouchi*, its stage history, and its publication history. The notes are

thorough and helpful. This edition makes a significant contribution to the study of Ravenscroft and highlights this playwright's importance in the development of Restoration drama.

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