

ES Review

SPANISH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES

Issue No. 46 • 2025



EDICIONES
Universidad
Valladolid

©LOS AUTORES. 2025

©EDICIONES UNIVERSIDAD DE VALLADOLID

E-ISSN 2531-1654

Diseño de cubierta: Ediciones Universidad de Valladolid

Fotografía: SRGS

DL: VA 904-2017

ES Review

SPANISH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

GENERAL EDITORS

María Belén López Arroyo
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

Esther Álvarez de la Fuente
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Tamara Gómez Carrero
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

MANAGING EDITORS

Qianting Yuan
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

Rebeca Martín Mozo
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

Lucía Sanz Valdivieso
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

COPY EDITORS

Alison Killilea
Thomas Hardy

PRODUCTION EDITORS

Laura Álvarez Trigo
Eduardo Sánchez Palencia

EDITORIAL BOARD

Arthur Aughey · *Ulster University, Antrim, UK*
María Vittoria Calvi · *Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy*
María José Carrera de la Red · *Universidad de Valladolid, Spain*
Emron Esplin · *Brigham Young University, US*
Juana M. Liceras · *University of Ottawa, Canada*
Ana Manzanas Calvo · *Universidad de Salamanca, Spain*
Ignacio M. Palacios Martínez · *Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Spain*
Diego Saglia · *Università degli Studi di Parma, Italy*
Manuel Sánchez García · *Universidad de Extremadura, Spain*
Robert F. Yeager · *University of West Florida, US*

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

Sonia Baelo Allué
Universidad de Zaragoza, Spain

Antonio A. Ballesteros González
UNED, Spain

José Manuel Barrio Marco
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

Jesús Benito Sánchez
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

Ruth Breeze
Universidad de Navarra, Spain

Gualter Cunha
Universidade do Porto, Portugal

David Earle
University of West Florida, US

Raquel Fernández Fuertes
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

José F. Fernández Sánchez
Universidad de Almería, Spain

Fernando Galván Reula
Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Antonio García Gómez
Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Cristina Garrigós González
UNED, Spain

Richard Gaunt
University of Nottingham, UK

Manuel J. Gómez Lara
Universidad de Sevilla, Spain

Chris Hart
University of Lancaster, UK

Silvia Pellicer Ortí
Universidad de Zaragoza, Spain

Ana Parejo Vadillo
Birkbeck, University of London, UK

Ian Haywood
University of Roehampton, UK

Jessica Hemmings
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Carlos Herrero Quirós
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

Laura Hidalgo-Downing
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

Mark Hutchings
University of Reading, UK

Jon Klancher
Carnegie Mellon University, US

Luis Alberto Lázaro Lafuente
Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Laura M. Lojo Rodríguez
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Spain

Rosa Lores Sanz
Universidad de Zaragoza, Spain

Giovanna Mapelli
Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

Elizabeth Marshmann
University of Ottawa, Canada

M. Soledad Morales Ladrón
Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Isabel Moskowich
Universidade da Coruña, Spain

Francisco Javier Muñoz Acebes
Universidad de Valladolid, Spain

Lorena Pérez Hernández
Universidad de La Rioja, Spain

David Río Raigadas
Universidad del País Vasco, Spain

Viorica Patea Birk
Universidad de Salamanca, Spain
Consuelo Stebbins
University of Central Florida, US

Jorge Sacido Romero
*Universidade de Santiago de
Compostela, Spain*

The Editors wish to thank the following experts, who kindly agreed to referee specific papers in their field for this issue:

Alannah Hopkin, Aleksandra Vida, Alfred Hornung, Alfred Markey, Alicia Muro Llorente, Alpo Honkapohja, Aneta Ostaszewska, Belén Labrador, Bianca Cherechés, Burcu Erdag, Carlos Herrero Quirós, Charles Altieri, Christof Schoech, David Kaufer, Eileen. W. Ariza, Ellen Scheible, Emilia Castaño Castaño, Enrique Cámara Arenas, Eric Marquer, Ewelina Feldman-Kołodziejuk, Fabien Desset, Fartima Agüero, Fernando Fraga, Francisco Ivorra, Heidi Macpherson, Hugh Craig, Ingvil F. Hellstrand, Jairo Adrián Hernández, Jan Alber, Jim Ellis, Joanna Klara Teske, José María Yebra, Joy Sánchez-Taylor, Katarína Labudová, Kristy Distefano, Laura Hernández Lorenzo, Laura Lojo Rodríguez, Lavinia Brydon, Łukasz Grabowski, Lucía Sapiña García, Margarida Esteve, Matthew Smith, Michael Adriaan Carelse, Michael Bryson, Michaela Keck, Minni Sawhney, Mónica Calvo Pascual, Paloma Fresno Calleja, Patrick Query, Rachel Hollander, Robert F. Yeager, Romina Victoria Rauber, Rosemary Jenkinson, Rosslyn Prosser, Sim Wai Chew, Sofia Martín Laguna, Stephanie Genty, Sylvie Mikowski, Veronika Koller, Wojciech Drąg.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Articles

From Community to Society: (Un)bound Pluralities in Eliot, Lewis, and Auden	11
MICHAL KLEPRLÍK AND LADISLAV VÍT	
Attitudes towards Codeswitching in ESP Classes: A Case Study of Second-Year Students in Business Administration	36
JEAN MATHIEU TSOUMOU, ANA ELENA MARTÍNEZ VARGAS, RAYMOND ECHITCHI, AURORA MURGA AROCA, AND MARÍA DEL CARMEN BOSCH BERMÚDEZ DE CASTRO	
When Fiction Becomes history: The Morphology of Context in the Short Stories of Bridget O'Connor	80
JONATHAN P.A. SELL	
Reclaiming the Past, Queering the Present: Nghi Vo's Speculative Fiction as a Space of Narrative Hospitality	100
BEATRIZ HERMIDA RAMOS	
Out of Date: Time Travel as Regression for Women in Lauren Beukes' <i>The Shining Girls</i>	117
MARÍA GARCÍA-LORENZO	
Narrative Empathy in Margaret Atwood's <i>The Blind Assassin</i>	139
TERESA GIBERT	
Students' Perceived Usefulness and Satisfaction with ChatGPT in Writing: A Quantitative Analysis	167
NAFISEH ZAREI AND IVAN DOLPH FABREGAS	
Radical Intimacy in Sally Rooney's <i>Intermezzo</i>	190
JOSÉ CARREGAL-ROMERO	
From Waste to Renewal: Circular Economy and the Ethics of Degrowth in <i>Record of a Spaceborn Few</i>	212
VANESA ROLDÁN ROMERO	

Technical Narrators and the Possibilities of Cognitive Assemblages in Kazuo Ishiguro's <i>Klara and the Sun</i>	243
MARÍA TORRES-ROMERO	
“The Taut Elastic of Time”: Polytemporality and the Black and Green Atlantic in Colum McCann’s <i>TransAtlantic</i> (2013)	280
JUAN-JOSÉ MARTÍN-GONZÁLEZ	
Sexual Subject and Textual Braid: Autobiographical Politics of Emancipation in Audre Lorde’s <i>Zami</i>	305
SHIRIN AKTER POPY AND KHANDAKAR ASHRAFUL ISLAM	
Mourning for the Lost Nation: The Transformative Poetics of Derek Jarman’s <i>The Last of England</i> and Terence Davies’ <i>Of Time and the City</i>	328
DIANA ORTEGA MARTÍN	
Text’s transmission in <i>Pe boke of ypocras</i> : editing and studying its Early Modern English witness contained in London, Wellcome Library. MS 7117 (ff. 92r–94v)	354
IRENE DIEGO RODRÍGUEZ	

Book Reviews

Daniel McKay. <i>Beyond Hostile Islands. The Pacific War in American and New Zealand Fiction Writing</i> . Fordham UP, 2024. Pp. 272. ISBN: 9781531505165. By PALOMA FRESNO-CALLEJA	380
---	-----



From Community to Society: (Un)bound Pluralities in Eliot, Lewis, and Auden

De la comunidad a la sociedad: Pluralidades (des)limitadas en Eliot, Lewis y Auden

MICHAL KLEPŘLÍK

Institution address: University of Pardubice, Studentska 84, Pardubice, 532 10, Czechia.

E-mail: michal.kleprlik@upce.cz

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9519-5389>

LADISLAV VÍT

Institution address: University of Pardubice, Studentska 84, Pardubice, 532 10, Czechia.

E-mail: ladislav.vit@upce.cz

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7666-7579>

Received: 29/11/2024. Accepted: 15/04/2025

How to cite this article: Kleprlík, Michal and Ladislav Vít. "From Community to Society: (Un)bound Pluralities in Eliot, Lewis, and Auden." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp. 11–35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/a83kme83>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Abstract: This article demonstrates how Ferdinand Tönnies's celebrated distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) resonates in the works of T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and W. H. Auden, who engage with the implications of rootedness, cosmopolitanism, and the erosion of traditional communities. These thinkers offer valuable insights into the ways in which the transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* reshaped social life, cultural identity, and individual consciousness. The paper examines these perspectives, contrasting the virtues of localized, organic communities with the challenges and opportunities posed by modern, cosmopolitan societies. It highlights the ongoing struggle to balance unity and diversity in a rapidly evolving world, where the preservation of cultural identity often clashes with the demands of global interconnectedness. Ultimately, this exploration underscores the enduring relevance of Tönnies's framework and the continued search for meaning and community in the face of modernity's transformative pressures.

Keywords: organic community; society; cosmopolitanism; T. S. Eliot; W. Lewis; W. H. Auden.

Summary: Introduction. British Intellectuals in Debate about *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Conclusions.

Resumen: El artículo demuestra cómo la célebre distinción de Ferdinand Tönnies entre *Gemeinschaft* (comunidad) y *Gesellschaft* (sociedad) resuena en las obras de T. S. Eliot, Wyndham

Lewis y W. H. Auden, quienes abordan las implicaciones del arraigo, el cosmopolitismo y la erosión de las comunidades tradicionales. Estos pensadores ofrecen unas valiosas perspectivas sobre cómo la transición de *Gemeinschaft* a *Gesellschaft* transformó la vida social, la identidad cultural y la conciencia individual. Por esta razón, contrastamos las virtudes de comunidades localizadas y orgánicas con los desafíos y oportunidades que plantean las sociedades modernas y cosmopolitas. Además, destacamos la lucha continua por equilibrar la unidad y la diversidad en un mundo que evoluciona rápidamente, donde la preservación de la identidad cultural a menudo entra en conflicto con las exigencias de la interconexión global. Por último, este trabajo subraya la relevancia del marco de Tönnies y la búsqueda continua de significado y comunidad frente a las presiones transformadoras de la modernidad.

Palabras clave: comunidad orgánica; sociedad; cosmopolitismo; T. S. Eliot; W. Lewis; W. H. Auden.

Sumario: Introducción. Intelectuales británicos debaten sobre los conceptos de *Gemeinschaft* y *Gesellschaft*. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Modernity and technological progress in Western culture at the outset of the twentieth century significantly reshaped social organization and hierarchy, accelerating the transformation of traditional, small-scale, close-knit communities into larger social forms. The progressive growth in size and subsequent atomization of society, widely regarded as a natural concomitant of modernity, brought with it a new set of questions about the notions of diversity, social cohesion, and civic responsibility. In this context, the issue of (un)boundedness and (up)rooted existence emerges, indicating two sets of polarities. On one end of the spectrum lies a type of community that is enclosed, internally generated, orthodox, homogeneous, inherently protective, emphasizing autonomy, isolationism, and preservation of established norms (e.g., Hall 1995). Conversely, the opposing view conceptualizes a community that is porous, inclusive, internationally-minded, open to change and cosmopolitan pressures. This perspective embraces fluidity and interconnectedness, incorporating external influences (e.g., Massey 2005). The second polarity is based on the perception of boundedness in the sense of rooted existence. Rootedness implies permanence and stability forming a bulwark against ephemerality and chaos, fickleness, and opportunism springing from uprootedness. However, as evidenced by events in the first half of the twentieth century, the metaphor of rootedness understood as embeddedness and deep-rooted existence can also evoke parochialism, chauvinism, and, in its most extreme form, the venom of nationalistic propaganda. The following text examines several approaches to (un)boundedness in the British interwar

debates on the demise of traditional communities and the evolution of new social structures in the face of rapid technological and cultural shifts. Although the focus is on changes characterizing the early decades of the twentieth century, most of the issues discussed in the following text are resurfacing due to recent developments such as migration crisis and Brexit, and because of the current protective isolationist politics or the revival of mercantilism in the USA and some European countries.

One of the key features defining the Western world at the turn of the twentieth century is an urgent need to reconsider its past. Conflicting attitudes towards archetypal values and classical humanistic ideals, the transformation of the relationship between tradition and modernity, have been frequently interpreted as signs of existential anxiety inducing alienation and an identity crisis. Perhaps the most sensible prophet of this transformation, Friedrich Nietzsche, called for a total revaluation of all values (*Umwertung aller Werte*). This depletion of fundamental values, accompanied by an acceleration of international mobility, interconnectedness through media and the unprecedented rise of the mass man to social power, has also manifested itself in various considerations on a form of society that would reduce the feeling of alienation and impersonality and promote a responsible, caring, and critically aware relationship with the community.

Ferdinand Tönnies's *Community and Civil Society* was a seminal, authentic contribution to this discussion of the dichotomy between an organic, pre-industrial type of society and the modern one, dominated by mass culture and mass production. First published in 1887, this study on the clash between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* plunges into the very core of modern aspects of living in society, shedding light on the tension between the different types of will that essentially affect the modes of living in a large-scale competitive market society (metropolis) and a small-scale, close-knit community. Tönnies arrived at a two-fold distinction between community and society. *Gemeinschaft* is a word that echoes personal attachment and interest instigated by internal correlation (*mein*), comradeship and affiliation (*-schaft*), as well as a sense of belonging (*ge-*). This type of social organization is built on boundedness, both material and spiritual. Traditionally, it stands for a small-scale neighborhood community, the establishment of which is solely determined by a natural will of men to live in polity. Life in this type of community is permanently shaped by an attachment to a field and a dwelling house: "With the cultivated field, the dwelling house also becomes fixed...Man

becomes doubly bound, both by the ploughed field and by the house in which he dwells – in other words, by the works of his hands” (Tönnies 37).

This dual “boundedness” clearly implies place as well as family affiliation (traditions and customs), and Tönnies argues that it allows individuals not only to understand their communities and associate with them, but also to anchor their search for personal identity. Through the soil, one becomes attached to the family and village life, both being shaped by the customs (traditional morality) and religion (*religare*—to bound fast). The three pillars of *Community* are blood, soil, and spirit: blood stands for kinship and soil highlights a sense of neighborhood (Tönnies 254). As the community is based on shared work or calling, it suggests shared beliefs and spiritual proximity (friendship). As for the economy, the core of the community is the domestic economy that promotes the idea of shared common good, rather than owned common good. It is this more or less covert Marxist aspect that forced Tönnies to associate with the style of *Community* positive values such as sympathy and mutual understanding, “the love of nurturing, creating and preserving” (258).

Similarly, the virtues and virility of a farmer, rooted to the soil, were celebrated by the theorists of the völkisch-nationalist narrative in the Weimar period and Nazi Germany in the 1920s and 1930s (mostly by Walter Darré, one of the leading Nazi ideologists, but also by popular German novelists such as Bertold Auerbach and Conrad Ferdinand Mayer). Apart from internal policy issues and racial purity doctrine, the Blood and Soil ideology (*Blut-und-Boden*) promoted völkish values and the myth of a stable, deep-rooted peasantry (*wurzelstark Bauerntum*) to counter internationalism and the melting-pot narrative of world culture. On the macro-scale, the rootless and nomadic mode of life came to be seen as “pure parasitism” (Lovin 283) and the exploitation of the German race. In this context, a return to the soil (rootedness) was viewed as a means to halt the deterioration of the German nation and fight against the ills of modern capitalist society.

Paraphrasing Karl Marx’s view of the economic history of modern nations, Tönnies argues that “the whole process of historical evolution can be seen as a shift towards an increasingly *urbanised* style of life” (259), a shift from *Gemeinschaft* towards *Gesellschaft*. In this type of social organization, people also live peacefully alongside one another, they belong to one city, a district, or a guild. Despite sharing places, institutions and facilities, they remain, however, existentially atomized and detached/dissevered. The crux of this condition lies in a fundamentally

different *raison d'être* concerning actions, activities, and spheres of powers.

In this type of social organization, characterizing the modern urban space and culminating in mass commercial society, people share the same place, as in the case of *Gemeinschaft*, but the temporal, transcendental principle is irrelevant: instead of a bond and attachment derived from a long-term communal experience, the competitive urban environment tends to facilitate conditions for a mere temporary “contract” between citizens engaged in a commercial exchange. As a result, “there are no activities taking place which are derived from an *a priori* and predetermined unity and which therefore express the will and spirit of this unity through any individual who performs them” (Tönnies 52). In other words, services are exchanged solely on a transactional basis, and people are motivated, forced to do or give something to another person only when it brings benefits to themselves. Tönnies speaks of the fundamentally “egoistical,” competitive ethos of big city life: “whatever anyone has and enjoys, he has or enjoys to the exclusion of all others” (53).

In opposition to the close-knit Community, the market-based civil Society implies, despite physical proximity, a fragmentary and dissevered mode of existence, with its members being reduced to “equal, simple, elementary units of labour” (Tönnies 57). Whereas the organic nature of Community suggests place-bound identity and, through an immediate bond with the soil, customs, and traditions, accentuates a strong sense of belonging and group attachment, Society is in essence preset to an urbane, uprooted, mobile, cosmopolitan, open attitude. Seen from this metaphoric perspective, a metropolis implies an opposing set of values and characteristics: an inorganic, mechanical, anonymous, and dissevered mode of living. At the same time, it promotes a progressive, pragmatic, utilitarian existence, albeit by the supporters of Community criticized for an inclination towards the “abandonment by Being” (*Seinsverlassenheit*), which M. Heidegger perceived as the primary cause of pervasive cynicism and nihilism in the modern world.¹

1. BRITISH INTELLECTUALS IN DEBATE ABOUT *GEMEINSCHAFT* AND *GESELLSCHAFT*

¹ See Martin Heidegger's lecture *Die Frage nach der Technik* (1953). For further analysis and exposition of the connection between fundamental nihilism and a forgetting of the mystery or secret of Being see S. L. Bartky (1967).

In British intellectual debate, this nostalgic lost-cause attitude, based on the above outlined community/society dichotomy, has been voiced by the English literary and cultural critics F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson. In their study *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* the authors draw attention to the loss of organic, preindustrial community which they relate to the concept of Old England. For Leavis and Thompson, the organic community matches the Tönniesian small-scale, close-knit communities celebrating rural (village) life, household economy, and provincial craftsmen. Although this traditional concept has become old-fashioned, challenged by scientific and technological progress, and despite the fact that it has been deemed primitive, representing “animal naturalness,” Leavis and Thompson find it “distinctively human” (91) and even claim that its destruction in the West is as irreversible a change as any geological change.

The transition from provincial and communal village life to an urban cosmopolitan existence, which is commonly described as a sign of modernity and progress, implies a departure from an authentic, immediate, more “primitive” mode of being in terms of intimacy or alienation. Leavis and Thompson argue that the villagers in an organic community struggle less with existential alienation than modern urban dwellers because they are in touch with the immediate environment. Similarly to the Marxist process of reification, issuing from the fact that modern alienation stems from production processes, making men into a thing (*Verdinglichung*) on account of mechanical, repetitive labor, the nature of cultural and existential alienation proceeds from losing touch with primary production. Leavis and Thompson claim that in the organic community, men lived in close contact with materials, environment, and the cycle of seasons. Through the insight gained from their predecessors, rooted in the same community, and because of their close, intimate connection with the soil and sources of sustenance, men in organic communities strengthen their attachment to the past and environment, making them feel “engaged” with their community. Moreover, unlike mass culture, the organic community encourages personal autonomy and fulfilment. While progress has raised the standard of living and increased efficiency, it has also violated this “natural” intimacy. Instead of deriving gratification from skilled work, modern manufacturing production requires man to participate only in a meaningless part of the process with no need for skill or expertise. As a consequence of such an existence, “[t]he modern citizen,” Leavis and

Thompson point out, “no more knows how the necessities of life come to him (he is quite out of touch, we say, with ‘primary’ production) than he can see his own work as a significant part in a human scheme (he is merely earning wages or making profits)” (92). Hence, the alienating and dehumanizing effects of modern production and society which Leavis correlates with the erosion of individuality and active, critical engagement.

A proper degree of unity and diversity, of local loyalties and transnational, cosmopolitan loyalties, became an important theme for T. S. Eliot and his theory of culture. Implicitly, it appears in his short response upon receiving the Emerson-Thoreau medal from the American Academy of Arts and Science in 1959. Although living in England at the time, in his ceremonial speech Eliot identified himself as “a New England poet,” recognizing the influence of the New England environment upon his sensibility (“The Influence” 421). He believed that the traces of every environment in which the poet has lived in show in the poet’s sensibility, forging a unique poetic voice. Similarly, although in a broader cultural context, Eliot discusses the importance of minor and local cultures and the desirability of cultural pluralism in his three radio talks entitled *The Unity of European Culture* (broadcast in 1946) and his book-length essay *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948, which originally appeared as a series of articles in *New England Weekly* in 1943). In this text, Eliot ruminates on the condition of culture and the debate that started in the aftermath of WWII on the need to create a world culture and government as a means to prevent any further conflicts between nations. Facing an increase in a nationalistic narrative that foregrounds national feeling and a sense of belonging to a national community, the identity of which has been imagined through communal remembrance of the past and invocation of a national symbol, Eliot points out that the diversity of a region should not be ignored and that contemporary culture should “grow from the old roots” (53). Calling it “a useful diversity,” Eliot advocates a moderate approach. He is concerned about the negative consequences of both extremes, excessive uniformity and diversity, which ultimately corrupt and devastate the community. In both cases, the extreme position prevents further development of culture. Eliot proceeds from the basic premise—the absolute value—that “each area should have its characteristic culture, which should harmonise with, and enrich, the cultures of the neighbouring areas” (54). This assumption clearly defines itself against a nationalistic mindset built on the belief that the national, or local, culture flourishes on the basis of “geography of rejection” (Jess and Massey 66), hence in

complete isolation and differentiation from neighboring cultures. Eliot is convinced that a satellite culture, which he defines as a culture having, “for geographical and other reasons, … a permanent relation to a stronger one” (54), is an indispensable and necessary component that benefits the whole. Contrary to the nationalistic idea, and despite the risk of local fragmentation and incoherence of neighboring regions, he comes to the conclusion that a far greater danger lies in uniformity, be it on a national or world-wide scale. Eliot emphasizes diversity because the survival of a weaker culture proves to be essential to the existence and development of a stronger culture. Relating specifically to the British Isles, it would be no gain whatsoever for the dominant English culture if the Welsh, Scots and Irish became indistinguishable from Englishmen—what would happen, of course, is that they would all become indistinguishable featureless “Britons,” at a lower level of culture than that of any of the separate regions. On the contrary, it is of great advantage for English culture to be constantly influenced from Scotland, Ireland, and Wales (Eliot, *Notes* 55).

If the satellite cultures were wholly assimilated to the dominant culture, if the regional loyalties were superseded by national ones, it would debase culture altogether and cause menace to other countries. Any society which lacks friction between its parts is, according to Eliot, more susceptible to the exercise of aggressiveness against another country. Although the greater the diversity, the greater the tension between different entities, Eliot perceives diversity in class and region as a way to cultivate a more pacific and tolerant nation: “[n]umerous cross-divisions favour peace within a nation, by dispersing and confusing animosities; they favour peace between nations, by giving every man enough antagonism at home to exercise all his aggressiveness” (*Notes* 59).

This reasoning led Eliot to skepticism about the idea of creating a world culture, precisely because its uniform quality would undermine the principle of respect for the diversity of human beings resulting in “humanity de-humanised” (*Notes* 62). In addition to his pessimistic view of the future of culture under capitalism, which, as David E. Chinitz puts it, “was intellectual gospel in both Britain and the United States” (*T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* 171), Eliot feared the fact that such a project would merely be a large-scale extension of dominant cultures (usually of those cultures from which the proponents of a world culture come) and that it is highly likely that if differences of cultures threaten the unity of the world culture, they will simply be levelled. At the same time, however, Eliot realized that it is not possible to completely abandon this ideal of a

world culture: to prevent local culture from becoming provincial, chauvinistic, and xenophobic, it also needs to be part of a larger whole. As paradoxical as it may sound, Eliot encourages a common world culture but at the same time warns that such an ideal is unimaginable and unrealizable. “We can only conceive it,” says Eliot, “as the logical term of relations between cultures” (*Notes* 62). Consciousness of belonging to a higher sphere, a higher whole, may bring us closer to the ideal, yet we do not fully realize it. If realized, it would decrease the prosperity of the constituent cultures, which contradicts Eliot’s basic thesis that any useful common culture is one “which is actual in diverse local manifestations” (*Notes* 62). It is on the basis of this thesis that Eliot opposes various schemes for the establishment of a world federation/culture, which have become very topical in the debate on the post-war order. Interestingly enough, as Bernard Bergonzi reminds us, although Eliot approaches the limits of cosmopolitanism from an idiosyncratically conservative position, his scheme of culture was also influential among left-wing writers such as Raymond Williams, who valued Eliot as “an impressive adversary” rescuing “from oblivion truths which Tories have forgotten” (Bergonzi 114).

An opposing view to those of Tönnies’s and Leavis’s trust in the merit of (organic) community as well to Eliot’s advocacy of the diversity of local cultures is held by Wyndham Lewis, a significant, although among prominent Modernists such as Eliot, Ezra Pound, or James Joyce, a lesser-known novelist and essayist. Lewis touches upon the above-mentioned notions of rootedness and of the clash between a local/national and cosmopolitan/world-federationist mindset in two book-length essays: *Paleface: The Philosophy of the ‘Melting Pot’* (1923) and *America and Cosmic Man* (1948), which display Lewis’s take on this topic and strategies for dealing with the complexities and challenges of a dynamic interplay between individual identity and collective belonging at the beginning of the atomic age.

In general, *Paleface* is a critique of the idealization of “primitive” consciousness and of the flagellation of white civilization. While focusing on the limitations and pitfalls of white civilization,² Lewis is not subject

² “There is the contradictory spectacle, which we all can observe, of our institutions, as they dehumanize themselves, clothing themselves more and more, and with a hideous pomposity, with the stuff of morals—that stuff of which the pagan world was healthily ignorant, in its physical expansiveness and instinct for a concrete truth, and which, for the greatest peoples of the East, has never existed except as a purely political systematization

to the then popular intellectual fascination with “primitive” races and cultures, be it Afro-Americans or indigenous Indian civilizations in America. Although he accepts that the white man enslaved and subjugated other civilizations and cultures, it is still “the paleface” whose achievements in many fields, be it art, science, architecture, or social organization, show signs of a more developed and progressive civilization. Despite the fact that Lewis, as Alice Reeve-Tucker and Nathan Waddell remind us, through his readings of the inter-war period, anticipated an early stage of the cultural criticism of the Frankfurt School and other social theorists who drew attention to the negative consequences of Enlightenment rationality (“Wyndham Lewis, Evelyn Waugh and Inter-war British Youth” 163–84), he still believed that white civilization might offer a potential model for a universal and all-inclusive way of life. The issue of rootedness is approached from the perspective of the melting pot model and the radical contradiction between European and American ways of regarding the assimilation of various nationalities (dissimilar racial stock). Lewis is wholeheartedly on the side of the melting pot and calls for its immediate implementation in Europe, suggesting that the idyllic portrayal of local or national loyalties (*Gemeinschaft*) will most likely result in parochialism, chauvinism, and more wars in Europe. The other option, Lewis warns, is “that of the Barbed Wire” (*Paleface* 276). Rootedness in a local soil and community is a hindrance for Europeans to live peacefully and respond adequately to the demands of Modernity since he believes European countries form a relatively uniform cultural region: “only five centuries ago the whole Europe possessed one soul in a more fundamental way than America can be said to at this moment” (Lewis, *Paleface* 277). Ignoring the Asiatic elements in southern and eastern parts of Europe, Lewis claims that “the European is as much of one blood as are the inhabitants of the British Isles, and in many instances more so—for instance, the Bavarian and the lowland Scotch are man for man as nearly one race (to look at them, as well as in their character) as you could find anywhere at all” (*Paleface* 279). Finally, Lewis pleads for the mass adoption of Volapuc, a construed international language that could solve the problem of Babel in Europe. Unlike Eliot, who believed that without Welsh, Irish, or Scottish tributaries, the great river of English language and

of something irretrievably inferior, a sentimental annex of a metaphysical truth” (Lewis, *Paleface* 273).

culture would dry out, Lewis argues that it is this international language that will help embrace universal identity and abolish “the fiction of our frontiers and the fiction of the ‘necessity’ of war” (*Paleface* 270).

Twenty-five years later, Lewis returned to the idea of the melting pot in his study “America and Cosmic Man,” his vision becoming more radical and more convinced in favor of the cosmopolitan cause. Once again, the focus is on the notion of rootedness and a vision of one great cosmic society, which shall replace a plurality of competitive nationalist societies. In this text, Lewis challenges the notion of rootedness as something intrinsically positive, arguing that “to be rooted like a tree to one spot, or at best to be tethered like a goat to one small area, is not a destiny in itself all desirable” (“America” 132). Lewis completely reverses the traditionally accepted positive connotations of the “roots” metaphor. Similarly, words such as “vacuum” or “rootlessness” that generally suggest a less desirable condition are charged with positive meaning—best demonstrated by the phrase “rootless Elysium” (“America” 132). Lewis’ original view is partly based on his own immigrant experience in North America—Lewis spent the war years in the USA and Canada—as well as on his unfailing trust in the American Way as a new way of life, “universal and all-inclusive in its very postulates” (“America” 132). Not only are immigrants to the USA seeking better conditions of life, better wages, or less war, but they also believe that they can co-create a new type of man, rootless and ahistoric, not determined by race, caste, and nationality. He therefore perceives the acquisition of American citizenship as something more than a mere pledge of allegiance to a new government or an adoption of social and cultural standards. Thinking about the nature of this attachment to the new way of life, Lewis comes to the conclusion that it stems from paradigms different from those in force in Europe. It is very different from a pious attachment to the soil, which scarcely exists in America, or to historic tradition. “No,” he argues,

it is attachment to the *absence* of these things. It is attachment, I should say, to a slightly happy-go-lucky vacuum, in which the ego feels itself free. It is, it seems to me, something like refreshing anonymity of a great city, compared with the oppressive opposite of that, invariably to be found in the village.” (Lewis, “America” 133)

Lewis promotes the absence of attachment to the soil and the historic tradition of the organic community, which Tönnies and Leavis and

Thompson considered to be the cause of alienation, as a way to break free from oppressive communal obligations and the constraints of tradition. It is this absence, Lewis believed, that allows a man to be “*in the world*, instead of just in a nation” (“America” 134). More importantly, it is a rootless, constantly evolving city, the dynamic *Gesellschaft* where “the spirit is released from all too-close contacts with other people” (Lewis, “America” 134) that will most effectively allow a new type of man—a cosmic man—to realize the potential of Modernity to foster a universal, all-inclusive world culture.³

Although Lewis clearly rejected nationalist impulses and isolationist tendencies, which are on the rise again in contemporary America, he does not offer any specific delineation of the attitudes and aspirations of the cosmic man; the man who shall implement his ideal of the future post-national society. Therefore, a characteristic spirit of cosmic man, a cosmic ethos can be understood more on the basis of Lewis’ turn of opinion on a given matter. As late as the mid-1930s, Lewis supported the idea of sovereign nationhood, preferring decentralized to centralized government. Retaining the maximum freedom for the sovereign state is preferable because any model of some super-state of internationalism means, after all, a government by a handful of individuals due to oppression and discrimination against less powerful groups. However, based on his long-term observation of the political scene in England, Lewis comes to the conclusion that it is better not to vest power in the hands of the people of a local community, since “the Parliament that sits in London is so peculiarly unrepresentative of the real interest of England that ‘a motley collection of gentlemen’ in Geneva could not be any worse” (“Hitler Cult” 128). Moreover, Lewis disputes the existence of a genuine, pure, completely isolated soul of a nation that has to be preserved: such an idea is outdated, a relic of the past. Thus, it makes no sense to fight for a nationalist cause if there are no true, by the spirit of their neighbors unaffected nations (Lewis, “Hitler Cult” 129). The inevitable course of history proves the rigid isolationism and nationalism unfeasible and irrational. For this reason, Lewis turns to the idea of the United States when

³ Seen from the contemporary perspective, Lewis’ vision of a cosmopolitan, interconnected world seems at odds with the resurgence of isolationist policies and the revival of mercantilisms in contemporary America. The current shift towards protectionist ideology suggests a return to rootedness and national exclusivity, undermining the aspirations to his cosmic man.

searching for an ideal model for a future cosmic society. It is in the USA where he finds “the requisite raw material, namely the great variety of races,” unburdened by previous duties and prejudices, by obligations and responsibilities towards a family, a community (tradition) or a nation—the material from which it is possible to prepare the way for a cosmic man, “a perfectly eclectic, non-national, internationally-minded creature, whose blood is drawn—more or less—from all corners of the earth, with no more geographical or cultural roots than a chameleon” (Lewis, “America” 147). This cosmic man can then provide solid ground for a World Government, a true Cosmopolis as envisioned by the Greeks, which Lewis sees as a way to reduce the incidence of warfare between nations.

From the moment of his arrival on the interwar intellectual scene, Wystan Hugh Auden also knew he was witnessing “one of the great historical periods, when the whole structure of our society and its cultural and metaphysical values [was] undergoing a radical change” (*Prose I* 486), which was causing, as he added on the eve of WWII, the “collapse of all previous standards” (*Prose II* 38). Like others, Auden too debated the repercussions of such a transformative process for forms of social organization. Auden’s views of the traditional community clearly issue from Tönnies and Leavis. At the same time, he refrains from nostalgia and accepts the transformation of social forms in evolutionary terms as a natural inevitable process. Approaching the fascination of Wyndham Lewis with a rootless, free-floating existence devoid of local attachments, Auden embraces the transformation of communities into a large-scale open society while conscious of its potential undesirable dissolution into gullible and mechanical crowds.

Although there seems to be no direct reference to Tönnies in Auden’s work, his sense of community shows a clear familiarity with the work of the German sociologist. In his definition of faith, for example, Auden noted that it declines in four stages, “each corresponding to a stage of advance or social differentiation from primitive community (*gemeinschaft*) toward civilized society (*gesellschaft*)” (*Prose II* 164). Like Tönnies, Auden also viewed community as a natural type of social form in which one “can feel at home” not only because man “has always been a social animal living in communities” (*Prose I* 436, 479), but also because it is a social manifestation of a universal principle of reciprocity and mutual dependence of parts and the whole. In “Writing” (1932), one of his earliest critical essays, Auden proposed the existence of an essential interdependence of different levels of social organization—individuals,

families, neighbors, nations and the whole world: “the whole cannot exist without the part, nor the part without the whole; and each whole is more than just the sum of its parts, it is a new thing.” Each individual part, he continues, lacks “meaning except in its connection with other things” (Auden, *Prose I* 13).

This organic and inherent quality recalls Tönnies’s assertion that “the whole is not merely the sum of its parts; on the contrary, the parts are dependent on and conditioned by the whole, so that the whole itself possesses intrinsic reality and substance” (Tönnies 21). Moreover, it alludes to the agreement and oneness that Auden associated with community. In the 1930s, Auden found the bonding agent in a “unity of interests” (*Prose I* 24) and belief (*Prose II* 51). “A true community,” he added in 1949, is “a group of rational beings associated on the basis of a common love” (Auden, *Enchafèd* 30). Such common goals, values, “mutual understanding and consensus” amass in what Tönnies calls the “will of the community” (32) arising spontaneously because “in the original or natural state there is a complete unity of human wills” (22). This causes, as Cleanth Brooks once suggested, that being a member of a community feels “like the air we breathe. One simply takes it for granted” (Brooks 5). Such an instinctive, natural and organic network of relationships can emerge, Auden claimed, only when an “individual and community are hardly distinct” (*Prose II* 52), when the common interest and the will of the community are stronger than the will of an individual, when the welfare of the whole is above that of an individual. In his writing, Auden captured his personal sense of such an associational homogeneous community based on the simple, direct and cooperative interaction of its members. In 1939, only one year after suggesting that the only remaining “real social unit” in the contemporary world was “the family” (*Prose I* 435), Auden recalled his own provincial Anglo-Catholic childhood to describe the undisputed set of shared activities and interests that kept his family bound together: “The study was full of books on medicine, archaeology, the classics. There was a rain-gauge on the lawn and a family dog. There were family prayers before breakfast, bi-cycle rides to collect fossils or rub church brasses, reading aloud in the evenings. We kept pretty much to ourselves” (*Prose II* 414). This was the Tönniesian world of a secluded and bounded “blood” community kept stable through tradition and firmly rooted in the provincial England of the early twentieth century, a world “which had nothing to do with London, the stage, or French literature” (Auden, *Prose II* 45) signaling changes and the pressure of

cosmopolitan influences. However, unlike their shared emphasis on boundedness and collective interest, Auden also differs from Tönnies and Eliot, who accepted the Platonic idea of hierarchy in community. Auden conceived community as a form with no social stratification. In 1936, Auden rejoiced to have found in Iceland a communal, rooted, and “the only really classless society” (*Prose I* 801), which later allowed him to call it a “Fortunate island,/Where all men are equal” (*Poems I* 538).

Boundedness and continuity allow Tönnies to liken community to a “self-sufficient household” which, “with its language, its customs, its beliefs, as well as its land, buildings and treasures” creates “a permanent entity that outlives the changes of many generations” (48–49). In his recollections of his own childhood and the life of Icelanders, Auden also emphasized the role of tradition in the sustenance of transgenerational cohesion. In “a traditional closed community,” he argued in 1949, an individual accepts the tradition—common truth, values and judgements—unwittingly because “unconscious of any alternative to his belief” (Auden, *Enchafèd* 30). Tradition is consequently “really binding” and becomes the source of “cohesion of an undifferentiated and segregated [i.e. enclosed]” community (Auden, *Prose II* 52; 102–03). Prioritization of the communal over the individual guarantees continuity and Auden suggested about a community that is bounded and rooted “generation after generation in one place” (*Prose I* 17).

Auden defined community in such detail in order to be able to contemplate changes and contemporary forms of social organization and predict its further development. He argued that the concord, unity, and mutual dependence characteristic of community can prevail only in small-scale and bounded social groups. He viewed the size as crucial for the sustenance of the communal will: “only in a group of very moderate size, probably not larger than twelve, is it possible for the individual under normal circumstances to lose himself” (Auden, *Prose I* 53). Hence, Auden located the existence of communal societies in tribal history and, like Tönnies and Leavis, in a preindustrial rural and small-town environment. Urbanization, resulting from the industrial revolution, weakened traditional bonds within community, Auden argued, and spurred the transition from the *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. “It was in the Victorian age,” he remarked in 1938, “that the atomisation of society into solitary individuals, which is one of the effects of laissez-faire capitalism, first began to be felt actively” (Auden, *Prose I* 467). As Benedict Anderson famously demonstrated, the growth of urban societies and nation states that

comprise large numbers of people decreases the chances of maintaining a unifying framework of ideas. The scale of modern social formations thus erodes the viability of shared interests, creating a porous aggregate of loose individuals who reside in the same place but lack a cohesion of beliefs. In modern large-scale society, concord and mutual sharing are displaced by the importance of personal interests and the individual will, which is contradictory to the idea of community in which the welfare of the whole, cooperation, and “social duties prevail over individual rights” (Mijuskovic 150).

Auden viewed as crucial the deterioration of communal formations and their replacement with mass society in technological progress and economic changes. He claimed that atomistic society is characteristic of liberal capitalist democracy, producing “a multiplicity of unrelated special individuals pursuing special unrelated occupations.” The complexity and advance of technology “obliges us to remain differentiated” (Auden, *Prose II* 101–02), spawning individuals segregated from others because of their specialized professions and interests and unaware of the bearing of their work on the whole (Auden, *Prose I* 18; 25). Auden found little cohesion in modern “contract society,” characterized by the economic and pragmatic self-interest of its members, except in groups united by their specialization: “the Maichine [*sic*] has deprived even words like society and class of any real meaning. Instead, there are only small groups, each united by a common specialization which dictates economic interest” (*Prose II* 52). A cello player who joins a string quartet for the pragmatic reason of earning a living is “a member of a society” but not “community of music lovers” (Auden, *Enchafèd* 30) united by their appreciation of music. Because Auden thought of community in classless terms, their growth in size, culminating in the disintegration of unity and cohesive values, also brought about social stratification and fragmentation of communities into “classes, sects, townspeople and peasants, rich and poor” (*Prose I* 24).

Auden pondered the costs of social atomization and stratification. His prose shows that, unlike Eliot who trusted the benefits of disunity and mutual friction, he sided with Leavis and associated the erosion of cohesion with negative consequences, mainly with an unprecedented sense of individual alienation and loneliness. With communal bonds weakened, modern man lives in proximity to large groups of people, yet experiences isolation. In “The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats” Auden has the counsel for the defense provide more detail and argue that liberal

capitalist society ignores the “social nature of personality.” Instead, it has created “the most impersonal, the most mechanical and the most unequal civilisation the world has ever seen, a civilisation in which the only emotion common to all classes is a feeling of individual isolation from everyone else” (Auden, *Prose II* 6–7), the result of which is that communal cohesion has withered. People in modern society either live as “dispersed units connected by electrical wires” or inhabit the same place but still experience an increasing “sense of loneliness” (Auden, *Prose I* 100; 16). Auden also related the isolation and the wane of common interest in a large-scale society to the consequences of its openness to change. He viewed large societies as porous assemblages of anonymous individuals lacking rootedness. “Men,” Auden wrote in New York in 1940, “no longer have neighbors tied to them by geography, only far-flung association of personal friends kept in touch with by machinery” (*Prose II* 52). Technology enables contact over long distances and makes man experience “the detachment of community from locality” (Auden, *Prose II* 87). Clearly, Auden posited community and rootedness in place as isomorphic concepts. His own memory of public-school days was that of boys brought to one place from various directions but, with no attempt by the teachers to graft them onto local people, who experienced no “natural community spirit.” Instead, the school was forced to “manufacture an artificial one” (Auden, *Prose I* 421). Auden also related the artificiality stemming from uprootedness and lack of shared values to the demise of tradition. While in a community, tradition provides one of the cementing agents, in the anonymous and atomized society made up of self-centered individuals and characterized by rapid social changes and porousness, its bonding potential recedes. “The development of industrial civilization,” Auden summed up, “has already destroyed tradition. The life of each individual is becoming increasingly unique” (*Prose II* 19).

Auden related this development to the changing position of an artist in society. In a close-knit community, the artist is “rooted in the life of his age to feel in common with his audience” and can act not as a prophetic guide or mentor but as a communal spokesman articulating common interests and values. In a stratified and fragmented society, however, an artist becomes a loose individual. As long as a community “changed slowly” and its members were united by faith, a set of values, beliefs, and worldview, the “audience and artists alike tended to have much the same interests and to see much the same things” because there was no barrier between the public and the artist: “the more homogeneous a society, the

closer the artist is to the everyday life of his time, the easier it is for him to communicate what he perceives" (Auden, *Prose I* 432). Disunity, social hierarchy, and changingness characterize, however, an open large-scale society and complicate the synergy and communication among its members, including the artist and their audience. When community "breaks up" into units and individuals, Auden argued already in 1932, "literature suffers" because a variety of writing appears for different social groups, individuals with diverse interests, and "the highbrow and the lowbrow" (*Prose I* 24). The writer must take sides, choose an audience and ask: "What has value" (Auden, *Prose II* 51)? Rather than creating a productive environment, these gaps, differences and variety also complicate communication, making the writer, like anyone else in the social aggregate, feel isolated: "the lack of communication between artist and audience proves the lack of communication between all men" who are "now only individuals who can form collective masses but not communities" (Auden, *Prose II* 93).

Despite such consequences, Auden was convinced that the transformation of community into society was a natural and unstoppable process. Auden's fondness for anthropology might have prevented him from nostalgia and allowed him to realize that "all ages are ages of transition" (*Prose II* 93). In connection with social forms, for instance, he criticized Matthew Arnold and his "idealist theory of the State." Auden chides the Victorian critic for "assum[ing] a unity of feeling and interest in the community which no longer existed" (*Prose II* 12). It is also a mark of Auden's family background in natural sciences, whereby he viewed evolution unromantically as an irreversible process. This included the historical development of social formations reflecting "life's attempt to organize itself so as to meet the demands of an ever-changing environment" (*Prose I* 734). As for the current social system, he claimed already in 1932, that it is not satisfactory but "we can't stop the boat" (Auden, *Prose I* 25) and revive a former state of civilization: "The old pre-industrial community and culture are gone and cannot be brought back" (Auden, *Prose I* 436).

His down-to-earth approach became more prominent in the mid-1930s, as the political developments in Germany came to the foreground and after his settlement in the USA in 1939. Auden repeatedly stressed that because unity in large social forms cannot exist naturally, the idea of a large community and yearning for a "universally valid faith" as a cement for unity is an untenable ideological "orthodoxy" (*Prose II* 33). While "by

nature, man seems adapted to live in communities of a very moderate size,” the modern social system and capitalist economy has compelled people to live in “ever-enlarging ones” in which “there is no such thing as a general will of society” (*Prose I* 483). Therefore, Auden suggested, politicians tempted to implement unity must use force. Examining the causes that vitiate political systems, he argued in 1935 that theories of the State resting on the metaphor of society as a biological organism, in which individual parts strive for the welfare of the whole, are a fallacy. “The unity of will is a fiction,” which causes that the politician striving for it cannot “afford to wait until this unity is voluntarily reached” and he “must coerce [it] either physically, or by propagandist organisation of public opinion” (Auden, *Prose I* 118).

An alternative to coerced unity was, in Auden’s view, the diversity characterizing open society. Because he understood social evolution as a process in which human societies always start as closed and rather inert homogeneous communities that evolve into porous and changing societies, he accepted atomization as a natural stage in the history of social organization: “we have either to adapt to an open society or perish” (Auden, *Prose II* 65). This became explicit after Auden’s arrival in New York. Exhausted by more than just his search for an adequate relation of an artist to the audience, its cosmopolitan atmosphere charmed him. Like Wyndham Lewis, he began to praise the USA for embodying the prime example of a modern, open society respecting variety and allowing for a rootless, ahistoric and individualistic existence. As Aidan Wasley eloquently shows, America helped Auden root himself out of the English intellectual circles and Europe, where “the forces of history, class, religion and region combine to dictate from birth a sense of a self already implicated in a preexisting cultural narrative that tells you who you are.” Contrary to this, in the USA, Auden found a climate allowing him and everyone else to join numerous other “solitary questers each in search of their own identities” (Wasley 50), which was a crucial aspect of his understanding of an absorbent and atomized open society. Auden translated the “historical discontinuity” and “mixed population,” inhabiting an environment where the industrial revolution coincided with an open geographical frontier, into “one the most significant experiences of [his] life” (*Prose II* 66). A few months after arrival, he could write: “I welcome the atomization of society, and I look forward to a socialism based on it, to the day when the disintegration of tradition will be as final and universal for the masses as it already is for the artist, because it will be

only when they fully realize their ‘aloneness’ and accept it, that men will be able to achieve a real unity through a common recognition of their diversity” (Auden, *Prose II* 53). His emphasis on diversity recalls his long-term belief in human exceptionalism resulting from a unique human ability to continue evolution because of the mind, the development of which is “one more and more of differentiation, individualistic, away from nature” (Auden, *English* 298). Auden’s early assessment of American society was exuberant. He found a pluralist society in which “the concept of normality disappears.” It is an open country that “exchanges freely with all other countries.” Its economy offers a sufficient variety of occupations so that everyone can find “a genuine vocation.” It is a society that “finds every kind of person useful, and its individuals are socially responsible because they are conscious of being needed.” This respect for individuality cultivates a person who “is open to the degree in which he knows who he is and what he really wants.” These aspects of openness and heterogeneity make Auden conclude that “physically, economically, and culturally it knows no frontier” (Auden, *Prose II* 66–67) which, as he later added, is a feature of “the ideal open society” (Auden, *Prose II* 91). Clearly, Auden uses his experience of American society to foreground individuality and diversity as staple features of modern atomized society. Unlike a closed small-scale community, where cohesion results from tradition, in open societies that emphasize individuality, he assumed, conditions for the sustenance of cohesion must be reformulated. It “can only be secured through a common agreement upon a small number of carefully defined general presuppositions, from which each individual can deduce the right behavior in a particular instance” (Auden, *Prose II* 102).

Auden’s optimistic Hegelian view of society as “a unity through multiplicity” (Mijuskovic 163), in which individuals and diversity thrive, wavered as he became concerned about the potential “annihilation of personality” (Auden, *Enchafèd* 31) in large-scale collectivities. What seeped into his writing, alongside ruminations on community and society, was a conviction that mechanical production and mass society erode the natural human drive towards individuality. He wrote of mass production in Leavisite terms as a monotonous activity that employs the body but not the mind, providing one with no sense of gratification or pride (Auden, *Prose I* 36). Modern mass society, as a large, complex, and cumbersome system, foregrounds the indistinctive and uniform, obfuscating the nurture of one’s growth towards individuation. Instead of living “as we will” and wish, we have become “content masochistically *to be lived*” (Auden, *Prose*

II 38). Auden often used metaphors drawn from mechanics to describe the devastating effects of modern social formations on the individual and open society. Man becomes “a cypher of the crowd, or a mechanical cogwheel in an impersonal machine” (Auden, *Enchafèd* 26), producing large formations of dehumanized “behaviorist automatons” (Auden, *Prose I* 31). Feeling that they cannot influence the collectivity (Auden, *Prose I* 25), individuals are more easily driven to isolation and self-interest. In 1949, Auden quoted Melville to suggest that like work in manufacturing, such a modern society is “mechanical” and its members passive “Ishmaels,” cocooned “isolatoes, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each isolate living in a separate continent of his own” (*Enchafèd* 34). For Auden, this was the moment when society transforms into the ultimate form of “human pluralities”—the crowd. It consists of individuals passive towards others and devoid of care for the welfare of the whole group. As Bonnie Costello reminds us, Auden famously illustrated the nature of the crowd at the end of his lecture “Poetry and Freedom” (1948) with his interpretation of a cartoon by Charles Addams (154–56). It shows an octopus eating New Yorkers while other passers-by form a crowd of passive onlookers whose individuality dissipates and horizon of care shrinks. Regardless of its size, a new social form arises as “a collection of people whose sole common bond is that they are together. There is a *we*, but there are no separate *I*’s” (Auden, *Prose II* 492). In an open society, in which individuals are aware of options, while at the same time facing forces that work against the development of and respect for their personal will and individuality, Auden predicted two possible lines of development: “either personal choice and through the sum of such choices an actual community *or* the annihilation of personality and the dissolution of community into crowds” (*Enchafèd* 31). The latter was Auden’s vision of the ultimate phase in the evolution of social formations: the crowd as a state in which human individuality dissipates and faceless gullible multitudes emerge.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper shows the extent to which the notion of human collectivities resonated in the thought and writing of interwar intellectuals. The sense of an erosion of traditional values and beliefs, to which the modernists felt compelled to respond, included their thorough scrutiny of a transformation of the weakening traditional small-scale communities into the newly

emerging large pluralities. At the same time, this case study intimates that the intellectual debate was marked with heteroglossia. Eliot, Lewis, and Auden adopted a distinctive approach *vis a vis* the same notions, relating community, society, rootedness, and cosmopolitanism to often contrasting meanings. Moreover, the analysis of their concern with such ideas, explored in light of the shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, might offer valuable insights for understanding contemporary cultural tensions. As contemporary societies grapple with migration, technological transformation, and the growing urban-rural divide, the balance between local identity and global interconnectedness remains a central, still unresolved concern. The erosion of traditional communities and the rise of cosmopolitan and transnational networks continue challenging individuals' sense of belonging and cultural coherence. Ultimately, the ideas explored by Eliot, Lewis, and Auden serve as a lens through which to examine how the shift from localized, organic communities to more abstract, market-driven, and pluralistic societies have reshaped cultural identities and what the possible pitfalls associated with this development are. Their prose shows the merits as well as limitations of both types of pluralities. One the one hand, the merits of bounded pluralities, the intellectuals in focus suggest, are a sense of belonging stimulating care for others and social cohesion. These are juxtaposed with isolationism, exclusionism, and ethnocentric chauvinism based on the "us" against "them" principle. Simultaneously, the prose showcases that large unbound pluralities promote the inclusion of marginalized groups and openness to cosmopolitan influences stimulating innovation. At the same time, such large and porous collectivities encourage passivity leading the dissolution of one's commitment to public affairs. Their perspectives resonate with current debates over the ambivalence of glocalization, (up)rooted existence, and the difficult search for a balance between unity and diversity in constantly changing liquid modernity. Be it Eliot's call for a "useful diversity," Lewis's vision of a "rootless Elysium," or Auden's focus on "social atomization" causing the isolation of individuals, this case study underscores the enduring relevance of these notions, inviting us to reconsider the merits of fealty to community and freedom in society stemming from uprooted individualism without succumbing to parochialism or xenophobia.

REFERENCES

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1983.

Auden, Wystan Hugh. *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse, Vol. I: 1926–1938*, edited by Edward Mendelson, Princeton University Press, 1996.

Auden, Wystan Hugh. *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose, Vol. II: 1939–1948*, edited by Edward Mendelson, Faber and Faber, 2002.

Auden, Wystan Hugh. *The Enchafèd Flood*. Vintage Books, 1967.

Auden, Wystan Hugh. *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings, 1927–1939*, edited by Edward Mendelson, Faber and Faber, 1988.

Bartky, S. L. “Seinsverlassenheit in the Later Philosophy of Heidegger.” *Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 1–4, 1967, pp. 74–88, doi: 10.1080/00201746708601483.

Bergonzi, Bernard. “Eliot on Culture.” *New Blackfriars*, vol. 52, no. 610, March 1971, pp. 109–14, doi: 10.1111/j.1741-2005.1971.tb02075.x.

Brooks, Cleanth. “The Sense of Community in Yoknapatawpha Fiction.” *Studies in English*, vol. 15, 1975, pp. 1–16, www.egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng/vol15/iss1/4/.

Chinitz, David E. T. S. *Eliot and the Cultural Divide*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Costello, Bonnie. *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others*. Princeton University Press, 2017.

Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. Faber and Faber, 1948.

Eliot, Thomas Stearns. “The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet.” *Daedalus*, vol. 89, no. 2, Spring 1960, pp. 419–28.

Hall, Stuart. "New Cultures for Old." *A Place in the World?*, edited by Doreen Massey and Pat Jess, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 175–213.

Heidegger, Martin. "Die Frage nach der Technik." *Gesamtausgabe, I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1910–1976, Band 7: Vorträge und Aufsätze*, edited by Friedrich Wilhelm von Herrmann, Vittorio Klostermann, 2000, pp. 5–36.

Jess, Pat, and Doreen Massey. "The Conceptualization of Place." *A Place in the World?*, edited by Doreen Massey and Pat Jess, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 45–85.

Leavis, Frank R., and Denys Thompson. *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*. Chatto & Windus, 1934.

Lewis, Wyndham. "America and Cosmic Man." *The Essential Wyndham Lewis*, edited by Julian Symons, Andre Deutsch, 1989, pp. 131–47.

Lewis, Wyndham. "The Hitler Cult." *The Essential Wyndham Lewis*, edited by Julian Symons, Andre Deutsch, 1989, pp. 127–31.

Lewis, Wyndham. *Paleface: The Philosophy of the 'Melting Pot.'* Chatto & Windus, 1923.

Lovin, Clifford R. "Blut und Boden: The Ideological Basis of the Nazi Agricultural Program." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1967, pp. 279–88, doi: 10.2307/2708423.

Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. Sage Publications, 2005.

Mijuskovic, Ben. "Organic Communities, Atomistic Societies, and Loneliness." *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1992, pp. 147–64, doi: 10.15453/0191-5096.2026.

Reeve-Tucker, Alice, and Nathan Waddell. "Wyndham Lewis, Evelyn Waugh and Inter-war British Youth: Conflict and Infantilism." *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity*, edited by Andrzej

Gasiorek, Alice Reeve-Tucker and Nathan Waddell, Routledge, 2019, pp. 163–84.

Tönnies, Ferdinand. *Community and Civil Society*, translated by Jose Harris and Margaret Hollis, edited by Jose Harris, Cambridge University Press, 2001, doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511816260.

Wasley, Aidan. “Ideas of America.” *W.H. Auden in Context*, edited by Tony Sharpe, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 47–55, doi: 10.1017/CBO9781139018180.006.

Attitudes towards Codeswitching in ESP classes: A Case Study of Second-Year Students in Business Administration

Actitudes hacia el cambio de código en las clases de inglés para fines específicos: Un estudio de caso de estudiantes de Administración de Empresas

JEAN MATHIEU TSOUMOU

Institution address: Departamento de Educación e Innovación Educativa, Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas, Educación y Humanidades, Universidad Europea de Madrid. Calle Tajo, 28670 Villaviciosa de Odón, Madrid

E-mail: jeanmathieu.tsoumou@universidadeuropea.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-4651-9161

ANA ELENA MARTÍNEZ VARGAS

E-mail: anaelena.martinez@universidadeuropea.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-5986-7552

RAYMOND ECHITCHI

E-mail: sechitchi@uliege.be

ORCID: 0000-0003-4154-7961

AURORA MURGA AROCA

E-mail: aurora.murga@urjc.es

ORCID: 0000-0001-5506-4181

MARÍA DEL CARMEN BOSCH BERMÚDEZ DE CASTRO

E-mail: mariadelcarmen.bosch@universidadeuropea.es

ORCID: 0000-0001-8970-3180

Received: 08/11/2024. Accepted: 14/02/2025.

How to cite this article: Tsoumou, Jean Mathieu, et al. "Attitudes towards Codeswitching in ESP classes: A Case Study of Second-Year Students in Business Administration." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp. 36–79.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/cf2mw773>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Abstract: Globalization has favored the expansion of teaching and learning English in higher education worldwide. Spain has not been an exception. The aim of this paper is to examine students' attitude to codeswitching and determine whether variables such as sex and age play a role in the perception of codeswitching in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP, hereinafter) classroom. The focus is specifically on second-year-Business Administration students. A data-driven analysis of data, collected by means of the questionnaire, reveals that neither sex nor age are significantly influential in the students' attitude to codeswitching. Furthermore, the findings indicate that resorting to Spanish while learning English contributes substantially to enhancing learners' learning experience and making it more effective.

Keywords: Codeswitching; English for specific purposes; attitudes; bi/multilingualism; higher education.

Summary: Introduction. Literature Review. Method. Data Analysis. Discussion and Concluding Remarks.

Resumen: La globalización ha favorecido la expansión de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés en la educación superior en todo el mundo, y España no se ha quedado al margen. El objetivo de este estudio es examinar la actitud de los estudiantes hacia el cambio de código y determinar si variables como el sexo y la edad influyen en la percepción del cambio de código en el aula de inglés para fines específicos (ESP, en inglés). El estudio se centra específicamente en estudiantes de segundo año de Administración de Empresas. Un análisis basado en datos, recopilados a través de un cuestionario, revela que ni el sexo ni la edad tienen una influencia significativa en la actitud de los estudiantes hacia el cambio de código. Además, los resultados indican que recurrir al español durante el aprendizaje del inglés contribuye sustancialmente a mejorar la experiencia de aprendizaje de los estudiantes y hacerla más eficaz.

Palabras clave: Cambio de código; inglés para fines específicos; actitudes; bi/multilingüismo; educación superior.

Sumario: Introducción. Revisión de la literatura. Método. Análisis de datos. Discusión y conclusiones

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, Spanish decision-makers and scholars have incentivized foreign language teaching with a view to meeting the European Union's goals and fostering internationalization (Anghel et al.). English is now taught and used as a medium of instruction, not only in primary and secondary schools, but also in higher education (Macaro et al.). This increasing demand for English language education in Spain has posed challenges related to teacher or learner profiles and attitudes as well as pedagogic methods. By and large, much emphasis has been placed on monolingual approaches, which are based on the belief that teachers should be fluent enough to avoid alternating between codes in the classroom (Custodio Espinar). Moreover, while research on language attitudes continues to grow in other contexts (Macaro; Ellwood;

Canagarajah; Chimbutane; Samar and Moradkhani; Buoy and Nicoladis), little is known of students' attitudes towards codeswitching in ESP classes at La Universidad Europea de Madrid (UEM, hereinafter). This research was motivated by the hypothesis that, despite being officially discouraged, codeswitching involving Spanish and English is very common in foreign language classes and viewed positively by the students. Therefore, with the aim of determining the students' attitudes to codeswitching, we surveyed—by means of questionnaires—students enrolled in the undergraduate degree program in Business Administration (BA, hereinafter) at UEM. To this end, the study specifically intends to (1) learn more about how widespread codeswitching practices are, (2) understand the role of codeswitching in ESP classrooms, (3) examine students' attitudes towards codeswitching, and (4) explore and explain motives for codeswitching from the students' perspective. Specifically, the study intends to provide scientific answers to the following research questions.

- (1) Is codeswitching positively or negatively perceived?
- (2) How does sex affect the students' attitudes to codeswitching?
- (3) How does age affect the students' attitudes to codeswitching?
- (4) What pragmatic, academic, and psychological factors drive students to codeswitch, and how do they justify their choices?

The above-mentioned research questions rest on the following two hypotheses:

H_1 . Sex does not play a statistically significant role in students' attitudes to codeswitching. In other words, male and female students have similar attitudes to codeswitching.

H_2 . Age does not play a statistically significant role in students' attitudes to codeswitching.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews literature on codeswitching and attitudes in both ESP and second language acquisition contexts. Section 3 describes the method. The data will be presented in section 4. The results are analyzed in Section 5. Section 6 discusses the results. Finally, the conclusions are drawn in the final section.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Codeswitching refers to the alternation of two or more different languages during a communicative exchange among bilingual individuals (Ellwood; Canagarajah). Although codeswitching is a common phenomenon among bilingual individuals (Macaro; Ellwood; Chimbutane; Samar and Moradkhani; Buoy and Nicoladis; Hazaymeh), it is considered “a chaotic practice.” In some cases, codeswitching is regarded as “a sign of lack of mastery of either or both languages” (Mabule 340). This negative view also applies to codeswitching in the foreign language classroom. Some scholars claim that language alternation can be a liability and a source of confusion for students (Raschka et al.). However, others consider that the use of the first language (or L1) should be seen as an asset in the bilingual classroom (Muñoz and Mora). The argument is that allowing students to make use of “natural codeswitching” encourages “greater . . . participation” and can be used as a means of scaffolding in early levels (Muñoz and Mora 35). According to Muñoz and Mora (38), the use of codeswitching by teachers normally responds to affective and repetitive functions, such as indicating a change in topic (topic switch), building rapport with students (affective function), or clarifying the meaning of key information (repetitive function). On the other hand, students’ codeswitching instances tend to respond to establishing equivalencies, or translating certain words; reiteration, and floor-holding, or using their L1 “to avoid gaps in communication,” thus prioritizing communication over accuracy.

Determining the impact of codeswitching in language teaching/learning based on students’ attitudes, has attracted the attention of many scholars (Ellwood; Wei and Wu; Raschka et al.; Canagarajah; Chimbutane). What seems to be the agreed-upon assertion about these studies is the argument that (positive and negative) attitudes towards codeswitching are key to, not just the success and/or failure of teaching/learning practices, but more importantly, may determine ways in which students assimilate the culture of the target language, while connecting the experience with thoughts and ideas already developed in L1. This has the potential to promote a “safe space” for bilingualism. For example, it has been suggested that positive attitudes may become an important factor to avoid tensions and conflicts that may arise between the target language ideologies and policies and the actual practices of teachers and students (Wei and Wu; Meij and Zhao). This, however, does not mean

attitudes to codeswitching are always positive in every language teaching/learning context. Codeswitching is often argued to undermine the learning process by proponents of the target language exclusivity. The argument, as Macaro (531) notes, is that “teaching entirely through [the target language] makes the language real, allows learners to experience unpredictability, and develops the learners’ own in-built language system.”

1.1 A Note on Translanguaging in Higher Education

Translanguaging, as in Baker, is an approach in pedagogy which emphasizes the use of the students’ full linguistic repertoire in the classroom. Although most studies on translanguaging fall within language revitalization, bilingual education and second language acquisition, research from other fields such as distributed cognition and language have also contributed positively to conceptualizing translanguaging (Wei). One may argue that until the early 90s, the use of students’ first language in second language classes was highly discouraged and thought to affect their ability to achieve full proficiency in the second language. Research into the use of students’ home language in multilingual settings has gained ground recently. García, for example, studies Hispanic students in the USA in which the author contends that the students’ underachievement was mainly due to the fact that their home language, Spanish, was never seen as a resource that teachers could tap into. In other words, resorting to the mother tongue has a positive effect on student achievement (see Effiong).

It is also important to note that, even though translanguaging and codeswitching involve alternating between languages, Wei insists that both terms should not be used interchangeably as they differ in their theoretical conceptualization. While the definition of codeswitching is built on the identification and distinction between languages, translanguaging, as Wei (167) posits, “emphasizes human beings’ ability to deliberately break the boundaries of named languages to create novel ways of expression and communication.” This paper focusses on codeswitching, even though some of the practices we observed could perfectly be described as translanguaging.

2. METHOD

This section overviews the context of the study, describes the participants, and explains the instruments and data collection procedure.

2.1 Context

This study is an exploratory attempt at determining not just the students' attitudes to codeswitching, but more importantly the role codeswitching plays in ESP classrooms at UEM where ESP is a compulsory subject in virtually every undergraduate program. ESP is a subject taught throughout the second year of every program at UEM. The subject is taken by students whose English level is B2 according to the CEFR. This paper specifically focuses on second-year students enrolled in the Business Administration undergraduate program. The choice of this program was both practical and methodological. It is practical in the sense that this was one of the programs with the most students enrolled in the second semester of the 2022/2023 academic year. Because of the exploratory nature of the study in a context where, to the best of our knowledge, no attention has ever been paid to either attitudes or codeswitching focusing on one single program could provide not just insights into the spread of codeswitching in ESP classrooms and its impact on the academic performance of the students, but more importantly, this could serve as a reference to much larger-scale research on codeswitching at UEM.¹ This choice was also methodological in the sense that most of the responses (44.87%) to the questionnaire, randomly sent out to second-year students enrolled in undergraduate programs, came from the Business Administration undergraduate program alone, and, as will be explained in the upcoming subsection, over half of all the students enrolled in this program completed the questionnaire.

2.2 Participants

The participants in this study included second-year students enrolled in the BA program. Overall, 179 students, including 131 male and 48 female students, were enrolled in this program in the second semester of the

¹ The long-term goal of this research group is eventually to study attitudes to codeswitching in virtually every program taught at UEM.

2022/2023 academic year. Of these 179 students, 92 students, which represents 51.39%, completed the questionnaire. In terms of the sample representation, this means that 1 in 2 students enrolled in the program completed the questionnaire. Of the 92 students who completed the questionnaire, 68, which represents 53.12% were male students whereas 24, which represents 47.05%, were female students. In other words, roughly half of both male and female students participated evenly in the survey, making the gender distribution reflective of BA classes at UEM. Put in perspective, this sample is more representative than those used in other studies which rely on fewer than 30 participants (Macaro; Ellwood; Samar and Moradkhani). In terms of age, self-reported responses led us to categorize the students' age in three different cohorts, including 18/20, 21/24 and 25+. As will be seen in the analysis, most participants were aged 21 to 24 (n 47) followed by students aged 18–20 (n 37). Only 8.6 percent of our respondents (n 8) were 25 or older.

2.3 Instruments and Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process started with the design of a robust data collection tool to gather suitable data on the students' attitudes. This led to the design of a Google form-based questionnaire. The questionnaire was organized in four different sections, including students' linguistic background, current ESP context, attitudes toward codeswitching in general and attitudes towards own codeswitching (see Appendix 1). Then, the questionnaire was sent out to the students through their teachers in the second week of May 2023. Each teacher was advised to put aside about 10 minutes at the end of their scheduled classes to allow the students to complete the questionnaire. This first attempt at data gathering did not yield as much data as expected. Therefore, a second attempt was made in the fourth week of May 2023. The questionnaire included four main categories of questions. The first category was intended to test students' attitudes to codeswitching in general. The second one was designed as a self-assessment of students' own codeswitching. The third category of questions aimed at eliciting information regarding how often students would make use of more than one language in everyday life. The final category was intended to evaluate the motives for which the students codeswitch. While categories 1, 2 and 3 were based on Likert scales, category 4 included close-end questions allowing the students to select one response category out of five suggested response categories, each of which

represented specific pragmatic purpose for codeswitching in the classroom.

One may argue that reliance on the questionnaire alone is a drawback since the study would have benefitted a great deal from the combination of more than one single data collection tool. However, studies that solely rely on questionnaires as a strong data collection tool have had a significant impact in assessing students' attitudes and perceptions of codeswitching in ESP and ESL classrooms (Levine; Wei and Martin; Van der Meij and Zhao; Buoy and Nicoladis). Second, to strengthen our approach, the questionnaire was designed in a way that could yield both the students' attitudes and the motives behind the use of codeswitching. Finally, the fact that all the authors of this paper are experienced ESP teachers allows us to reflect on this experience as a background observational tool of codeswitching as it manifests in the classroom.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

The present paper draws on a mixed-method analysis which tackles the collected data from both qualitative and quantitative approaches. While the quantitative analysis sheds light on the statistical values of codeswitching, the qualitative analysis explores the pragmatic motives behind the use of codeswitching in the classroom.

Sex and age were examined as independent variables in order to determine their impact, if any, on the manifestation of codeswitching in the classroom. This understanding implies that attitudes to codeswitching are taken as a dependent variable whose value depends on changes in the independent variables. The dependent variable here is positive or negative attitudes to codeswitching. In other words, the paper sets out to test whether favorable or unfavorable attitudes to codeswitching depend on the students' sex and/or their age. In terms of sex, for example, females' attitudes were contrasted to males' attitudes to determine whether sex bears any influence on the occurrence of codeswitching. In terms of age, the three cohorts, including 18/20, 21/24 and 25+, were statistically contrasted to determine their ramifications when it comes to students' attitudes to codeswitching. The goal here was to test and determine whether there might be any variations based on the students' age.

Statistical analyses, especially those based on Likert scale, often rely on a reasonable manipulation of control variables. This is why, in each of the categories of questions, specific Likert-related response categories

were carefully selected to serve as control variables. In categories 1 and 2, for example, “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neutral,” “agree,” and “strongly agree” serve as the control variables. In category 3, we relied on “never or hardly ever,” “occasionally,” “sometimes,” “often,” “very often” to serve as control variables so as to determine the frequencies in the use of codeswitching. In category 4, however, we relied on key aspects in language teaching/learning to serve as control variables. These aspects include “it does not make any difference,” “to increase attention span,” “to feel more confident about what the teacher is saying,” “to produce an answer and to follow instructions.” The manipulation of these variables allowed us to examine not just the nature of codeswitching, but also its causes, effects as well as consequences in students’ academic performance.

Finally, to test the above-mentioned hypotheses, the analysis of the data is carried out both horizontally and vertically. The horizontal analysis allows us to determine the effect of both dependent and independent variables on the control variables. The vertical analysis, on the other hand, was intended to contrast the findings both in terms of sex and age. The extent to which each variable affects the use of codeswitching in the ESP classroom was determined by running two main statistical analyses, including mixed ANOVA and logistic regression analysis.

4. RESULTS

The data analysis begins with a closer look at students’ attitudes to the concept of teacher-induced codeswitching. Then, it delves into an examination of the students’ attitudes towards their own codeswitching in the specific context of ESP. Frequencies and/or occurrences of codeswitching as reported by the students are explored before looking into the role of codeswitching in the students’ academic performance.

4.1 Students’ Attitudes Towards Teacher-Induced Codeswitching

The students’ attitudes were examined based on how they positioned themselves regarding some statements as described below.

Before moving any further, it is important to point out that all the statements related to Q1² in both tables 1 and 2 (i.e., Q1a, Q1b, Q1c, Q1d, Q1d and Q1e) represent some of the different functions of codeswitching in the classroom, as put forward in previous studies (Sánchez Carretero; Muñoz and Mora). For example, whereas Q1a, Q1b, and Q1d touch into the students' language development, Q1c and Q1e account for the way codeswitching becomes a tool to build teacher and student relationships in second language acquisition and ESP.

Overall, the students' perception of teacher-induced codeswitching is more favorable. For example, in Q1a, 41.17% of male and 41.66% of female students "agree," and 25% of male and 29.16% of female students "strongly agree." Only a small proportion of students "disagree," 1.47% of male and 4.16% of female. Finally, 4.41% of male and none of female "strongly disagrees." Resorting to Spanish while learning English can be deemed useful by the students as they seek to strengthen teaching-learning process (Effieng). This points to the fact that, as can be observed in the rating of Q1a, the students' perception of the teacher meaning clarification is rather positive.

However, students do not lean one way or the other regarding the statement about the use of codeswitching to introduce a new topic or activity (i.e., Q1b). As can be observed, the most rated response category is "neutral" (i.e., 38.23% of male and 37.5% of female students). The statistics show that beside neutral, both female and male students "agree" or "strongly agree" that they pay more attention when Spanish is used as tool to introduce a new topic or activity. Concretely, 32.35% of male and 20.83% of female respondents "agree;" 5.88% of males and 20.83 of females "strongly agree." This stands against 13.23% of male and 20.83% of female who "disagree;" and 10.29% of male and 0% of female who "strongly disagree."

² Throughout this paper Q, as in Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4 and Q5, refers to the questions on which our analysis is based. For question Q1 and Q2, a general question was followed by statements (i.e., Q1a, Q1b, Q2a, Q2b, etc.) to which the students had to react. The students were asked to report how often they codeswitch by means of two additional questions, Q3 and Q4. Q5 was a simple prompt aimed at eliciting the reasons for codeswitching (see Appendix 2).

Table 1. Perception of teacher-induced codeswitching according to sex

Sex	I strongly disagree		I disagree		Neutral		I agree		I strongly agree	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Q1a	3 (4.41%)	0 (1.47%)	1 (4.16%)	1 (27.94%)	19 (25%)	6 (41.17%)	28 (41.66%)	10 (25%)	17 (29.16%)	7
Q1b	7 (10.29%)	0 (13.23%)	9 (20.83%)	5 (38.23%)	26 (37.5%)	9 (32.35%)	22 (20.83%)	5 (5.88%)	4 (20.83%)	5
Q1c	6 (8.82%)	1 (4.16%)	5 (7.35%)	1 (4.16%)	21 (30.88%)	10 (41.66%)	27 (39.70%)	4 (16.66%)	9 (13.23%)	8 (33.33%)
Q1d	5 (7.35%)	2 (8.33%)	9 (13.23%)	1 (4.16%)	18 (26.47%)	6 (25%)	27 (39.70%)	4 (33.33%)	9 (13.23%)	7 (29.16%)
Q1e	3 (4.41%)	1 (4.16%)	6 (8.82%)	23 (12.5%)	20 (29.41%)	7 (41.17%)	28 (41.17%)	5 (20.83%)	11 (16.17%)	8 (33.33%)

According to Sánchez Carretero (141), “humor helps to provide an adequate climate in which the student relaxes and additionally lowers the level of anxiety caused by the embarrassment that comes with speaking a second language.” In the same vein, the statistics of Q1c show that the use of Spanish by the teacher to tell jokes within the classroom seems to be positively valued by the students. For instance, 39.70% of male and

16.66% of female students “agree” and 13.23% of male and 33.33 % of female “strongly agree.” It is important to note, however, the high percentages of the students who remain neutral, with more female students than their male peers (i.e., 30.88% of male and 41.66% of female). Although one may argue that female students are less enthusiastic about joke telling or any distraction in the classroom, it is to note that one of the main functions of humor is motivation (Barrio and Fernández Solís). The fact that most students, regardless of their sex, welcome joke telling-induced codeswitching supports the argument that the use of humor can serve as a motivator and a stress reliever in the language classroom.

The last two statements (Q1d and Q1e) evaluate how codeswitching can help the students better understand the lesson (Q1d) and how codeswitching can contribute to building teacher-student rapport (Q1e). Accordingly, the percentages, as shown in table 1, show that most students, regardless of sex “agree” (i.e., 39.70% male and 33.33% female) and “strongly agree” (i.e., 13.23 % male and 29.16% female), thus welcoming the use of Spanish in class. With respect to Q1e, most students regardless of sex, agree or strongly agree. In fact, 41.17% of male and 20.83% female students agree, and 16.17% male and 33.33% female strongly agree.

Table 2. Perception of teacher-induced codeswitching according to age

	I strongly disagree	I disagree	Neutral	I agree	I strongly agree
Age (n37) (n47)	18-20 21-24 (2.70%)(42%)	25+ (n8) (n47)	18-20 21-24 (n37) (n8)	25+ (n47) (n8)	18-20 21-24 (n37) (n47) (n8)
Q1a	1 (2.70%)(42%)	2 (2.70%)(21%)	0 (27.02%)(29.78%)	10 (45.94%)(34.04%)	14 (62.5%)(21.62%)
Q1b	2 (5.40%)(10.63%)	5 (16.21%)(10.63%)	0 (37.5%)(37.88%)	3 (42.55%)(25.53%)	14 (35.13%)(25.53%)
Q1c	3 (8.10%)(8.51%)	4 (5.40%)(6.38%)	0 (12.5%)(18.91%)	2 (44.68%)	7 (37.5%)(27.65%)
Q1d	2 (5.40%)(10.63%)	5 (8.10%)(10.63%)	0 (25%)	10 (27.02%)(27.65%)	13 (37.88%)(36.17%)
Q1e	2 (5.40%)(42%)	2 (2.70%)(12.76%)	0 (24.32%)(34.04%)	6 (43.24%)(34.04%)	2 (12.5%)(24.32%)
					9 (14.89%)(14.89%)
					7 (37.5%)(37.5%)
					1 (12.5%)

The mixed ANOVA showed that there was a significant difference between the groups of the first factor “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neutral,” “agree,” and “strongly agree” in relation to the students’ attitudes to teacher-induced codeswitching ($F(4, 48) = 43.57, p < .001$). As can be observed in table 2, this difference stems from the fact that the three age cohorts have similar attitudes with respect to Q1a, Q1b, Q1c, Q1d, Q1e. In other words, regardless of their age, the students were more likely to have positive attitudes towards codeswitching in the classroom. In fact, the number of students who favorably and positively rated the use of codeswitching is substantially higher than the number of those who went for “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” For example, when it comes to Q1a, which centers on the teacher’ use of Spanish, the statistics are mostly favorable in that 45.94% of students aged 18–20, 34.04% of those aged 21–24, and 62.5% of 25+ years old students “agree,” and 21.62% of 18–20, 29.78% of 21–24 and 25% of 25+ years old students “strongly agree.” The implication is that, irrespective of age, the students welcome the use of Spanish by the teacher when clarifying some ESP contents.

Similarly, the percentages related to Q1c and Q1e show that “agree” is the most rated response category. In fact, the percentages associated with Q1c show that 40.54% of 18–20, 27.65% of 21–24, and 37.5% of 25+ agree, and 27.02% of 18–20, 12.76% of 21–24, 12.5% of 25+ strongly agree. On the other hand, the statistics associated with Q1e reveal that 43.24% of 18–20, 34.04% of 21–24 and 12.5% of 25+ agree, and 24.32% of 18–20, 14.89% of 21–24 and 37.5% of 25+ strongly agree. In both Q1c and Q1e, the second most represented response category is “neutral.” This may indicate that some students are more focused on learning the content of the language rather than building rapport with their teachers. Interestingly, the age cohort that is more appealing to Q1c and Q1e, which represents the effective function of codeswitching, is the 18–20 years old. In other words, whereas the 21–24 and 25+ year-old students are more neutral in their ratings of Q1c and Q1e, it is the 18–20-year-old students who strongly rate Q1c and Q1e favorably. This implies that younger students may be more receptive to the teachers’ sense of humor. With respect to Q1b, the most rated response category is neutral (i.e., 37.83% of 18–20, 42.55% of 21–24 y 12.5% of 25+), followed by agree (i.e., 35.13% of 18–20, 25.53% of 21–24 and 25% of 25+). However, a closer look at the students’ ratings of “agree” and “strongly agree” suggests that most students, irrespective of age, are receptive to codeswitching when the teacher switches topic or introduces new activities. Finally, the ratings of

Q1d show that the highest percentage corresponds to the response category “agree” (i.e., 37.83% of 18–20, 36.17% of 21–24 and 50% of 25+), followed by “neutral” (i.e., 27.02% of 18–20, 27.65% of 21–24 and 12.5% of 25).

4.2 Students’ Attitudes Towards Student-Induced Codeswitching

This subsection examines students’ attitudes to codeswitching within the classroom when initiated by themselves or their classmates. To this end, the students’ ratings of the different statements attached to Q2 are analyzed on the grounds of the influence of both sex and age.

Table 3 shows that most students are either in favour of or neutral towards their classmates’ using Spanish when they communicate with the teacher. The statistics associated with Q2a show that 47.05% of male students “agree” (25%) or “strongly agree” (22.05%) that they do not mind when their classmates codeswitch when talking to their professor, and 38.23% remain neutral. In terms of female students, 45.83% “agree” (20.83%) or “strongly agree” (25%), and 50% of them remain neutral. It therefore seems that, regardless of their sex, most students are either favourable or neutral with respect to switching to Spanish to communicate with the teacher. It can be observed, however, that no female students disagreed strongly with the use of Spanish in student-teacher communication, while 5.88% of male students (5.88%) did oppose it strongly.

Table 3. Perception of student-induced codeswitching according to sex

Sex	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	I strongly agree
Q2a	4 (5.88%)	0 (8.82%)	6 (4.16%)	1 (38.23%)	26 (50%)	12 (25%)	17 (20.83%)	5 (22.05%)	15 (25%)	6 (25%)	
Q2b	4 (5.88%)	1 (14.16%)	7 (10.29%)	5 (20.83%)	34 (50%)	9 (37.5%)	14 (20.58%)	5 (20.83%)	9 (13.23%)	4 (16.66%)	
Q2c	7 (10.29%)	0 (14.70%)	10 (4.16%)	1 (23.52%)	16 (37.50%)	9 (36.76%)	25 (29.16%)	7 (14.70%)	10 (29.16%)	7 (29.16%)	
Q2d	13 (19.11%)	3 (12.50%)	17 (25%)	3 (12.50%)	25 (36.76%)	10 (41.66%)	9 (13.23%)	5 (20.83%)	4 (5.88%)	3 (12.50%)	

With regard to Q2b, 33.81% of male students are either relieved (20.58% “agree”) or greatly relieved (13.23% “strongly agree”) when told they can communicate in Spanish with their professor, and 50% remain neutral, which might indicate that they feel comfortable communicating with the teacher in English but might be open to using Spanish in certain situations. On the other hand, only 16.17% of male respondents express

disagreement (5.88% “strongly disagree” and 10.29% “disagree”). On the other hand, 37.49% of female students agree with statement 2b (20.83% “agree” and 16.66% “strongly agree”), 37.5% remained neutral, and 24.99% disagreed (20.83%) or strongly disagreed (4.16%). Therefore, results show that female students seem to feel more comfortable than male respondents when it comes to the possibility to communicating solely in English, since close to 30% of males do not feel relieved knowing they can communicate in their mother tongue with their professor, and almost 40% remain neutral on this question.

Concerning whether students should be allowed to resort to Spanish when unable to communicate in English (Q2c), 51.46% of male respondents agreed (36.76% agree and 14.70% strongly agree), 23.52% remain neutral and 24.99% disagree (14.70% disagree and 10.29% strongly disagree). In the case of the female respondents, whilst most respondents are in favour of using Spanish, 37.5% remain neutral, and only a 4.16% disagree. What this implies is that male students tend to be stricter towards the use of the L1 in the classroom.

Finally, when asked about their levels of anxiety when forbidden from using Spanish (Q2d), 19.11% of male respondents report feeling anxious (13.23% “agree”) or very anxious (5.88% “strongly agree”), versus the remaining 80.87% (25% “disagree,” 19.11% “strongly disagree,” and 36.76% “neutral”). On the other hand, 33.33% of female respondents, which includes 20.83% who “agree” and 12.5% who “strongly agree”), recognise feeling anxious, and out of this amount, 12.5% claim to feel extremely anxious (i.e., “disagree”). Hence, one can argue that female students tend to feel more anxiety when not allowed to speak in Spanish. Yet, 41.66% of female respondents reported feeling neutral, 12.5% disagreed and 12.5% strongly disagreed with Q2d, thus claiming to feel no stress or anxiety when unable to use Spanish. This might indicate than more than half of female students feel comfortable using English to communicate in the classroom.

With respect to sex, the mixed ANOVA showed that there was a significant difference between the groups of the first factor “I strongly disagree,” “I disagree,” “Neutral,” “I agree,” and “I strongly agree” in relation to the dependent variable, which is codeswitching ($F(4, 36) = 15.33, p <.001$). In other words, the difference between neutral or positive response categories (“agree” and “strongly agree”) and negative response categories (“disagree” and “strongly disagree”) is statistically significant. This is illustrated by the percentages of the five response categories in table

4 where a closer look reveals that, even though the response category associated with neutral outnumbers the remaining response categories, it is the response categories such as “agree” and “strongly agree” that overall outnumber the response category associated with disagree and strongly disagree when it comes to Q2a and c. This implies, in other words, that the trend in the students’ attitudes, regardless of age, is towards a more favorable view of the manifestation of their own codeswitching. For example, when looking into how tolerant the students are (i.e., Q2a) to see and hear classmates engage in Spanish with the teacher, a roughly substantial number of students of all age cohorts strongly tolerate the use of Spanish between the teacher and the students. Illustratively, it can be seen, for example, that 32.43% of 18–20 agree whereas 25.53% of 21–24 and 37.5% of 25+ strongly agree. Similar attitudes are observable when it comes to Q2c where 35.13% of 18–20, and 34.04% of 21–24 and 37.5% of 25+ agree on the statement that Spanish should be used alongside English. This may be grounded in linguistic tolerance, defined as willingness to accept behavior and beliefs that are different from your own, although you might not agree with or approve of them. However, a closer look at Q2b and Q2d reveals some rather contrasting results. With respect to Q2b, which revolves around what it means to use Spanish in ESP classrooms, 21.27% of 21–24 disagree whereas 32.43% of 18–20 agree and 12.5% of 25+ strongly disagree. Likewise, when it comes to Q2d, which revolves around whether the students feel anxious when they are forbidden from using Spanish, the results show that while 18–20-year-old students agree, 21–24-year-old students as well as 25+-year-old students disagree. The contrast between the results associated with Q2a and Q2c as opposed to Q2b and Q2d may be tied to the very nature of the questions. While the former could be more connected to linguistic tolerance, which often depends on external factors, the latter draw on the students’ personal emotions and feelings, which do not just tend to depend on internal factors but also tend to be more hidden than revealing. Nevertheless, both emotional attachment to language and linguistic tolerance are practices that represent pragmatic functions of codeswitching as they promote linguistic diversity in multicultural settings (Tsoumou).

Table 4. Perception of student-induced codeswitching according to age

	I strongly disagree	I disagree	Neutral	I agree	I strongly agree
Age (n37) (n47)	18–20 21–24 25+ (1081%) (422%)	18–20 21–24 25+ (n8) (n37)	18–20 21–24 25+ (n47) (n8)	18–20 21–24 25+ (n37) (n47)	18–20 21–24 25+ (n8) (n47) (n8)
Q2a (540%) (425%)	2 0	4 (422%)	2 (4680%) (3750%)	13 (35.13%)	22 (3224%) (19.14%)
Q2b (810%) (425%)	3 0	2 (540%) (2127%)	10 (4680%)	0 (50%)	17 (3243%) (12.76%)
Q2c (810%) (851%) (1250%)	4 1	6 (27.65%) (37.50%)	1 (24.32%) (12.50%)	9 (35.13%) (34.04%)	13 (37.50%) (21.62%)
Q2d (21.62%) (17.02%)	8 0	6 (23.40%) (37.50%)	11 (37.88%) (38.29%)	3 (18.91%) (37.50%)	18 (12.76%) (12.50%)
				7 (18.91%) (54.0%)	3 (12.76%) (54.0%)
				1 (8.51%) (12.50%)	0 (17.02%)
				6 (8.51%) (12.50%)	1 (8.51%) (12.50%)
				1 (8.51%) (12.50%)	4 (8.51%) (12.50%)
				2 (8.51%) (12.50%)	1 (8.51%) (12.50%)
				3 (8.51%) (12.50%)	8 (8.51%) (12.50%)
				8 (8.51%) (12.50%)	8 (8.51%) (12.50%)

Disparity is also notable when it comes to the percentages associated with each age cohort within each specific control variable. What is observable is that none of the age cohorts holds its ratings consistent and constant either horizontally among the control variables (i.e., strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree) or vertically among the specific statements (i.e., Q2a, Q2b, Q2c and Q2d). All in all, the students, regardless of age, are mostly reluctant to position themselves one way or the other when it comes to their attitudes to codeswitching as manifested in the classroom. Since codeswitching may be indexical of sociolinguistic identity (Myers-Scotton; Ellwood), the reason for this neutrality may be tied to the students' desire to conceal their identity. Ellwood (539) notes, for example, that "acts of identity are not always attempts to align with a particular identity, but may be attempts to reject, resist, or seek to modify an imposed identity." If (strongly) disagree or (strongly) agree may oblige the students to position themselves, thus revealing their standings when it comes to codeswitching, neutrality becomes an appropriate way to conceal such standings.

4.3 Self-Reported Frequencies/Occurrences of Codeswitching

The examination of self-reported frequencies of codeswitching revolves around two main questions.

Q3 intended to elicit information regarding how often students would make use of more than one language in everyday life. Just like the questions discussed in previous sections, it was structured as a five-point Likert scale. Nevertheless, to obtain information about frequency, the five response categories the students could choose included "never or hardly ever," "occasionally," "sometimes," "often," and "very often."

Table 5. Frequencies/occurrences of codeswitching according to sex

Sex	Never or hardly ever		Occasionally		Sometimes		Often		Very often	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Q3	2 (2.94%)	1 (4.16%)	17 (25%)	6 (33.82%)	23 (33.33%)	8 (20.58%)	14 (20.83%)	5 (17.64%)	12 (16.66%)	4
Q4	15 22.05%)	3 (12.50%)	22 (32.35%)	6 (25%)	20 (29.41%)	6 (50%)	6 (8.82%)	8 (33.33%)	2 (2.94%)	2 (8.33%)

As shown in table 5, the response category that attracted more responses amongst male and female respondents include “sometimes,” with over 33% of responses in both groups, and “occasionally” with 25% of responses for both male and female participants. It is worth noting that even though they did not attract as many responses as “sometimes” and “occasionally,” “often,” and “very often” garnered far more responses than

“never or hardly ever.” This suggests that most students boast many languages in their repertoire, which they use on a regular basis.

After finding out about the languages in their active repertoire, the focus turned to analyzing the students’ codeswitching practices. This was motivated by the belief that even though bi/multilingualism and codeswitching are closely connected, negative attitudes towards the latter (Martínez Agudo; Mata) could make multilingual students strive to keep the languages in their repertoire separate. Just like in the previous question, the respondents were asked, by means of a Likert-scale question, to indicate how often they alternated between languages when speaking, with response categories ranging from “never or hardly ever” to “very often.”

Here again, most respondents across gender groups were likely to codeswitch on a regular basis. That is exactly why “occasionally,” “sometimes,” and “often” attracted most responses. However, it is important to note that, in comparison with Q3, a sizeable number of respondents claimed they never or hardly ever alternated between languages. More specifically, while only 2.94% of males and 4.16% of females indicated that they never or hardly ever used more than one language, many more male and female respondents (22.05% and 12.5% respectively) stated that they never or hardly ever codeswitch.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the methodology section, the respondents were divided into different age groups based on the belief that factoring in age could reveal the extent to which codeswitching practices might differ depending on how old the respondents were. Overall, and as confirmed by the statistical analysis tests conducted, the options “occasionally,” “sometimes,” and “often” did attract most responses amongst all age groups, as illustrated in table 6.

Table 6. Frequencies/occurrences of codeswitching according to age

	Never or hardly ever	Occasionally	Sometimes	Often	Very often
Age (n37) (n47)	18–20 21–24 25+ (n8) (n37) (n47)	18–20 21–24 25+ (n8) (n37) (n47)	18–20 21–24 25+ (n8) (n37) (n47)	18–20 21–24 25+ (n8) (n37) (n47)	18–20 21–24 25+ (n8) (n37) (n47)
Q3 (540%) (2.12%)	2 0 (13.51%)(27.65%)(62.50%)(45.94%)	1 5 (13.51%)(27.65%)(62.50%)(45.94%)	5 17 (12.50%)(27.65%)(18.91%)(23.40%)	13 1 (12.50%)(18.91%)(16.21%)(19.14%)	7 11 (12.50%)(18.91%)(16.21%)(19.14%)
Q4 (24.32%) (14.89%) (25%)	9 2 (37.83%)(23.40%)(37.50%)	7 14 (37.83%)(23.40%)(37.50%)	11 3 (27.02%)(31.91%)	10 15 (0) (31.91%)	15 0 (8.10%)(23.40%)(37.50%)
				0 3 (8.10%)(23.40%)(37.50%)	11 3 (27.02%)(31.91%)
				3 1 (27.02%)(31.91%)	11 3 (27.02%)(31.91%)
				1 1 (27.02%)(31.91%)	6 9 (27.02%)(31.91%)
				1 1 (27.02%)(31.91%)	1 1 (27.02%)(31.91%)

After obtaining the aforementioned results, the most logical step was to find out whether gender and age could be correlated with multi/bilingual and codeswitching practices. The ANOVA test revealed that, overall, there was no statistically significant difference between male and female respondents when it comes to their propensity to use more than one language (Q3) and their codeswitching practices (Q4). That is exactly why the p values obtained for both questions were greater than 0.05 (0.103 and 0.391, respectively).

To further explore the above findings, logistic regression tests were carried out in a bid to gauge the influence of some variables on others and similar results were obtained. Here again, neither age nor gender was significant with regard to the respondents' multilingualism and how often they switched between languages.

4.4 Motives for Codeswitching in the Classroom

This subsection examines what the students claim to be the reasons why codeswitching may or may not help them in their academic performance.

The manifestation of codeswitching in academic settings is arguably the highlight of the positive side of mixing languages, thus countering the pejorative connotation that codeswitching once had. It is a linguistic practice that matters to the students. Tables 7 and 8 below, for example, show how the students relate codeswitching to their academic performance. The response categories associated with "increasing attention span," "feeling confidence about what the teacher is saying," "producing an answer," and "following the instruction" are visibly and notably the most rated reasons why the students resort to codeswitching in the classroom. These statistics suggest that the manifestation of codeswitching is key to the process of concept development that allows the students to connect the contents taught by the teacher with thoughts and ideas already developed in Spanish. For example, "an increase in attention span" is arguably a substantial component of success in the second language learning process. "Confidence in what the teacher is saying" and "understanding of the instructions" are undoubtedly the backbone of teaching activities. The percentages in these response categories show the benefits that the students see in codeswitching. The fact that the students link the use of codeswitching to these response categories allows the argument the students' ability to use both Spanish and English is key to enhancing their comprehension of the ESP contents.

In both tables 7 and 8, it is clear that the response category associated with “it does not make any difference” is the least valued, which explicitly indicates that the students are fully aware of the academic value of codeswitching in the classroom. In other words, codeswitching, as reflected in both tables, manifests for various reasons, thus confirming what has been suggested in previous studies (see Muñoz and Mora). However, an observation can be drawn from what is presented in both tables 7 and 8. It may be the case that the response categories associated with “increasing attention span,” “feeling confidence about what the teacher is saying,” “producing an answer,” and “following the instruction” play a substantial role in second learning acquisition, but critics of codeswitching may justifiably argue that resorting to the first language as a confidence booster may stem from the students’ lower level and lack of proficiency in English (Flyman-Mattsson and Burenhult). Evidently, being at a B2 level in English implies that students might not be fully proficient in English, which, to a larger extent may stand as the reason for them to go back and forth between Spanish and English. Meij and Zhao (406) already anticipated that “a . . . factor that is likely to influence . . . codeswitching behavior is the language proficiency . . . more switches will take place when the students are less and less knowledgeable and (less) skilled.” Nevertheless, as Ariza (2) argues, codeswitching “makes meaning clearer, and helps students to keep up with the academic gains of the rest of the class [*in this particular context*]” (own emphasis).

Table 7. Codeswitching and academic performance according to sex

		It does not make any difference				To increase attention span				To feel more confident about what the teacher is				To produce an answer				To follow instructions			
Sex		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female		
Q5		13 (19.11%)	4 (16.66%)	14 (20.58%)	3 (12.50%)	23 (33.80%)	10 (41.66%)	11 (16.17%)	5 (10.83%)	7 (16.17%)	2 (10.29%)	2 (8.33%)									

In terms of the significance of sex in the students' perception of codeswitching and its benefits in their academic performance, the findings presented in table 7 show that sex is not that significant in the connection between the students' use of codeswitching and their academic performance. In fact, a logistic regression analysis was performed to examine the influence of "it does not make any difference," "to increase

attention span,” “to feel more confident about what the teacher is saying,” “to produce an answer,” and “to follow instructions on sex.” This statistical analysis showed that the model as a whole was not significant ($\chi^2(1) = 2.77$, $p = 0.096$, $n = 2$). As can be seen, not just the values for both male and female students are higher than 0.05, but also both male and female students rate the five response categories in a slightly similar way. This points to the argument that both female and male students have similar interest in rating the reasons why codeswitching is important in their academic performance. First, frequencies amongst the responses associated to the response categories point to the argument that both male and female students bear the same interest when it comes to the relevance of codeswitching in their academic performance. The most valued response category for both male and female students is “feeling confident about what the teacher is saying,” followed by “the production of answers.” The third category includes the students who believe codeswitching does not make any difference. The category of attention span comes fourth right before the response category associated with following the instruction, which comes last. Second, the fact that some students (19.11% of male and 16.66% of female) believe codeswitching does not make any difference in their academic performance may favor the argument that even though codeswitching is pervasive in ESP classes, the purpose for which each student codeswitch cannot always be academically related. Nevertheless, what is presented in both tables 6 and 7 falls within Adendorff’s (389) argument according to which codeswitching [can] serve as a “communicative resource which enables the . . . students to accomplish a considerable of social and educational objectives.”

The perception of the codeswitching and its connection with the students’ academic performance is also examined from age perspective following similar control variables used for sex.

Table 8. Codeswitching and academic performance according to age

Age	It does not make any difference	To feel more confident about what the teacher is saying						To produce an answer			To follow instructions		
		18–20	21–24	25+	18–20	21–24	25+	18–20	21–24	25+	18–20	21–24	25+
Q5	11 (29.72%)(12.76%)	6 (18.91%)(12.02%)	0 (12.50%)(40.54%)	7 (46.88%)(125.0%)	8 (87.50%)(40.54%)	1 (21.62%)(17.02%)	15 (21.62%)(17.02%)	22 (21.62%)(17.02%)	7 (17.02%)(15.21%)	8 (15.21%)(13.88%)	0 (15.21%)(6.38%)	6 (15.21%)(6.38%)	3 (15.21%)(6.38%)

While proponents of English-only in the classroom may attempt to argue that an ESP classroom is a context in which English should be used exclusively, the reality, as illustrated in both tables 7 and 8, is that the students are mostly open to including Spanish in their teaching and learning process. In other words, the concept of English only does not always match the in-classroom reality of language teaching and learning (Raschka et al.). For example, the fact that most students, regardless of their age cohorts, report to feeling more confidence in what the teacher is saying can be interpreted as if the use of Spanish in ESP classrooms is, in a way, a confidence booster for the students.

However, some variations within each age cohort can be noticed. Students aged between 18 and 20 are the most diverse group. As shown in table 8, 29.72% of the 18-to-20 students believe codeswitching does not make any difference in their academic performance. While this percentage is lower than the one associated with “feeling of confidence in what the teacher is saying” (40.54%), it is, however, higher than ones associated with response categories such as “increase attention span” (18.91%), “produce an answer” (21.62%), and “follow the instructions” (16.21%). Similar results are apparent among the 21–24 group. Here, while the response category associated with “feeling more confidence about what the teacher is saying” is the most rated (46.80%), it is the response categories associated with “increasing attention span” (18.91%) and “produce an answer” (17.02%) that outperform the response categories associated with “it does not make any difference” (12.76%). This diversity, however, may be associated with the students’ ways of learning. One may argue that different students may have different approaches to second language learning. Those who believe that codeswitching does not make any difference are certainly under the impression that their learning approach is unrelated to their ability to switch language. On the other hand, one may also argue that the belief that codeswitching does not make any difference may be rooted in language proficiency in that students with a higher level of English may be confident in their proficiency, which in turn, may boost confidence in how the students perceive codeswitching. In the meantime, the students who relate codeswitching with their academic performance outnumber those who think codeswitching does not make any difference. Finally, regression analysis, which was performed to examine the influence of “it does not make any difference,” “to increase attention span,” “to feel more confident about what the teacher is saying,” “to produce an answer,” and “to follow instructions” on variable “age” to

predict the values “18/20,” “21/24,” and “25+,” revealed that the model as a whole was not significant ($\chi^2(2) = 3.82$, $p = 0.148$, $n = 3$). In other words, age and sex alike, as presented in both tables 7 and 8, do not appear to impact the link between codeswitching and students’ academic performance.

5. DISCUSSION

This paper set out to examine codeswitching and its role in the ESP classroom and determine the extent to which age and sex affect (or do not affect) the students’ attitudes towards codeswitching. Four research questions were addressed: (1) Is codeswitching positively or negatively perceived? (2) How does sex affect the students’ attitudes to codeswitching? (3) How does age affect the students’ attitudes to codeswitching? and (4) What motives are there for students to codeswitch?

With respect to the first research question, the findings indicate that codeswitching is not only positively perceived, but most importantly, codeswitching is a common practice within the classroom. In fact, as shown in tables 5 and 6, most students have occasionally, sometimes, often and very often codeswitched, against a slim number of students who claim to never or hardly codeswitch. In other words, the role played by codeswitching in the students’ academic performance is undeniable. Moreover, and as shown in tables 7 and 8, the students tend to associate the manifestation of codeswitching with academic and pedagogical gains such as increase students’ attention span, feel more confident about what the teacher is saying, produce an answer and follow the instructions. The implication here is that rather than being used as a distraction mechanism, codeswitching allows the students to engage with the teaching and process. In this regard, the use of Spanish in the ESP classroom allows the students to manage and negotiate the concepts of rights and obligations (see Myers-Scotton) in such a way as both Spanish and English are seen as valuable tools in process of learning English. This aligns with the argument that bilingualism is an opportunity for the students to not only express their feelings and thoughts, but also shape their identities (Tsoumou). Furthermore, codeswitching, as has been indicated, allows the students to connect the experience of learning English with thoughts and ideas already developed in Spanish. Among other motives, codeswitching is prompted by many different motives, including translation of target words, word finding, content enhancement as well as change in the topic being

discussed. This is an indicator that codeswitching makes meaning clearer and helps students keep up with the academic gains of the rest of the class in this context, as suggested by Ariza.

Regarding the second research question, both ANOVA and regression analysis showed no clear-cut connection between sex and codeswitching. In other words, both female and students tend to rate their responses to the three categories of the questions in a similar way. For example, by testing the students' attitudes to codeswitching based on sex (Tables 1 and 3), the trend is that both male and female students have positive attitudes towards codeswitching. Likewise, in examining the frequencies of codeswitching practices based on sex (Table 5), the revelation is that sex was not significantly influential. In fact, both male and female students highly rated sometimes and occasionally in a similar way.

As for the third research question, the findings show that overall age does not have a significant incidence in the way the students perceive and rate the use of codeswitching in the classroom. Regardless of the students' age, they all are likely to rate codeswitching favorably, which confirms the second hypothesis of the study. The examination of the students' attitudes to both teacher-induced codeswitching (Table 2) and students-induced codeswitching (Table 4) shows that the three age cohorts have similar attitudes; that is, the students, regardless of age, tend to positively rate the use of codeswitching.

Regarding the fourth research question, the analysis of the pragmatic and academic motives for codeswitching (Table 7) reveals that sex is less impactful in the connection between the students' use of codeswitching and their academic performance. The absence of the effect of sex on the way students rate codeswitching is suggestive that codeswitching is indeed a common practice that is primely valued based on its usefulness and academic benefits regardless of the students' sex, thus confirming hypothesis 1. Moreover, the examination of the association between codeswitching and academic performance indicates that all the students strongly feel confident about what the teacher is saying through codeswitching. However, even though age does not substantially affect the perception of codeswitching, some variations within each age group may be noticed when it comes to the way the students relate codeswitching with academic performance. For example, the 18–20 group is the only group to report that codeswitching does not make any difference in their academic performance.

The fact that neither age nor sex significantly affects the students' attitudes to codeswitching is an indication that the exclusive use of English in the ESP classroom does not often fulfill the students' expectations and needs. The understanding of attitudes, as presented in this paper is likely to influence pedagogical decision. Against the argument that teaching entirely through the target language makes the language real, allows learners to experience unpredictability, and develops the learners' own in-built language system (Macaro), codeswitching becomes a useful tool that allows a better understanding of ESP.

Although normatively the configuration of ESP classes would set English as the unmarked choice and any other language as a marked choice, the findings indicate that overall, the students are enthusiastic about the use of both Spanish and English by themselves and by their teachers. Any argument to suggest that the rights and obligations in an ESP context would compel the participants to favour English is thus challenged by the findings in this paper. In other words, the difference between marked and unmarked choices is blurred in that the students overtly claim Spanish as an uncontested tool in their English learning process. Resorting to Spanish while learning English thus contributes to enhancing learners' learning experience and making it more effective, as has been indicated in previous studies (Effiong; Santos; De la Cruz).

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that codeswitching is idiosyncratic in ESP classrooms. This idiosyncrasy highlights the impact of codeswitching and its ability to shape language teaching and learning. The fact that codeswitching does not depend on factors such as age or sex leads to the assumption that dismissing or ignoring codeswitching would threaten the possibility of an inclusive learning process. In other words, this paper supports the argument that attitudes towards codeswitching—both positive and negative—are key not only to the success or failure of teaching and learning practices but, more importantly, may determine how students assimilate the culture of the target language while connecting the experience with thoughts and ideas already developed in their L1. In other words, codeswitching is not only independent but also an undeniable sociopsychological phenomenon that must be taken into account if one wishes to generate an inclusive learning environment.

The study is limited in terms of its focus, as it only centers on the students enrolled in one Business Administration alone. Future research should examine other bachelor's degree programs to determine whether the present findings can be compared or contrasted.

REFERENCES

Adendorff, Ralph. "Code-Switching amongst Zulu Speaking Teachers and Their Pupils: Its Functions and Implications for Teachers' Education." *Language in Education*, vol. 7, 1993, pp. 141–62, doi: 10.1080/09500789309541356.

Anghel, Brindusa, et al. "Evaluating a Bilingual Education Program in Spain: The Impact Beyond Foreign Language Learning." *Economic Inquiry*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1202–23, doi: 10.1111/ecin.12305.

Ariza, Eileen. W. "Translanguaging and the Benefits of Going Beyond Codeswitching: Some Practical Applications." *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*, edited by John I. Lontas, Willey: Online Library, 2019, pp. 1–5, doi: 10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0961.

Baker, Colin. *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. Multilingual Matters LTD, 2001.

Barrio, José Luis, and Jesús Damián Fernández Solís. "Educación y humor: Una experiencia pedagógica en la educación de adultos." *Revista Complutense de Educación*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2010, pp. 365–85, www.revistas.ucm.es/index.php/RCED/article/view/RCED1010220365A/.

Buoy, Turyn, and Elena Nicoladis. "The Considerateness of Codeswitching: A Comparison of Two Groups of Canadian French-English Bilingual." *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2018, pp. 361–73, doi: 10.1080/17475759.2018.1462241.

Canagarajah, Suresh. "Codemeshing in Academic Writing: Identifying Teachable Strategies of Translanguaging." *The Modern Language*

Journal, vol. 95, no. 3, 2011, pp. 401–17, doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01207.x.

Chimbutane, Feliciano. “Codeswitching in L1 and L2 Learning Contexts: Insights from a Study of Teacher Beliefs and Practices in Mozambican Bilingual Education Programs.” *Language and Education*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2013, pp. 314–28, doi: 10.1080/09500782.2013.788022.

De la Cruz, Adriane. “Students’ and Teachers’ Attitude and Reasons for Codeswitching, and its Role in Learning Second Language Acquisition.” *Linguistic Forum*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2019, pp. 1–6, doi: 10.5281/zenodo.14812143.

Custodio Espinar, Magdalena. “CLIL Teacher Education in Spain.” *Content and Language Integrated Learning in Spanish and Japanese Contexts: Policy, Practice and Pedagogy*, edited by Keiko Tsuchiya and María Dolores Pérez Murillo, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 313–37, doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-27443-6_13.

Effiong, Akpabio M. “The Role of Mother Tongue in Early Childhood Education.” *Journal of Education and Practice*, vol. 24, 2013, pp. 141–42, www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/JEP/article/view/8909/9183/.

Ellwood, Constance. “Questions of Classroom Identity: What Can Be Learned from Codeswitching.” *The Modern Language Journal*, vol. 92, 2008, pp. 538–57, doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00786.x.

Flyman-Mattsson, Anna, and Niclas Burenhult. “Codeswitching in Second Language Teaching of French.” *Working Papers*, vol. 47, 1999, pp. 59–72.

García, Ofelia. *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective*. 2009, Wiley-Blackwell.

Hazaymeh, Wafa A. “Teachers’ Perceptions of Code-Switching Functions and Effects in English as a Foreign Language Classroom.” *European*

Journal of Educational Research, vol. 11, no. 3, 2022, pp. 1839–49, doi: 10.12973/eu-jer.11.3.1839.

Levine, Glenn. “Student and Instructor Beliefs and Attitudes about Target Language Use, First Language Use, and Anxiety: Report of a Questionnaire Study.” *The Modern Language Journal*, vol. 87, 2003, pp. 343–64, doi: 10.1111/1540-4781.00194.

Mabule, Dorah Riah. “What is This? Is It Code Switching, Code Mixing or Language Alternating?” *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, vol. 5, 2015, pp. 339–50, doi: 10.5901/jesr.2015.v5n1p339.

Macaro, Ernesto. “Analyzing Student Teachers’ Codeswitching in Foreign Language Classrooms: Theories and Decision Making.” *The Modern Language Journal*, vol. 85, 2001, pp. 531–58, doi: 10.1111/0026-7902.00124.

Macaro, Ernesto, et al. “The Importance of Certification of English Medium Instruction Teachers in Higher Education in Spain.” *Porta Linguarum: revista internacional de didáctica de las lenguas extranjeras*, vol. 32, 2019, pp. 103–08, doi: 10.30827/pl.v0i32.13702.

Martínez Agudo, Juan de Dios. *Native and Non-Native Teachers in English Language Classrooms: Professional Challenges and Teacher Education*. De Gruyter Mouton, 2017.

Mata, Rodolfo. “Bilingualism is Good but Codeswitching is Bad: Attitudes about Spanish in Contact with English in the Tijuana-San Diego Border Area.” *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2022, pp. 386–407, doi: 10.1080/15427587.2022.2136672.

Muñoz, José Enrique, and Yadira Fernanda Mora. “Functions of Code-Switching: Tools for Learning and Communicating in English Classes.” *HOW: A Colombian Journal for Teachers of English*, vol. 13, 2006, pp. 31–45, www.howjournalcolombia.org/index.php/how/article/view/106/.

Myers-Scotton, Carol. *Multiple Voices: An Introduction to Bilingualism*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006.

Raschka, Christine, et al. "Conflicts and Tensions in Codeswitching in a Taiwanese EFL Classroom." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2009, pp. 157–71, doi: 10.1080/13670050802153152.

Samar, Reza Ghafar, and Shahab Moradkhani. "Codeswitching in the Language Classroom: A Study of Four EFL Teachers' Cognition." *RELC Journal*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2014, pp. 152–64, doi: 10.1177/0033688214534796.

Sánchez Carretero, Cristina. "El aprendizaje de lenguas a través del humor." *Encuentro. Revista de investigación e innovación en la clase de idiomas*, vol. 9, 1997, pp. 142–48, www.ebuah.uah.es/dspace/handle/10017/912/.

Santos, Jay Mark. "The Utilization of Codeswitching and Its Impact on Students' Academic Performance." *Cosmos Journal of Engineering & Technology*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2021, pp. 48–54.

Tsoumou, Jean Mathieu. "English as an International Language: English/French Language Alternation in Politically Motivated CMC in Congo-Brazzaville." *Journal of English as an International Language*, vol. 14 no. 2, 2019, pp. 97–117, www.hdl.handle.net/11268/10761/.

Van der Meij, Hans, and Xiaoguang Zhao. "Codeswitching in English Courses in Chinese Universities." *The Modern Language Journal*, vol. 94, 2010, pp. 396–411, doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.2010.01090.x.

Wei, Li. "Key Concepts in Applied Linguistics: Translanguaging." *ELIA: Estudios de lingüística inglesa aplicada*, vol. 21, 2021, pp. 163–77, doi: 10.12795/elia.2021.i21.06.

Wei, Li, and Wu, Chao-Jung. "Polite Chinese children revisited: creativity and the use of codeswitching in the Chinese complementary school classroom." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 12(2), 2009, pp. 193–211. doi: 10.1080/13670050802153210

Wei, Li, and Peter Martin. "Conflicts and Tensions in Classroom Codeswitching: An Introduction." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2009, pp. 117–22, doi: 10.1080/13670050802153111.

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX 1: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Section 1 of 5

Survey research: student's perception on codeswitching

This questionnaire is part of a research study, carried out by the UEM Language Department.

This project intends to analyze the language teaching/learning model for specific purposes that is currently implemented in Higher Education and specifically in the European University of Madrid.

It will help us develop tools that enhance the quality of language teaching at the UEM, thus favoring inclusive learning.

YOUR DATA WILL BE TREATED WITH ABSOLUTE CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMOUSLY

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Note: ESP stands for English for Specific Purposes. For example, English for business and management is considered as an ESP subject.

Please contact Dr. Jean Mathieu Tsoumou (at jeanmathieu.tsoumou@universidadeeuropea.es) should you have any doubts.

Section 2 of 5

Demographic data

In this first part of the questionnaire you will be asked some demographic questions. Read each item carefully and respond as indicated below:

Gender *

Female

Male

Others

Age *

18-20

20-24

25 o más

Nationality *

Short answer text

In which Faculty do you study? *

School of Biomedical and Health Sciences

School of Sports Sciences

School of Social Sciences and Communication

School of Architecture, Engineering and Design

Now, choose your degree *

1. Grado en Criminología 100% online

2. Grado en Musicología 100% online

3. Grado en Medicina

4. Grado en CAFYD

5. Grado en Gestión Deportiva 100% online

6. Grado en Gestión Deportiva (Global Bachelors Degree in Sport Management)

7. Grado en Marketing

8. Grado en Marketing 100% online

9. Grado en Marketing-Alcobendas

10. Grado en Farmacia_Semipresencial

11. Grado en Farmacia; y G. en Bio; y G. Farmacia y G. en Nutrición Humana y Dietética

12. Grado en Fisioterapia Hcap/Grado CAFYD Semipresencial (online)

13. Grado en Psicología

14. Grado en ADE

15. Grado en Ingeniería Civil

16. Grado en ADE 100% inglés

17. Grado en ADE_Alcobendas

18. Grado en ADE 100% Online

19. Doble grado en ADE/Doble Business analytic

20. Doble Grado en Fundamentos de la Arquitectura y en Diseño/Fundamentos

21. Grado en Física

22. Grado en Ing. de Sistemas de Telecomunicación

23. Grado en Ingeniería Aeroespacial en Aeronaves

What is your native language *

Short answer text

How many languages can you speak besides your native language? *

1. None
2. 1 language
3. 2 languages
4. 3 languages
5. 4 languages
6. More than 4 languages

If so, could you name the different languages you speak?

Short answer text

How often do you use more than one language? *

- Never or hardly ever
- Occasionally
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very often

What do you think your English level is? *

- Beginner
- Intermediate
- Advanced
- Near native
- Native

After section 2 Continue to next section

Section 3 of 5

II - Current ESP context

Codeswitching is the use of two or more languages simultaneously during an English class. This section is designed to understand your perception of codeswitching as it occurs in the ESP class.

How often do you switch or mix languages in the ESP classroom? *

- Never or hardly ever
- Occasionally
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very often

If so, can you name the languages you usually mix?

Short answer text

Choose one or more reasons why switching languages helps you in your academic performance in ESP? *

It doesn't make any difference

To increase attention span

To feel more confident about what the teacher is saying

To produce an answer

To follow instructions

I codeswitch in the classroom: *

When I don't know the meaning of a word in English

Because I want to check my understanding of the topic that the teacher is explaining

Because I want to discuss a topic that is not related to the one being discussed in English

Because most of my classmates speak Spanish and I don't see the reason to speak in English with Spanish...

After section 3 Continue to next section

Section 4 of 5

III Attitudes towards/perception of codeswitching in general

In this part, we would like to know your general opinion about codeswitching. Please, read carefully and answer as indicated.

How much do you agree with the following statements? *

	I strongly disagree	I disagree	Neutral	I agree	I strongly agree
When the teacher...	<input type="radio"/>				
When the teacher...	<input type="radio"/>				
When the teacher...	<input type="radio"/>				
The occasional...	<input type="radio"/>				
The occasional...	<input type="radio"/>				

After section 4 Continue to next section

Section 5 of 5

IV Attitudes towards/perception of own codeswitching

Now, we would like to know your personal perception of codeswitching. Please, read carefully and answer as indicated.

How much do you agree with the following statements? *

	I strongly disagree	I disagree	Neutral	I agree	I strongly agree
I don't mind wh...	<input type="radio"/>				
I feel relieved ...	<input type="radio"/>				
All students sh...	<input type="radio"/>				
I feel anxious ...	<input type="radio"/>				

APPENDIX 2: THE DATA ANALYZED IN THIS STUDY

Q1. How much do you agree with the following statements?

- Q1a. When the teacher uses Spanish to clarify the meaning of key information, I find it useful.
- Q1b. When the teacher uses Spanish to introduce a new topic or a new activity, I pay more attention.
- Q1c. When the teacher uses Spanish to make a joke or to catch students' attention, I feel more interested.
- Q1d. The occasional use of Spanish in the classroom helps understand the lesson (s) better.
- Q1e. The occasional use of Spanish in the Classroom contributes to building a better teacher/student relationship.

Q2. How much do you agree with the following statements?

- Q2a. I don't mind when my mates use Spanish in the classroom to communicate with the teacher.
- Q2b. I feel relieved when I can express myself in Spanish to communicate with the teacher.
- Q2c. All students should be allowed to communicate in Spanish when they are unable to do it in English.

- Q2d. I feel anxious when my teacher does not allow me to express myself in Spanish.

Q3. How often do you use more than one language?

Q4. How often do you switch between languages or mix them?

Q5. Choose one or more reasons why switching languages helps you in your academic performance in ESP



When Fiction Becomes History: The Morphology of Context in the Short Stories of Bridget O'Connor

Cuando la ficción deviene historia: la morfología del contexto en los relatos de Bridget O'Connor

JONATHAN P.A. SELL

Institution address: Facultad de Educación, Universidad de Alcalá. Calle Madrid, 1, 19001 Guadalajara.

E-mail: jonathan.sell@uah.es

ORCID: 0000-0001-5566-6393

Received: 15/01/2025. Accepted: 23/03/2025.

How to cite this article: Sell, Jonathan P.A. "When Fiction Becomes History: The Morphology of Context in the Short Stories of Bridget O'Connor." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025 pp. 80–99.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/xgatmz22>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Abstract: Taking as its theoretical starting-point Bergson's notion of subjective time and as a practical exemplar Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, this article contends that fiction has the capacity to morph historical context, thereby making it phenomenologically present to readers. As a formal contrast to Proust's immense novel, Bridget O'Connor's short stories are analyzed to show how even short fiction can give shape to context, in this case through aspects of style and characterization. As a result, conventional distinctions between history and fiction are elided, which in turn challenges conventional definitions of historical fiction.

Keywords: Bridget O'Connor; Marcel Proust; context; morphology; history; fiction.

Summary: Introduction. Time and Context in O'Connor's Short Stories. The Morphology of Context in O'Connor's Short Stories. Conclusions.

Resumen: Tomando como punto de partida teórico la noción de tiempo subjetivo de Bergson y como ejemplo práctico *In Search of Lost Time* de Proust, este artículo sostiene que la ficción tiene la capacidad de mutar el contexto histórico, haciéndolo así fenomenológicamente presente a los lectores. Como contraste formal a la inmensa novela de Proust, se analizan los relatos breves de Bridget O'Connor para mostrar cómo incluso la ficción breve puede dar forma al contexto, en este caso a través de aspectos de estilo y caracterización. Como resultado, se diluyen las distinciones convencionales entre la historia y la ficción, lo que a su vez pone en tela de juicio las definiciones convencionales de ficción histórica.

Palabras clave: Bridget O'Connor; Marcel Proust; contexto; morfología; historia ficción.

Sumario: Introducción. Tiempo y contexto en los relatos de O'Connor. La morfología de contexto en los relatos de O'Connor. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Apart from several stage-plays and film-scripts, including *Tinker, Tailor Soldier Spy* co-written with her husband, Peter Straughan and released in 2011, a year after her death, Bridget O'Connor's cruelly truncated writing career yielded two collections of short stories, *Here Comes John* (1993) and *Tell Her You Love Her* (1997).¹ The small body of criticism agrees on the signature qualities of speed, precision, immediacy, flair for observation, ear for dialogue, mordant humour and gritty lyricism (Doyle; Evans; Lázaro Lafuente; Sell, "Bridget O'Connor, *Here Comes John*" and "Inside the Goldfish Bowl") and on the paradigmatic protagonism of socially, professionally or sexually disappointed, sometimes obsessive (O'Connor qtd. in Lázaro Lafuente 172) and almost always isolated urbanites, the "victims" with whom O'Connor herself identified in the semi-autobiographical "Hard Times." Yet the achievement of O'Connor's stories lies far beyond aspects of style and types of character which are not necessarily unique to her. Rather, it consists in the aesthetic textualization of an age in which moral paralysis and social exclusion led to a usually abortive struggle for self-fulfilment or transcendence in a society which entrapped the individual in a reiterative, soul-destroying cycle of meaningless social and inter-personal relations and material consumption. In both collections, the evils of consumer society in Greater London in the late 1980s and 1990s are exposed subtly yet with clinical precision. O'Connor's stories are very much children of a particular time and place, or context: Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite London. They are set in and around shopping arcades, pubs, newsagents, PR firms, clothing chain stores, banks, market research firms and building societies. In a world of services and consumption, identity is constructed, recognition sought and communication entered into by means of material externals. We are what we buy, or wear, or consume: as Tina reflects in "I'm Running Late," "At the counter it's obvious, the difference between us" (*HC* 38–39). It is the surface that negotiates an individual's place in society, be it Tony Wornel's attention-winning leg-cast (*TH* 29–45) or Gary's eloquent t-shirt slogans

¹ For more on O'Connor's biography, see Sell, "Bridget O'Connor"; for more on her short stories, see Sell, "Bridget O'Connor, *Here Comes John*," "Transcendent Commodities" and "Commodified Identity."

(*TH* 119–129).² Knowing your girl means calibrating her niche in the marketplace: “Take your average Harvey Nichols girl, she don’t drink tea. She’s expensive. Cappuccino” (*TH* 122). If gold is the standard of value, it is beyond the horizon here, existing only as the glitzy colour of the busker’s shell-suit and trainers (*HC* 111–19) or of Godfrey the goldfish’s scales (*TH* 131–48).

It is how O’Connor gives a morphology to that particular historical-social-economic context that is the subject of this essay. What is of interest is not the textual representation of that context—in other words, its mimesis through description—nor O’Connor’s critique of it; nor even how O’Connor sows her stories with an inventory of *realia* or cultural references—brand names, chain stores, TV and pop celebrities—that will be a treasure trove for textual archaeologists of the future and index the social and economic particularities of the historical context—1980s–1990s urban consumer society—which O’Connor delineates so cannily. Rather, the issue at stake is how O’Connor’s stories give a shape or morphology to what Hamlet called “the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure” (Shakespeare 699)—how, that is to say, the texts themselves *present* context phenomenologically rather than *represent* it mimetically. The shaping or morphology of context thereby becomes one way of “putting forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (Lyotard 81). By providing through her texts a phenomenological morphology of a precise historical context, O’Connor resolves the conflict between the mental faculty of presentation’s drive to present an object—in this case, a particular historical context—and that object’s fundamental inaccessibility (Johnson 118–19): context can become accessible when given a phenomenological shape, a conclusion that, as will become apparent, also has implications for the vexed question of what historical fiction is.

To that extent, this essay is in some ways caught up in the “spiralling return to time as the focus and horizon of all our thought and experience” which David Wood (xxxv) expected to follow the twentieth century’s linguistic turn. More precisely, it is in sympathy with Mark Currie’s simultaneously narratological and philosophical project to provide “a theoretical account of time . . . particularly in relation to fiction, to the strange temporal structures that have developed in the novel in recent decades” and to “revisit the relation of fiction and philosophy because of

² Here and throughout, the titles of the two collections are abbreviated thus: *HC* = *Here Comes John*, *TH* = *Tell Her You Love Her*.

these strange temporal structures” (1). But it is also a contribution to the problematic issue of what should be understood as historical fiction. Defining any literary genre is difficult, defining historical fiction notoriously so. One recent critic puts the matter as follows: “Indeed, the intergeneric hybridity and flexibility of historical fiction have long been one of its defining characteristics” (De Groot 2). Another has proposed that any work may be considered historical fiction if “it is wholly or partly about the public events and social conditions which are the material of history” (Rodwell 48); on this view, as a record and critique of 1980s–1990s urban consumer society, O’Connor’s stories would appear to qualify as historical fiction. Moreover, if it is true, as Barbara Foley has argued, that “the historical novel’s powerful synthesis of the dialectics of social change mediates the emergence of capital itself as the supreme social subject” (145), few short stories are more “historical” than O’Connor’s in their engagement and critique of 1980s–1990s consumer society or consumer capitalism (see below). But this essay takes “historical” one stage further for, as we shall see, fiction’s capacity to morph context constitutes it, whether self-avowedly historical fiction or otherwise, as in a very strict sense historical because its historical context becomes palpably present: fiction can *become* history, a state of affairs which runs counter to the claims of poet, essayist and translator Francisco Carrasquer (qtd in Mata-Induráin 17) that the adjective “historical” may be predicted of the novel whereas substantive “history” never can.

French philosopher Henri Bergson’s notion of a subjective, human or phenomenological time in opposition to scientific or cosmological clock-time is fundamental to what follows. It is also central to Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of the interconnected genres of history and fiction, both of which are concerned with the human experience of time (142; Collington 228). Bergson had precursors, among them Augustine (*Confessions* 11.xxvi.33) and Kant, for whom time was “merely a subjective condition of our (human) intuition . . . and in itself, outside the subject, is nothing” (164), while contemporaries William James and Alfred North Whitehead held similar views. But it was Bergson who popularized subjective time to the point that it would influence Marcel Proust, his student and best man at his wedding (Carter 139), as well as stream-of-consciousness writers like Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

The Case of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*

Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* acknowledges a debt to Bergsonian subjective time on various occasions: Marcel observes how time is elastic (Proust 2: 217) and grows longer in solitude or while waiting for a rendezvous (3: 403, 442); and he argues that "As there is a geometry in space, so there is a psychology in time" (5: 637).³ Moreover, the novel's very physical massiveness is not only a correlative of the time required to read it but also morphologically presents the passage of time, the number of spaces and places, and the plethora of characters encompassed by its seven volumes. Its material extent shows rather than tells "the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure," phenomenologically replicates its extensive context. It is a novel whose heavy phenomenological presence is a correlative of its ambition to capture "the weight, density, and concreteness of things, bodies, and sensations" (Calvino 25), to adopt Italo Calvino's definition of the weighty tendency in literature, as well as of the context depicted mimetically in its diegesis.

But there is more to *In Search of Lost Time*'s formal distention—and distention (*distensio*) was Augustine's term for humans' subjective perception of chronological time—than the simplistic equation "a big context requires a big book," which is in any case untrue, for small books like Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* can encompass far larger tracts of time, big ones like Joyce's *Ulysses*, far smaller ones. *In Search of Lost Time* takes formal stretching and elongation to new limits in its morphological adaptation to the events and the personages it contains. Its sheer length translates into a capaciousness which automatically expands its chronological grasp; thus, it almost masters time, not through the compression enforced by the Aristotelian unity, but by the distension of its formal limits to encompass it whole—or to come as close to encompassing it as is artistically possible. In its collapse towards the three-hour traffic of the stage, that Aristotelian unity as applied to drama led to mimetic distortions and diegetic improbabilities; in its tendency towards infinity, the Proustian unity of time maximizes the impression of mimetic realism and diegetic probability and steers magnificently clear of the distortions produced by formal constriction, which Dryden (26) likened famously to looking down the wrong end of a perspective-glass. Thus, a pseudo-Aristotelian unity is approached more nearly than it would be in a shorter work because the lapse of chronological time required to read the novel stretches endlessly in replication of the

³ Parenthetical references to Proust are by volume and page number.

lapse of the fictional time textualized in the novel, a time the novel persuades us corresponds to a historical context. The effect is that in terms of duration the fictional time of the events and characters in the novel and the extra-fictional time of the reader outside the novel approach co-extension and simultaneous co-existence.

Therefore, the novel's distended morphology bears directly on time viewed quantitatively: just as it takes a long time to read the novel, so the novel covers a long period of time. One can be reading the novel for months, even years at intermittent readings; and as that reading time extends chronologically, so it begins to match the chronological extent of the novel's context, which determines its distended morphology. Moreover, readers grow old as they read the novel in an ageing process that runs parallel to that of the novel's characters and which the novel never lets us forget. In this respect, the novel's morphology engenders a very basic human sympathy between reader and characters. In fact, Proust actually states that one reason for the length of the work was to textualize that very ageing process, which he achieves by literally incorporating time into his descriptions of characters: so the guests at the final Guermantes reception were "puppets which exteriorised time" in their physical senescence, "time which by habit is made invisible and to become visible seeks bodies" (6:291). These bodies disclose "the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure," much as the body of Proust's novel makes phenomenologically visible the invisibility, or makes phenomenologically accessible the inaccessibility, of the context its mimesis represents. As time becomes visible in human corporality, so it does, morphologically, in the shape of the novel which is cut to its characters' cloth, the fabric of which is time. That cutting necessitates the expansion of formal space through the distension of the novel in order "to describe men as occupying so considerable a place, compared with the restricted place which is reserved for them in space, a place on the contrary prolonged past measure . . . —in Time" (6:451).

Here Proust elides the traditional metaphysical distinction between time and space into the time-and-space which together constitute context in conventional definitions, and into the unitary conception of space-time which in physics has fused the non-relativistic, classical three dimensions of space with the fourth dimension of time: it is the "new Time & Space Continuum" O'Connor's Barry envisions while pissing up a back-alley (*TH* 156). This elision affords an analogy with Bakhtin's chronotope, itself indebted to Einstein's Theory of Relativity, a term whose literal meaning

he gives as “time space” and which he defines as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84) He continues:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (84)

Bakhtin’s chronotope is implicitly palpable: it is a “*concrete whole*,” “time *thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible*” (emphasis added). In this respect, it bears resemblance to our notion of the phenomenological morphology of context in fiction. However, it differs from our morphology in that it functions on the level of mimesis, “provid[ing] the ground essential for the showing forth, the *representability* of events . . . emerg[ing] as a center for concretizing *representation*” (250. Emphasis added). If we remove Bakhtin’s mimetic focus, however, the chronotope’s function “as the primary means for materializing time in space . . . as a force giving body to the entire novel” comes to resemble our phenomenological morphology by means of which “time in space,” or context, is literally materialized in the shape of the piece of fiction, in its material “body,” which makes present the “form and pressure” of its historical-social-economic context.

But operating on smaller structural scales, the morphology of *In Search of Lost Time* also conveys a qualitative impression of time as passing slowly, so slowly as to approach standstill. The novel’s painstaking diegesis seems almost to arrest the rush of time to the point of standstill, apparently stemming the tide of the philosopher’s *nunc fluens* to create the illusion of a *nunc stans*, a present moment excised from chronology and expanded towards infinity. Reading *In Search of Lost Time* is no swift straight line from capital letter to full-stop, from one paragraph indent to another, from chapter to chapter, but a constant stopping and starting, a back-tracking and meandering, which converts fiction’s conventional paratactical arrow-like flow into a sometimes frustrating reading on the spot: the novel’s syntax, paragraphing and internal divisions transform the usual *nunc fluens* of the novel-reading experience into an unusual *nunc stans* which alerts the reader to the very quality of time as something that has duration and whose chronological advance is almost

imperceptible.⁴ Proust's readers face a perpetual dilemma of whether to skip quickly to the end of the sentence, hurry on to paragraph end, fast-forward to next chapter (should there be one)—all in obedience to the quotidian imperatives of officious, extra-fictional chronology—or to stop all the clocks, put the brakes on the wheels of time and ease themselves into the leisured *durée* that arises inevitably on an attentive reading of the Proustian text. Readers, in other words, engage in the same struggle against the inexorable flow of chronological time as Proust the novelist and Marcel, his protagonist; like Shakespeare's audiences, they intuit the form and feel the pressure of time. Much as the massive Podsnap plate of Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* declared in pounds and ounces the *nouveau* wealth of its owner, so the bulk of *In Search of Lost Time* is an invitation to readers to experience the weight of time, as experienced in turn by fictional Marcel. One consequence of this is the reader's sympathetic identification with Proust's narrator; another is that the reader who brings chronology to a halt in the manner of Marcel's reminiscences may relish the *durée* of the reading *nunc stans* that has been wrested from the jaws of devouring time.

I have written at some length about Proust for the simple reason that his novel lies at one extreme of prose fiction's generously indefinite criterion of length; at the other lies the short story, and, as *short short* stories, the complete contrast between O'Connor's fictions and *In Search of Lost Time* renders the former an attractive testing-ground for the hypothesis that fiction of different kinds can present context phenomenologically by giving it a palpable shape.⁵ Perceptive readers will have noticed that in my discussion of Proust, I moved away from Marcel's intuitions and perceptions of a subjective, Bergsonian time to the novel's morphological presentation of its context. When a fiction shapes context in the sense that concerns us here, it is subjective in so far as the product of an individual writer's craft; but it is also, more importantly and irremediably, public or social in that it remits the reader to a context that is, so to speak, "common knowledge," broadly familiar in its historical-social-economic particularities. It is this social morphology of context in O'Connor's stories that is the focus of the following sections.

⁴ *Nunc fluens* (flowing now) and *nunc stans* (standing now) were the scholastic rewrites of Boethius's *nunc currens* (running now) and *nunc permanens* (*De Trinitate* 4: 72–77).

⁵ Shakespeare's plays, each of which have their particular morphology, might also have been adduced. For a full treatment, see Sell, *Shakespeare's Sublime Ethos* (176–87).

1. TIME AND CONTEXT IN O'CONNOR'S SHORT STORIES

Many of O'Connor's short stories exhibit a concern or anxiety about the passage of time, something which for the author was "major" (Evans), a precious commodity in non-stop retreat. Of the two collections' total of 33 stories, six invoke or imply time in their titles ("Kissing Time," "Time in Lieu," "I'm Running Late," "Old Times," "Time to Go," "Hard Times," "A Little Living" and "Closing Time"); taken as a whole, they revisit the classical commonplaces of *tempus fugit* and *tempus edax rerum*, the voracity of the latter gaining added point in connection with a society of remorseless consumption. That society, in which O'Connor's characters are trapped, is viewed synoptically rather than dynamically, to adopt Halliday's terminology for the distinction between noun- and verb-rich writing, to which we shall return: it is "a world of things, rather than one of happening; of product, rather than process; of being rather than becoming" (146–47). The characters are permanently running on the spot, or, as Eve realizes, are "dying fish going round and round" (*TH* 4) in circles like the "endless U-ey" (*TH* 133) of goldfish Godfrey in his bowl. There is no growth, no progression: one date follows another with another spin of the Rolodex; one drink follows another. Characters are caught up in a vortex of directionless, iterative moments, each new moment replicating the past and anticipating the future with the result that in fact there is no future and past, but an eternal present. Rick and Len in "Old Times" coincide once a year for their weekend bender in London: "All the years before they drowned The Big Weekend in a sea of beer and wine, and beached, fish-eyed on the Monday . . . They always had a great time. *Grate!* Even though they could hardly remember it" (*HC* 139. Original emphasis). Alcohol induces oblivion, but that yearly razzle in the Smoke is a replay of the previous year's and in Rick's and Len's memories all the razzles merge into one wuzzy recollection: "this is well not fun, exactly like last year . . . or, well, was it the year before that?" (*HC* 144).

Because there is no future, the present must be lived to the fullest; there is no time to be lost, not a second to be wasted, particularly as, to rewire the topic and vehicle of Peggy's metaphor in "Closing Time," time is a "mugger . . . snatching the present" (*TH* 175). As they circle around the temporal vortex, many of O'Connor's characters espouse the banal post-romanticism sold to those of her generation by pop-philosophers such as Blondie in songs like "Die young stay pretty," in which we are told "You've gotta live fast, 'cos it won't last" (Harry and Stein). In "Time in

Lieu,” Fiona is “breathless,” “time is short;” in a comment that identifies sex as another form of consumption, she says, “Sometimes you just grab sex, like you grab fast food, and hope it’s safe. Anyway, you haven’t got the time. You are always very busy” (*HC* 34, 27). Elsewhere, in a verbal echo of Blondie, Eve, in “Lenka’s Wardrobe” boasts, “I stay pretty, rich” even though she is also “dying” in “the [telephone] pool with the other dying knackered girls” (*TH* 3–4). And as Godfrey the goldfish’s teenage chronicler, sister of spaced-out Majella and daughter of drug-cabbaged Mum, notes in her red note pads, “only the *very* fast survived” (*TH* 136).

Naturally, the present is always either in the future or already in the past, and whereas Keats or Coleridge on a good day might look forward to and write in yearning anticipation of a transient ripeness, O’Connor’s characters find the flower has already blown, the fruit is always past mature. At what should be the apogee of her sensualist moment, luxuriating in the touch of diamonds upon her naked skin, Eve finds that she is already a “soft fruit,” no longer ripe and plagued by fruit flies (*TH* 14); likewise, in “Shop Talk,” shop girls are “mutant fruits” that produce “A quick feeling of revolt. A revolting feeling” (*TH* 26). Meanwhile, the sensualist protagonist of “Nerve Endings” is prepared to feign death in order to “feel a finger and thumb press upon her eyelids;” and then she really does die (*TH* 74). Of course, the Romantics were not unaware that the flower finally withered or the fruit rotted into rank corruption, which is one reason why the fleeting moment of maturity was to be lived to the highest pitch of intensity. But O’Connor almost always concentrates on the withering and the rot, hardly ever treating her characters to the fleeting moment of Romantic ripeness or romantic plenitude. If, as Coleridge wrote, “The transientness is poison in the wine” (276), at least the Romantics were willing to show us both poison and wine. With O’Connor we only get the poison; her characters are in knackered pursuit of the immediately perishable. The act of consumption is an act of murder, subjecting all commodities to an inevitable death sentence. The consumer needs to consume in order to replace the already consumed in what amounts to an endless, self-replicating cycle in which each new act of consumption is effectively a replay of the previous one and a rehearsal of the next. Thus, the kitsch commodity hooped at a fairground, Godfrey the goldfish, is just one in a long line of “pet deaths” (*TH* 133). At first he “bright[ens] the “dingy” lower class existence of Majella and her family, only to die eventually of over consumption of the leftovers (“florets of cauliflower . . . broccoli bombs . . . logs of carrots . . . shreds of chicken

and lamb . . . chips . . . old cups of sugary sun-warmed tea . . . [mum's] little white pills," 139–47) unconsumed by the other members of the household. Like the goldfish looping in its bowl, the individual is immersed in an endless cycle of consumption—in Majella's case, of drugs—which leads to its deindividuation as, like a goldfish, it remains animate but becomes indistinguishable from its fellows, and in the worst cases is a prelude to its death. We are what we consume, surrendering our identity to the commodities with which we stock our lives. And as we replace one generation of mobile for the next, and then the next, or purchase unneeded, poor quality clothes at each change of season—and in fashion stores the seasons change with increasing frequency—time collapses into a giddy eternal present, a spinning whirligig which repels notions of durability or intrinsic worth: as Eve in "Lenka's Wardrone" knowingly observes, "Must buy new clothes all the time . . . Life was a constant costume change" (TH 6)

Time, then, in O'Connor's stories "goes fast—it's a wind machine tossing off a calendar" (HC 97), and one has to be fast to keep up. But it moves in a circle: instead of the straight-line, endlessly onward march of conventional time, which allows progress to be measured and individuals to develop and live new experiences, O'Connor's time is caught in a loop which replaces progress with repetition, stunts individual development and converts new experiences into usually disappointing re-runs of past ones. Transcendence of time's hectic spiralling is rare: only when he falls in love—ascends to "Planet Love"—does Gary suddenly realize, counting down the seconds before the next vision of his building society crush, "there's so much *time*. Shop days dragged when they used to whizz" (TH 123. Original emphasis). And once the brakes are applied to the wheels of time, there is an opportunity for development and progress for evolution: "On Planet Love, there is *so much* time. Pavement trees sprouted, flowered, died" (TH 123. Original emphasis). "Died" augurs ill: Gary's love comes to nothing, leaving him "blocked" and with no more resort than a night of mindless sex with an old flame, reliving the past, back in the vortex. Short-lived, too, is the "total joy" experienced, callously and ominously, at the death of a policeman: "It lasted the length of a fag, not one second more not one second less: one whirling, burning minute" (HC 169).

In O'Connor's short stories, then, time is a *nunc fluens*, in which everyone is in a rush to stay ahead of the game, to be up-to-date or fashionable, but also a *nunc stans*, in which no one gets anywhere, the up-

to-date soon ceases to be so, and fashion is a passing fad. It is a time appropriate to its historical-social-economic context of urban 1980s–1990s consumer society; and it is how time is perceived by those who are irretrievably ensnared by that context. It is, therefore, “social” because the avid rush and the frustrating stand-still are experienced communally in response to the context which engenders them. In other words, the real phenomenological presence of that context is intuited, even palpable, to those who exist within it and replicated in their actions, ambitions and disappointments. The question that remains is how O’Connor makes that specific context present phenomenologically to the readers of her stories.

2. THE MORPHOLOGY OF TIME IN O’CONNOR’S SHORT STORIES

To start with the obvious, O’Connor’s short stories are, on the whole, short short stories. In that regard, they are macrostructurally poles apart from Proust’s massive novel. But whereas the exceptional length of *In Search of Lost Time* legitimates an enquiry into what, phenomenologically, its formal distention might present to the reader, the shortness of O’Connor’s short stories hardly makes them exceptional. Short stories can be long, longish, shortish, short and even shorter. Edgar Allan Poe’s prescription for the length of a short story is quantitatively useless:

If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression—for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed. (163–64)

In fact, Poe is writing about “any literary work,” although the focus of his essay is his poem “The Raven;” but his view is usually quoted in discussions of the short story. The important point is that he considers length not in terms of number of pages, but phenomenologically, as the amount of time a reader takes to read a given work; and, in contrast to the near lifetime required to read *In Search of Lost Time*, that amount should correspond to “one sitting”—not a chronological, but a phenomenological measure of time, which is, of course, relative to each reader, and consequently subjective. This equation of short story length to reading time provides a rationale for considering the short story’s form—its relative shortness—as phenomenologically presenting to the reader a context that is temporally coextensive with the duration of the reader’s

sitting. Thus, the span of short stories in general is a palpable sign of their intrinsic connectedness with time. As with Proust, the temporal coextension of the story's context with the reader's reading context ("sitting") engenders a sense of coexistence, which in turn may intensify the reader's engagement with the text and his sympathy with its characters. Indeed, this may be one of the implications of Poe's "unity of impression," which on the one hand refers to the aesthetic unity of the text, but also suggests the phenomenological unity of reader with text through the coextensivity of reader's context with the text's context. It is interesting that the text's aesthetic unity is threatened not by deficiencies in its artistic production but by the intrusion of "the affairs of the world," in other words, of a context alien to the text's and also to the reader's, as she "sits" in temporary disengagement from the larger context beyond the walls of her library. Like all short stories, it might be concluded that, in their relative brevity, O'Connor's are genetically shaped to present phenomenologically the temporal coextensivity of their contexts with the reading context of the reader. Beyond that, the macrostructural shape of her stories seems not to present phenomenologically the specificities of the historical-social-economic context they represent mimetically. Updating Poe's "sitting" to a strap-hang on the underground is historically plausible but of no aesthetic value.

At the microstructural level, however, the consumer society O'Connor scrutinizes is made phenomenologically present in her very manner of writing. As stated earlier, the context in which O'Connor's characters are trapped is, in Halliday's terms, viewed synoptically rather than dynamically, quite in keeping with that context's generation of a social time which runs in circles rather than progressing linearly. For Halliday, synoptic texts are "noun-rich," dynamic ones "verb-rich." Synoptic texts reproduce "a world of things, rather than one of happening; of product, rather than process; of being rather than becoming" (146–47). That "world of things"—the very historical-social-economic context in which Halliday was writing and intuiting, perhaps, socially—of stasis rather than flow, is entirely consistent with the context of O'Connor's stories. And it is made palpable in O'Connor's stylistic quiddity, in the proliferation, for example, of nouns, which denote "things," and their routing of verbs, which denote actions, processes, dynamism. Nouns duplicate neighbouring verb-stems, thereby drawing attention to the very substantiveness of the verb's lexical origin: "the whole cave of his chest caved in," "I hope Hope comes into the shop. I hope Hope buys something," "The doors squeeze open, and in

for a squeeze steps Mr Head" (*TH* 108, 124, 159). Alternatively, nouns act as verbs in their own right in such of O'Connor's hallmark neologisms as "lumbagoed" or "berried" (*TH* 81, 159). In fact, there are times when nouns take over the function of verbs in whole passages, as in Eve's description of the Leyton sky where all the verbs could elsewhere be substantives: "Pubs *dot* it. Cars *clog* it. In winter, black limbless trunks *wrist* up it. In summer, leafy branches *splash* right across it. Lorries *thunder* through it all hours, like trains. Helicopters (even) *police* above it" (*TH* 4–5. My emphasis). This concentration on the thinginess of language, this usurpation of the role of verbs by verbalized nouns is just one step away from the total banishment of verbs altogether, as in Sal's reply to the question "What did you do last night, Sal?:" "TV. Dinner. Bed." O'Connor continues in a verb-free account of what ensued:

Fight.

*

Loll's armchair. Her couch. (*TH* 21)

This eviction of verbs from the narrative makes phenomenologically palpable to the reader a historical-social-economic context where time, like O'Connor's verbless sentences, is short and impatient of progress or in default of its own dynamic linear advance; where time turns cyclical, is a running-on-the spot, an endless loop of "TV. Dinner. Bed;" and where material objects, commodities are the depressing measure of human existence. This is just what Emelda, who has been injecting daily doses of happiness into her life in the form of the snack and its container which she has taken to work daily for the last three years, comes to realize: "three years of sturdy Tupperware. I see, in my mind, an itemized vat of banana skins. A day-by-day blast of yellow cheer me up!" (*TH* 165). What price a life whose measures are banana skins and Tupperware? The tendency of O'Connor's sentences towards shortness—unlike Proust's formidable, labyrinthine periods—and of her stories towards brevity dovetails perfectly with a synoptic vision of the world: they can be taken in all at once, are permanently available for instant consumption by readers who do not have time as they commute to work and wrestle with the short attention spans symptomatic of the consumer age.

At times O'Connor's treatment of objects seems to be an admission of defeat by the recalcitrant ineffability of things: if her verbs often remit the reader to their nominal origins, her tautologies remind us of the essential

circularity of verbal definition (“A cow is a bovine quadruped”—but what does “bovine” mean?): when Kyle says “That’s what flowers do, flower, flower” (*TH* 49), he merely reiterates the ultimate tautology of quiddity, which in turn makes palpable once more the effective stasis of the cyclical time perceived by those entrapped in an urban consumer society. This is where brand names can press a temporary advantage: linguistic equivalents to ostensive definition (“What is a cow?” [Pointing] “That is!”), they allow for instant recognition of individual articles within a category. But that advantage is temporary because they only signify in a particular set of historical, economic and social circumstances. Some will enjoy longer currency than others, but the majority are the fleeting playthings of commercial vicissitude and changing taste. In the brief space of “Shop Talk” (*TH* 21–27) the reader is regaled with a veritable compendium of brands: Hoover, Vosene, Nissan, Ghost, Nicole Farhi, French Connection, Sturgeon, Safeway’s, [Renault] Laguna, Golf GTI, M&S, Donna Karan and Sony—all this to a soundtrack composed of assorted pop artists, whose names also amount to brands in the music trade: Gypsy Kings, Björk, Madness and Seal. All these allusions to commodities, most of which are already obsolete or threatened with obsolescence, evoke mimetically, on the plane of representation, the context in which the stories were written, while also illustrating the parasitical relationship between O’Connor’s style and the particular society that plays host to them. Yet their cumulative abundance, their sheer omnipresence on the printed page makes the centrality of branding to a consumer society phenomenologically present to the reader, thereby, to adopt Bakhtin’s terms, “thicken[ing]” or making “artistically visible” the historical-social-economic context.

As mentioned earlier, one self-declared reason for the formal distention of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* was to give the characters space to grow over time; parsed phenomenologically, that distention allows readers space to grow with the characters, to get to know them, to forget them, to renew acquaintance with them—in short, makes palpable the reader’s relations with the characters, enhancing, perhaps, sympathy and, certainly, removing ontological gaps between fictional character and real-life reader as their biographies seep into ours. Such growth of characters is *a fortiori* difficult to achieve in short stories and in any case ruled out by the temporal stasis in which O’Connor’s characters are trapped. They are, in comparison with Proust’s, flat characters, though each has their own idiosyncrasies; but that very flatness is also a marker of

the stories' historical-social-economic context in which idiosyncrasy is erased as consumers are reduced to the anonymity of data on a profit and loss account and, being what they consume, come to resemble other individuals who, by consuming the same things, actually forfeit their individuality as they acquire a consumption profile shared by countless others. As Bernard Stiegler has theorized, consumer capitalism—governed not by production but by consumption—generates “affective saturation” through “the hypersolicitation of attention . . . and aims, through the intermediary of industrial temporal objects, to divert [children’s] libido from their spontaneous love objects [parents, friends, partners, etc.] exclusively toward the objects of consumption.” As for “city-dwellers,” the urbanites who throng O’Connor’s stories, Stiegler remarks, “We, city-dwellers . . . suffer from . . . the affective saturation which disaffects us, slowly but ineluctably, from ourselves and our others, disindividuating us psychically as much as collectively, distancing us from our children, our friends, our loved ones and our neighbours.” Accordingly, for precise historical reasons, the biographies of O’Connor’s characters do not seep into ours as readers; there is not that palpable relation between reader and character nor the consequent ontological merger of fiction and reality. Yet that very absence of any palpable relation, in connection with other aspects of O’Connor’s morphology of context, may at the same time make phenomenologically present the historical-social-economic context of 1980s–1990s consumer capitalism in which people were living in increasing isolation from others, where personal relations were becoming increasingly difficult to strike up, where, paradoxically, we are all alone. Put another way, O’Connor’s characters satisfy Georg Lukács’s typicality criterion for characters in historical novels who “embod[y] in microcosm the essential trajectory of the historical dialectic” (Foley 148; Lukács 34–39); the morphology, in other words, of O’Connor’s characters makes present the “pressure” of the historical-social-economic context they live in. And in that respect, though their morphologies differ, they resemble Proust’s “puppets which exteriorised time . . . time which by habit is made invisible and to become visible seeks bodies.”

CONCLUSIONS

O’Connor’s stylistic quiddity enables form and historical context to dovetail in a seamless integration which surpasses mimetic representation and becomes phenomenologically present to the reader. In other words,

through their phenomenological morphology, the stories transcend the aesthetic to become the historical—they become historical fiction in a very real and pressing sense for their historical-social-economic context is rendered palpably present to the reader: they become history substantively. Similarly, O'Connor's characters embody the historical-social-economic context in which they live, once again making it phenomenologically present to the sympathetic reader. Lukács felt that the historical novel could enact historical process by presenting a microcosm which generalized and concentrated. In their own morphological “enactment”—our “presentation”—of the context they derive from, O'Connor's short stories occupy the same ground as historical fiction, while in their Proustian becoming history they elide conventional ontological distinctions between history and fiction. Rather than merely sharing contents and methods, in some cases history and fiction may actually be the same thing.

FUNDING

Research for this article has been supported by Research Project PID2022-140013NB-I00 “*Voces del pasado: El referente contextual en la narrativa histórica británica e irlandesa contemporánea*,” funded by MICIU/AEI.

REFERENCES

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Texas UP, 2020.

Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Translated by Patrick Creagh, Jonathan Cape, 1992.

Carter, William C. *Marcel Proust: A Life*. Yale UP, 2000.

Collington, Tara. “Space, Time, and Narrative: Bakhtin and Ricoeur.” *Space and Culture*, vol. 4, no. 7–9, 2001, pp. 221–31, doi: 10.1177/120633120000300502.

Currie, Mark. *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*. Edinburgh UP, 2007, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1r1zgb/.

De Groot, Jerome. *The Historical Novel*. Routledge, 2010.

Doyle, Martin. "Jumping to the Wake-Up Call." *The Irish Times*, 23 June 2007, www.irishtimes.com/news/jumping-to-the-wake-up-call-1.1211823/.

Dryden, John. *Dramatic Essays*, edited by William Henry Hudson. Dent, 1912.

Evans, Martina. "Bridget O'Connor: A Story-Telling Genius Before her Time." *The Irish Times*, 23 June 2012, www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/bridget-o-connor-a-story-telling-genius-before-her-time-1.4576023/.

Foley, Barbara. *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction*. Cornell UP, 1986, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g5pj/.

Halliday, Michael A. K. "Language and the Order of Nature." *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between Language and Literature*, edited by Nigel Fabb et al., Manchester UP, 1987, pp. 135–54.

Harry, Deborah, and Christopher Stein. "Die Young, Stay Pretty." *Eat to the Beat*. Chrysalis Records, 1979.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*, edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge UP, 1998, doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511804649.

Johnson, David B. "The Postmodern Sublime: Presentation and its Limits." *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, edited by Timothy M. Costelloe. Cambridge UP, 2012, pp. 118–31.

Lázaro Lafuente, Luis Alberto. "A Chapter of the Moral History of London: An Interview with Bridget O'Connor." *Odisea*, vol. 1, 2001, pp. 167–72, doi: 10.25115/odisea.v0i1.64.

Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Translated by Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell, Merlin Press, 1962.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester UP, 1984.

Mata-Induráin, Carlos. “Retrospectiva sobre la evolución de la novela histórica.” *La novela histórica. Teoría y comentarios*, edited by Kurt Spang et al., Eunsa, 1995, pp. 13–63.

O’Connor, Bridget. *Here Comes John*. Jonathan Cape, 1993.

O’Connor, Bridget. *Tell Her You Love Her*. Jonathan Cape, 1997.

Poe, Edgar Allen. “The Philosophy of Composition.” *Graham's Magazine*, vol. XXVIII, no. 4, 1846, pp. 163–67, www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm.

Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time*. Translated by Andreas Mayor et al., Vintage, 2000. 6 vols.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 3, Chicago UP, 1988.

Rodwell, Grant. *Whose History? Engaging History Students through Historical Fiction*. Adelaide UP, 2013.

Sell, Jonathan P. A. “Bridget O’Connor.” *The Literary Encyclopedia*, www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=15114/.

Sell, Jonathan P. A. “Commodified Identity and Materialist Allusion in the Short Stories of Bridget O’Connor.” *Allusion, Identity and Community in Recent British Writing*. Universidad de Alcalá, 2010, pp. 99–111.

Sell, Jonathan P. A. “Bridget O’Connor, *Here Comes John*.” *The Literary Encyclopedia*, www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=41470/.

Sell, Jonathan P. A. *Shakespeare’s Sublime Ethos: Matter, Stage Form*. Routledge, 2022.

Sell, Jonathan P. A. "Transcendent Commodities: Magical Materialism in the Short Stories of Bridget O'Connor." *The Silent Life of Things: Reading and Representing Commodified Objecthood*, edited by Alan Munton et al., Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, pp. 55–81.

Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works*, edited by John Jowett, et al. 2nd ed., Clarendon Press, 2005.

Stiegler, Bernard. "The Disaffected Individual in the Process of Psychic and Collective Disindividuation." Extract from the third chapter of *Mécréance et Discrédit: Tome 2. Les sociétés incontrôlables d'individus désaffectionnés* (Editions Galilée, 2006), published as a working paper for the Ars Industrialis seminar, "Suffering and consumption," 25 Feb. 2006. Translated by Patrick Crogan and Daniel Ross, 2006, arsindustrialis.org/disaffected-individual-process-psychic-and-collective-disindividuation/.

Wood, David. *The Deconstruction of Time*, 2nd ed., Northwestern UP, 2001.



Reclaiming the Past, Queering the Present: Nghi Vo's Speculative Fiction as a Space of Narrative Hospitality

Reclamando el pasado, queerizando el presente: La ficción especulativa de Nghi Vo como espacio de hospitalidad narrativa

BEATRIZ HERMIDA RAMOS

Institution address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Universidad de Salamanca. Calle Placentinos, 18, 37008 Salamanca

E-mail: bhermidaramos@usal.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-1173-6406

Received: 21/05/2024. Accepted: 25/11/2024.

How to cite this article: Hermida Ramos, Beatriz. "Reclaiming the Past, Queering the Present: Nghi Vo's Speculative Fiction as a Space of Narrative Hospitality." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp.100–116.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/s0x46202>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Abstract: Nghi Vo's *Singing Hill* Series follows the character of Chih, a monk that has been entrusted with the task of collecting and preserving stories that either have never been recorded before or that have been deliberately excluded from the canon because they contradict national, hegemonic and cis-heteropatriarchal discourses. Throughout the course of the saga, Chih learns and writes down stories that have been neglected, erased and forgotten, and we, as readers, see how these acts of narrative preservation help to build a present in which those that have been casted as "other," and in particular, racialized sapphic women, are able to find and recognize themselves. My argument is that the speculative elements of the novellas help to question what is thought of as normal, as possible and as real, and thus, allow for the texts to be read as spaces of narrative hospitality where sapphic women can not only reclaim their (her)stories but can also build a home and a community through them.

Keywords: Speculative fiction; queer memory narrative hospitality; narrative representation.

Summary: Introduction. Forgotten Places, Forgotten Herstories: In-yo and the Empress of Salt and Fortune. Narrative Agency and Archival Distortion: Tiger-Women in *When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain*. Conclusion.

Resumen: La saga *Singing Hill* de Nghi Vo sigue al personaje de Chih, un monje a quien se le ha encomendado la tarea de recoger y preservar historias que nunca han sido archivadas antes, o que han sido deliberadamente borradas del canon por contradecir discursos nacionales,

hegemónicos y cis-heteropatriarcales. A lo largo de la saga, Chih escribe y protege historias que han sido borradas y olvidadas. A través de estos actos de preservación narrativa, Chih ayuda a construir un presente en el que quienes han sido marcadas como “lo Otro” y, en particular, las mujeres sáficas racializadas, tienen una oportunidad para encontrarse y reconocerse a sí mismas. Mi argumento es que los elementos especulativos de estas novelas cortas ayudan a cuestionar lo que se considera normal, posible y real y, por lo tanto, permiten que los textos se lean como espacios de hospitalidad narrativa donde las mujeres queer no solo pueden reclamar sus historias, sino que también pueden construir un hogar y una comunidad a través de ellas.

Palabras clave: Ficción Especulativa; memoria queer; hospitalidad narrativa; representación narrativa.

Sumario: Introducción. Lugares Olvidados, Historias Olvidadas: In-yo y la Emperatriz de la Sal y la Fortuna. Agencia Narrativa y Distorsión del Archivo: Las Mujeres-Tigre en *When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain*. Conclusión.

INTRODUCTION

Nghi Vo is an American science fiction author who has recently gained public recognition for her writing, which often interrogates essentialist constructions of identity and centers queer possibilities instead. This popular and critical acclaim has also been extended to her *Singing Hill series*, an ongoing saga of sapphic novellas that includes *The Empress of Salt and Fortune*, *When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain*, *Into the Riverlands* and *Mammoths at the Gates*. The series follows the character of Chih, a monk that has been entrusted with the task of collecting and preserving stories that either have never been recorded before or that have been deliberately excluded from the canon because they contradict national, hegemonic, and cis-heteropatriarchal discourses. Throughout the course of the saga, Chih learns and writes down stories that have been neglected, erased and forgotten, and readers see how these acts of narrative preservation help to build a present in which those that have been casted as “other,” and in particular, racialized and sapphic women, are able to find and recognize themselves.

The saga can be read in any order, as all novellas can be considered independent texts even if they share the same setting and characters, as well as a clear thematic concern regarding connections between storytelling, identity, and memory. For instance, *Into the Riverlands* blurs the lines between story and history and between person and character, exploring how the influence of the archive is less present in remote locations of Vo’s fictional empire, and emphasizing a link between physical and narrative spaces that permeates the whole saga. A similar

theme is present in *Mammoths at the Gates*, technically the “fourth” instalment of the series, where readers delve into the material space of the archive. Vo examines the physical embodiment of both history and stories through not only the material space of the archive, an abbey that also functions as the largest library of all the fictional Ahn empire, but also through a speculative transformation of personal archives and stories into literal flesh to protect dear memories.

These texts, if not the entirety of the saga, explore the different ways stories are able to shape both personal and national memories, as Vo’s characters deliberately embody and protect different tales to warp an exclusionary archive that leaves subaltern bodies behind—a violent form of erasure that seeks to legitimize the violent annexation of the northern territories into the Ahn empire, portray non-citizens as uncivilized and barbaric, and remove any queer experiences and stories from official history. In this way, the archive is revealed as a political apparatus that monitors and alters collective and historical memories and (hi)stories, thus becoming a “legitimizing instrument of power structures and prevailing authorities” (Manalansan 94; see also Derrida). By warping the archive—that is, by questioning its authority through the inclusion of queer racialized experiences—the protagonists destabilize national discourses of exclusion, and instead put the spotlight on different (her)stories that have been forcefully kept secret.

This allows, or rather, requires, thinking of storytelling as a double-edged sword of sorts. On the one hand, a form of social control that polices narratives that may question the legitimacy of the hegemony of the empire (Glave). And, on the other hand, a form of narrative agency, a form of justice and hope that is central to queer and racialized groups that have historically never been fully inside canonical narratives and national discourses, that do not fully pass the threshold of inclusion (Bomans). In this way, as Stone and Cantrell argue, “[a]rchival exclusions are reframed as intentional, pervasive reproductions of social order” (7) through epistemological and physical violence, rather than as accidental or apolitical.

My argument is that the speculative elements of the novellas, alongside their treatment of the archive, help to question what is thought of as normal, as possible, and as real, and thus open up possibilities for engaging with forgotten and erased stories in critical ways—reminding us of the power of the archive to reshape national myths and even embroider narratives of who can be included in the idea of the nation and the empire,

and who is a passing guest that will never be granted the right to belong. I believe that it is precisely this radical potentiality that allows Nghi Vo's fiction to become a space of narrative hospitality where (her)stories are able to both highlight and mend the wounds of the empire. In this way, Vo's fiction becomes a space in which sapphic and racialized women can not only reclaim their experiences but can also build a home and a community through them.

In "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," Paul Ricoeur explores narrative hospitality as "an ethical encounter that demands the story of the other to be listened to and welcomed" (Kearney 42), that is, as an ethical responsibility with the other and their stories, and as a re-examination of the boundaries between other and self (Barba Guerrero, "Vulnerabilidad y Testimonio," "Wounding the Archive"). Ricoeur's own work has been characterized as seminal in that it "that reminds us that the Other does not come alone, but has verbal and narrative baggage, and it is crucial to take responsibility" (Manzanas and Benito, 134) both "in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern the other" (Ricoeur, 7). Through the lens of narrative hospitality, storytelling becomes a textual space from where otherness, and the vulnerability and violence associated with being cast as other, can be worked through and ethically shared, in an act of community that demands that the stories of the other are processed and told in whatever way is deemed necessary. In other words, narrative hospitality can be understood as a tool from which to explore the role of literature in creating hospitable spaces for social groups that have historically not been welcomed into the nation and the empire—such as the queer racialized women of these two novellas, thus establishing a connection between storytelling and dynamics of social violence and exclusion.

This is not to say that the saga offers perfect instances of hospitality. Rather, I contend that the characters' warping of the archive, whether it is by including forgotten (her)stories within the archive or by rejecting its power all together, is an act of narrative hospitality in itself that defies dominant imaginaries and discourses of otherness. That is, challenging the archive through speculation not only creates textual spaces where these women can see and find themselves, but this form of symbolic and narrative inclusion counteracts the historical discourses that leave these people behind or mark them as unwanted guests, barbaric others, or dangerous occupants. Here, the notion of narrative hospitality contextualizes Vo's work through an ethical lens and centers ideas of

narrative and national belonging, while the novellas, in turn, unsettle ideas of inclusion and exclusion through speculation and offer potentialities for “alternative worlds” (Schultermandl et al. 21) where queer lives might be rendered possible.

In order to explore the idea of narrative hospitality in the context of Vo’s saga, I focus on two of the novellas: *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* and *When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain*. First, I look at *The Empress of Salt and Fortune*, which follows In-yo, a woman from the north of the empire who is forced to marry into the royal family against her will. I examine how she is presented as racialized, as uncivilized, and as inhuman, as well as the ways in which her queerness has been erased by the nationalist narratives that surround her historical figure. I focus on the mediated transmission of In-yo’s story, which is told to Chih by another othered woman, and I argue that this act of sharing and transmission is a way of splitting the historical tale and historical wounds wide open to achieve an act of narrative hospitality that challenges hegemonic memory.

I then analyse *When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain* and its portrayal of three literal tiger-women who directly challenge their own representation within the archive in an exercise of agency and narrative justice. I argue that the instances of narrative hospitality present in this novella can be read as examples of what Vosloo describes as “archiving otherwise” (11), that is, using the archive “to challenge the story of the victor and the way in which it has been successfully transmitted” (13), or as a form of queering the cis-heterosexual archive (Watts)—both of them ways of warping the archive and its contents while resisting its authority.

While in *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* (Vo), Rabbit deforms the archive as an act of justice and affection towards In-yo, the narrative reparation of the tiger-women does not involve increasing the archive or belonging to it, but rather renouncing their authority directly as they confront the pain caused by the unique imperial history. Both moments are incredibly different, with Chih being invited to the space of exile and helping to remember the figure of In-yo there; while in the second text, Chih is confronted with the reality of archival erasure and alternative ways of remembering. Both stories are fragmented, mediated, and to some extent incomplete, but both involve imperfect instances of narrative hospitality. This way of sharing stories and remembering communally does not erase the pain suffered by other women, but it does allow them to

create their own alternative archives where they stop occupying the figure of object and other, where they can exist on their own terms.

Finally, this article ends with a brief conclusion that exposes the commonalities between the two texts and their different strategies of narrative hospitality and their relationship to the archive, emphasizing the critical nature of Vo's work.

1. FORGOTTEN PLACES, FORGOTTEN HERSTORIES: IN-YO AND THE EMPRESS OF SALT AND FORTUNE

At the beginning of *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* (Vo), readers are introduced to the world of the Singing Hills saga, which draws its name from the religious order the protagonist belongs to—an order that serves as both a physical and spiritual archive within the empire. Its clerics, which use gender neutral pronouns and renounce their past lives before joining the order, are entrusted with the task of recording the stories and histories of the empire, its people and its places, both big and small. Acolytes are encouraged to “speak to the florists and the bakers as much as to the warlords and magistrates” and to value “accuracy above all things” (Vo, *The Empress* 17), as the only way to preserve history seems to be to record all its parts. The clerics draw from official records, yes, but also small anecdotes and personal stories, as everyday objects are considered to be fundamental parts of the fabric of history and, as such must be preserved through generations. To accomplish this arduous task, the clerics that explore the world to interview different communities or to write down undocumented historical events are accompanied by neixins, fantastical creatures that remember everything they listen to and that “need to have a place and a name for everything” (Vo, *The Empress* 16), making them great partners for the members of the order of Singing Hills.

While not every cleric judges the contents of the stories they write down, Chih, Vo's protagonist, attempts to record stories that have been deliberately forgotten and erased due to their contents and their ability to contradict national discourse and ideals. Chih's acts of narrative preservation serve to protect, legitimize, and record counter-narratives that challenge imperial discourses, counter-narratives that can be understood as “culturally-rooted aspects of one's history that have not yet become part of one's story” (Freeman 193; Herman), emphasizing once more the porous boundaries that separate history from (her)story. Moreover, I also claim that the retrieval of In-yo's story, as well as its separation from the

historical figure of the Empress of Salt and Fortune, serves to humanize queer and racialized women that have been rendered other by the fictional figure of the empire.

Vo's story begins next to the Lake Scarlet, a large body of water that is believed to be haunted due to its reddish colour—perhaps stained with the blood of In-yo, who lived in that location after being forcefully exiled from the imperial family. Next to the lake, Chih finds a house that has its own name, Thriving Fortune. Despite its name, the building seems to be in quite a bad condition, and has only one inhabitant, an older woman called Rabbit because of her prominent incisors. Rabbit welcomes Chih and their neixin, Almost Brilliant, into her home, and offers to share her life experiences and those that surround the place they stand in, since they seem to be very closely intertwined. After being told “[w]elcome to your place in history, grandmother” by her guest, she answers that she is “pleased that the *true history* of Lake Scarlet will be told” (Vo, *The Empress* 16, my emphasis). While Chih, as a monk, seems to wield the power to welcome people into official narratives, their connection to the archive rendering textual thresholds porous, Rabbit presents herself as the one that holds the true story of In-yo's life and displacement.

Rabbit begins her tale describing her humble origins, recounting how she was sold to the imperial palace at a young age, where she worked as a cleaner for several years until she was named lady in waiting of the future empress. From there, Rabbit explains the dynamics inside of the palace, and goes on to describe the arrival of the newly wedded In-yo to the court. This proves to be very emotionally demanding, and Rabbit is forced to split her account in several days, as the effort of sharing the past becomes too much to bear in one sitting. While it has been argued that “memory desires to take a narrative form” (Dragojlovic 93., referring to Sturken 234), verbalizing one's memories is often a painful process. From this point on, readers encounter a fragmented tale, one that is very much mediated, heartfelt, and told through the eyes of Rabbit, as she struggles to share with Chih the different ways in which both her and her loved ones have been erased and misrepresented within the official history.

Over the course of several days, Rabbit tells Chih of her friend In-yo, and of how she was never seen as human, but rather as “the future mother of the emperor” (Vo, *The Empress* 24), a crude woman, an intruder within the palace due to her northern ancestry. She is perceived as a barbaric womb, and, even, a necessary sacrifice to continue and expand the imperial legacy. In-yo's inadequacy is made even more prominent when

examining the attitude of the palace servants, who both care for her and spy her, always watching for the slightest hint of treason. In fact, to the imperial workers that have been raised in the courts, it was “a bitter thing” to “be sent into the wilderness with a barbarian empress” (Vo, *The Empress* 17), their surveillance justified and even necessary in their eyes. Through those same eyes, they constantly describe In-yo as uncivilized and brutish in both appearance and character. Rabbit tells Chih the following:

History will say that she was an ugly woman, but that is not true. She had a foreigner’s beauty, like a language we do not know how to read. She was barely taller than I was at then, and built like an ox drover’s daughter. Her two long braids hung over her shoulders as black as ink, and her face was as flat as a dish and almost perfectly round. Pearl-faced, they call it where she came from, but piggish is what they called it here. (Vo, *The Empress* 24)

In-yo’s perceived ugliness is not only physical, but also metaphorical: her presence in the empire is an ugly mark that tarnishes its beauty. As the narration progresses, it seems that everything that is associated with her is “contaminated,” marked as foreign, such as one of her dresses, which “the ladies of the women’s quarters could only call strange and barbaric” (Vo, *The Empress* 25). Later on, readers learn of Chih finding said dress in present day and recording it as part of their clerical duties, embedding physical and affective objects in Rabbits’ reparative narrative. Rabbit’s tale is, in this way, a mosaic of sorts, composed of mediated and sown together memories, physical reminders of In-yo, and private conversations with Chih about the role of stories in shaping the archive. This dress, where “every stitch bites into her [In-yo’s] history, the deaths she left behind her, and the homes she could not return to” (Vo, *The Empress* 25), helps to exemplify and to further problematize the empire’s othering and exclusionary practices. It also reminds readers of In-yo’s status as a “barbarian” that can never be fully included in the empire’s civilized spaces, both physical, such as the palace, and metaphorical, like the official imperial recordings. Here, the “true history” of In-yo is not one linear or objective narrative, but rather, a compound of small objects and stories that, through affective connections that reject the idea of objectivity and an ethical duty to share In-yo’s struggle, seek to represent her humanity.

In this way, Vo's *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* offers a counter-narrative that challenges the hegemonic discourse and representation of othered women in this fictional world. Here, the exclusion and dehumanization of In-yo is not an isolated incident, but rather, is symptomatic of a larger issue. In-yo's treatment is representative of institutional discourse of otherness, national belonging and racial superiority that lay at the heart of the empire.

As the text progresses, readers learn of In-yo being sapphic, a fact that has been deliberately obscured in the historical and popular records of the figure of the empress of salt and fortune. This information only comes to light because of Rabbits desire to preserve the memory of her friend in a way that honours her whole identity and acknowledges In-yo's queerness even in the prison that was her forced marriage. This version of In-yo, who "doesn't like chains around her neck" (Vo, *The Empress* 39) and is "as little like a proper Anh lady as a wolf is like a lapdog" (Vo, *The Empress* 40), defies expectations and problematizes the relationship between the personal and the historical. This facet of In-yo can only be shared in the presence of Chih, is meant to be recorded and written down to counter painful and restrictive imaginaries that erase In-yo's queerness as yet another strategy of dehumanization. By sharing and recording this, Vo offers and highlights instances of not only counter narratives but also "counter-memory" (Foucault) that challenge hegemonic and collective discourses that directly exclude and misrepresent queer and racialized people.

As Rabbit's story continues, nearing its end, readers learn about In-yo's forceful exile, as she is banished from the empire after giving birth to her only son. Rabbit explains that "once the emperor had his northern heir, he no longer needed a northern wife" (Vo, *The Empress* 45), which leads to In-yo being forcefully sterilized so that she cannot have children outside of her marriage and threaten the throne. In-yo, still injured and incredibly weak from the obstetric violence she has suffered, is forced to leave the royal palace. In order to avoid her divulging military or political secrets, she is prohibited from returning to her home, and she is exiled to Thriving Fortune, the cabin from which Rabbit now tells her story, and also, the place from where In-yo planned her revenge. Before her death, In-yo encrypts messages to her motherland using different objects that Chih has examined and recorded, such as the dress that was described earlier. In-yo relies on clothing, tarot, salt of various colors, and a fortune teller—hence

the title of the novella—to help protect her home and free it from the yoke of the empire.

Here, *Thriving Fortune* is re-signified as a dual space: one of exile and of narrative justice, as the cabin is the physical place from where In-yo's memories and stories are honored and recorded. Narrative and psychical spaces blend and bleed into each other's borders, as the occupation of narrative spaces is done precisely by reclaiming physical ones, by reclaiming the material landmark of exile. Thus, a place of violence becomes one of refuge, and words fill in the silence of In-yo's story. I believe that it is precisely this overlap that allows for us to read Chih's clerical labor as an instance of narrative hospitality, since their presence is key in reimagining and reclaiming In-yo as a complex individual, rather than as an empress or as a caricature from the “barbaric North.”

The cleric looks at *Thriving Fortune* and sees the history they own as a subject of the empire. As a member of their order, perhaps they own it twice over, and I do not begrudge them that. The Empress of Salt and Fortune belongs to all her subjects, and she was a romantic and terrible and glamorous and sometimes all three at once. There are dozens of plays written about her, and some are good enough that they may last a little while even after she is gone. Older women wear their hair in braided crowns like she did, and because garnets were her favorite gem, they are everywhere in the capital.

In-yo belonged to Anh, but *Thriving Fortune* only belonged to us. (Vo, *The Empress* 82)

The novella ends with Rabbit asking Chih “do you understand?”, a question that has been placed after every conversation they have had regarding In-yo. Rabbit's question demands that both Chih and readers rethink official histories, and center In-yo's experience instead. Thus, Rabbit's tale emphasizes the necessity of counter-memory and counter-narratives to reclaim forgotten stories, and to remember In-yo as fully human, rather than as other, as a stranger.

2. NARRATIVE AGENCY AND ARCHIVAL DISTORTION: TIGER-WOMEN IN *WHEN THE TIGER CAME DOWN THE MOUNTAIN*

The “second” short novella of the Singing Hills saga, *When the Tigers Came Down the Mountain* (Vo), begins with Chih's encounter with three

tiger-women in their own territory, and explores the different ways in which stories can be contested and weaponized as a means of both exclusion and self-preservation. Here, the speculative elements of the text allow Vo to introduce the shapeshifting tiger-women as physical embodiments of otherness in order to further examine the treatment of marginalized women in this fictitious empire and their relation to the archive—women who, like in In-yo, have been cast as non-human and in-human, as animalistic, as beast-like.

When they first meet, the three tiger-women—Sinh Loan, Sinh Hoa and Sinh Cam—are presented as dangerous predators, but also as “civilized” and “rational.” The narrative emphasizes the complex society and hierarchies between tiger-women through their formal language, forms of address and historical knowledge. In fact, Chih appeals to their civility to protect themselves and their companions, relying on their knowledge of tiger-women’s customs and rank systems to appeal to their pride and their values in order to escape. Here, readers encounter an inversion of racialized and colonial expectations, where the tiger-women proclaim to Chih that “you [Chih] are a something like a civilized thing, and I suppose that I must treat you as such” (Vo, *When the Tiger Came Down* 33)—that is, the expectation of barbarity and unruliness is placed upon Chih, rather than the feline people. This reversal continues and is made even more explicit when Chih clarifies the situation to their friends: “They can talk, and now they’ve seen that we can. That’s—that means that they’ll treat us like people” (Vo, *When the Tiger Came Down* 34).

Thus, Vo asks the audience who gets to be (considered) people, destabilizing through speculation the connections the human and the animal, between the self and the other. Later on, in this encounter, Chih appeals to the tiger-women’s ego and offers them the possibility of recording their stories and writing down their names for the abbey’s historical records, as they fear they might be attacked. Here, Chih entices them with promises of fame and glory, an opportunity for their unknown names to be carved into history, to be included into the official archive. Nevertheless, the tiger women reject the offer and instead, question the veracity and authority of the archive, asking about the existing records of other tiger-women.

Once the tiger-women discover that Chih knows of the tale of a tiger-woman who fell in love with a human woman, they demand to be told said story. Similarly to the previous novella, Chih experiences become a frame to rescue forgotten tales and herstories. However, rather than finding a

hospitable space where Chih is invited inside, where they are offered the status of guest, as in the previous novella, here the tiger-women demand to reexamine their portrayal within the archive, as they recognize its potential for violence and its tendency towards erasure.

“We’ll tell you when you get it wrong,” growled Sinh Hoa abruptly, her voice like falling rocks. “We shall correct you.”

“Best not get it wrong too often,” advised Sinh Cam, her voice like dangerous water.” (Vo, *When the Tiger Came Down* 35–36)

They demand to hear the version recorded in the abbey and memorized by Chih, letting them know that, while they, the tiger-women, will correct any misrepresentation of Ho Thi Thao, they will react with violence if their kin are portrayed as beastly or barbaric. While Chih’s involvement in this challenging of the archive and this questioning of official memories is by no means voluntary—since, again, Chih is attempting to use their knowledge of tiger stories to protect themselves from the tiger-women after entering their territory—, I believe that Chih’s role as a cleric is essential to create a narrative space where tiger women are able to reclaim their stories and their cultural heritage, putting their own version of the story of Ho Thi Thao against imperial recordings.

Throughout the novella, this inside tale is interrupted by the tiger-women, who question it and eventually include their own versions of the story and the Life of Ho Thi Thao and her role in history. Through this mediation and narrative negotiation, the three tiger-women emphasize how the canonical and recording version of this (love) story, demonizes said tiger-woman, robs her of her agency and portrays her as monstrous. When discussing Ho Thi Thao’s first-time meeting with Dieu, her love interest and future wife, the official recording portrays the tiger-woman as dangerous and animalistic, as someone who dismisses Dieu’s presence by inviting her to take a different route if she so wishes. And yet, the Sihn sisters see this event instead as an example of her kindness and respect for her soon to be partner.

“No, she would have said that kindly,” rumbled Sinh Hoa, who Chih had thought was sleeping.

“Lady?”

“She wouldn’t have been mean about it,” said Sinh Hoa sleepily. “It’s a courtesy. It’s permission. It’s being nice.”

“I’ll remember that,” Chih said, and continued. (Vo, *When the Tiger Came Down* 49)

The tiger-women advocate for different forms of queer memory that “open spaces for messy forms of being, becoming and remembering” (Çalışkan 262), questioning cis-heterosexual expectations and defying the implicit and explicit authority of the archive. Here, my view of queerness and queer memory is meant to be an expansive one, one that not only refers to the necessity of centering sapphic stories and sapphic desire, but also, one that encompasses larger discussions regarding what kind of subjects, and what kind of communities, have the possibility of belonging and performing normalcy. Indeed, when discussing Safiya Hartman’s work, Gopinath describes Hartman’s texts as queer in that they broadcast the “impossibility of normativity for racialized subjects who are marked by histories of violent dispossession,” arguing that “for such subjects, a recourse to the comforting fictions of belonging is always out of reach” (Gopinath 167). I believe that Vo’s texts can be read as queer in this way, apart from their perhaps more obvious discussions of sapphic and lesbian desire. Thus, by questioning normative forms of memory transmission and of generating knowledge, the tiger-women create narrative hospitable spaces where epistemic justice is possible.

By centering these queer possibilities, Nghi Vo emphasizes how hegemonic narratives hurt tiger-women, and the fact that this is the first time their version of their histories, their stories, and even their herstories, can be written and archived. Nevertheless, and with reason, the tiger-women distrust the archive, and reject the possibility that both an exclusionary narrative and their own version of their ancestors may be kept together without context or explanation, and may even be rendered equal. The three sisters express this worry when Chih asks them to offer their version of the story so that they might record a version that does not harm the queer tiger-woman protagonist

“Please tell me how it went instead, lady” Chih said respectfully. “I can only tell the story as it has been told to me.”

“Even if it is wrong and wicked?” asked Sinh Loan coldly. “Even if, as you said yourself, you knew it to be imperfect?”

“It is the only version of the story I know,” Chih said. “Tell me another, and I’ll tell that instead.”

“Or you will keep them both in your vault and think one is as good as the other,” said Sihn Hoa, speaking up unexpectedly, her voice gravelly with sleep. “That’s almost worse.” (Vo, *When the Tiger Came Down* 59–60)

After the exchange, Chih promises to honor their story, and creates, once again, a mosaic of memory, historical record and personal experience to repair the violence of the archive and create a narrative space of hospitality and healing. By protecting and revising Ho Thi Thao’s herstory, the three tiger women repair queer genealogies that have been damaged by the archive, forming queer “communities across time” (Dinshaw 12). I argue that this creation of alternative connections, this warping of the archive, is an act of narrative hospitality and narrative justice. In this way, queer affect becomes “a portal through which history, memory, and the process of archiving itself are reworked” (Gopinath 165), that, in turn, weaves together institutional, collective, and individual stories and memories.

Because Chih’s tale is “a story told by humans who never heard it from a tiger” (Vo, *When the Tiger Came Down* 97), narrative hospitality, in this case, can only be achieved by directly intervening and rejecting the authority of the archive. Chih and the tiger women collaborate in the creation of a new, hybrid story that showcases the experiences of othered women, as Chih offers them details that were unknown to the tiger women, and incorporates their new, hybrid text as the “real” one. This hybrid and collaborative nature not only serves to highlight the fluidity of storytelling, but it also reminds readers of its potential to render forgotten lives visible, livable, and to create new queer, narrative spaces that hold spaces for those that have been made to inhabit the margins of society.

CONCLUSIONS

All in all, I have attempted to contextualize the work of Nghi Vo through the lens of narrative hospitality, arguing that her novellas rely on speculation to make the violent erasure of archive known and to denounce the ways in which queer racialized women are dehumanized and rendered other. Her saga opens up small yet meaningful opportunities to warp the archive, to create, through fragmented and mediated stories, bridges towards epistemic justice. From a hospitality perspective, Vo’s stories become, or are revealed as, a textual space from where alternative ways of existing queerly may emerge, the saga a form of narrative shelter where otherness may rest.

FUNDING

This research has been supported by a predoctoral fellowship co-funded by the Junta de Castilla y León and the European Social Fund (ORDEN EDU/1868/2022).

REFERENCES

Barba Guerrero, Paula. “Vulnerabilidad y Testimonio de Frontera: Repensando la Migración desde la Hospitalidad Narrativa en *The Book of Grace* de Suzan-Lori Parks.” *Hospitalidad: Lo otro y sus Fronteras*, edited by Rosa Benéitez Andrés, and Virginia Fusco, Dykinson, 2021, pp. 69–90.

Barba Guerrero, Paula. “Wounding the Archive: Reparative Writing in Imani Perry’s Epistolary Memoir.” *Escritoras y Personajes Femeninos en Relación*, edited by Daniele Cerrato, Dykinson, 2021, pp. 132–46.

Bomans, Bastien. “‘Cric, Crac, Queer’: Queer Storytellers and Story-Membering in Lawrence Scott’s *Witchbroom*, Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* and David Chariandy’s *Brother*.” *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, vol. 46, n. 2, 2021, pp. 16–79, doi: 10.1080/08263663.2021.1882806.

Çalışkan, Dilara. “Queer Postmemory.” *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2019, pp. 261–73, doi: 10.1177/1350506819860164.

Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz, Chicago UP, 1996.

Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Duke UP, 1999, doi: 10.1215/9780822382188.

Dragojlovic, Ana. "Politics of Negative Affect: Intergenerational Hauntings, Counter-Archival Practices and the Queer Memory Project." *Subjectivity*, vol. 11, 2018, pp. 91–107, doi: 10.1057/s41286-018-0046-1.

Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, Cornell UP, 1977.

Freeman, Mark. "Charting the Narrative Unconscious: Cultural Memory and the Challenge of Autobiography." *Narrative Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2002, pp. 193–211, doi: 10.1075/ni.12.1.27fre.

Glave, Thomas. "Fire and Ink: Toward a Quest for Language, History and a Moral Imagination." *Callaloo*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2003, pp. 614–21, doi: 10.1353/cal.2003.0088.

Gopinath, Gayatri. "Archive, Affect, and the Everyday: Queer Diasporic Re-Visions." *Political Emotions*, edited by Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds, Routledge, 2010, pp. 164–92.

Herman, David. "Considering Counter Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense." *Language in Society*, edited by Michel Bamberg, and Molly Andrews, Cambridge UP, 2004, pp. 278–84, doi: 10.1017/S0047404507270137.

Kearney, Richard. "Renarrating Irish Politics in a European Context." *Europeanisation and Hibernicisation*, Brill, 2010, pp. 41–57, doi: 10.1163/9789042030541_004.

Manalansan, Martin F. "The 'Stuff' of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives." *Radical History Review*, vol. 120, 2014, pp. 94–107, doi: 10.1215/01636545-2703742.

Manzanas Calvo, Ana María, and Jesús Benito. *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture: Spaces, Bodies, Borders*. Routledge, 2016.

Ricoeur, Paul. "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 21, no. 5–6, 1995, pp. 3–13, doi: 10.1177/0191453795021005-602.

Schultermandl, Silvia, et al. "Introduction." *Affective Worldmaking: Narrative Counterpublics of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Silvia Schultermandl, et al., Transcript Verlag, 2022, pp. 13–44.

Stone, Amy. L., and Jamie Cantrell, editors. *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories*. State University of New York Press, 2015.

Sturken, Marita. "Narratives of Recovery: Repressed Memory as Cultural Memory." *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, edited by Mieke Bal, et al., New England UP, 1999, pp. 231–48.

Vo, Nghi. *The Empress of Salt and Fortune*. Tor, 2020.

Vo, Nghi. *When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain*. Tor, 2020.

Vo, Nghi. *Into the Riverlands*. Tor, 2022.

Vo, Nghi. *Mammoths at the Gates*. Tor, 2023.

Vosloo, Robert. "Archiving Otherwise: Some Remarks on Memory and Historical Responsibility." *Studia Historiae Ecclesiastiae*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2005, pp. 379–99, hdl.handle.net/10500/4357/.

Watts, Gina. "Queer Lives in Archives: Intelligibility and Forms of Memory." *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 27, 2018, pp. 101–11, doi: 10.13023/disclosure.27.15.

Out of Date: Time Travel as Regression for Women in Lauren Beukes' *The Shining Girls*

Fuera de fecha: El viaje en el tiempo como retroceso para las mujeres en *The Shining Girls*, de Lauren Beukes

MARÍA GARCÍA-LORENZO

Institution address: Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Paseo Senda del Rey 7. 28040 Madrid

E-mail: mgarcia@flog.uned.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-6613-1826

Received: 02/09/2024. Accepted: 13/11/2024.

How to cite this article: García-Lorenzo, María. "Out of Date: Time Travel as Regression for Women in Lauren Beukes' *The Shining Girls*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp. 117–138. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/gbxycp43>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Abstract: This paper examines Lauren Beukes' *The Shining Girls* (2013) as a reflection on recurrent obstacles to women's rights. Beukes geometrizes her characters' temporalities as either linear or circular to convey the conflict between women who fight for equality and the enduring socio-economic forces that block their development as full human beings. Contrary to traditional genderings of time, in Beukes' work the male chrononaut time-travels in circles to kill promising women, thus embodying backlash discourse and practices that repeatedly jeopardize feminist advances made across time. In contrast, his victims are set in chrononormative linear time to represent women's struggles for advances in reproductive rights, sexual freedom, and career opportunities.

Keywords: Time travel; chrononormativity; women's rights; backlash; Lauren Beukes; *The Shining Girls*.

Summary: Introduction. Time Travel as Disrupted Advancement in *The Shining Girls*. The Embodiment of Backlash in the Chrononaut. The Normative Temporality of the "Shining Girls" as Progress. Conclusions.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza *The Shining Girls* (2013) de Lauren Beukes como una reflexión sobre los impedimentos recurrentes que sufren los derechos de las mujeres. Beukes geometriza las temporalidades de sus personajes como lineales o circulares para transmitir el conflicto entre las mujeres que luchan por la igualdad y las fuerzas socioeconómicas que impiden su evolución como seres humanos plenos. Contradicciendo generalizaciones tradicionales del tiempo, en la obra de Beukes el crononauta viaja en círculos en el tiempo para matar a mujeres prometedoras, encarnando así discursos y prácticas de retroceso que ponen en peligro constante los logros

feministas conquistados a lo largo del tiempo. Por el contrario, sus víctimas se sitúan en una línea temporal cronomotivativa para representar los esfuerzos de las mujeres por conseguir avances en derechos reproductivos, carreras profesionales y libertad sexual.

Palabras clave: Viaje en el tiempo; cronomotivatividad; derechos de las mujeres; retroceso; Lauren Beukes; *The Shining Girls*.

Sumario: Introducción. El viaje en el tiempo como avance truncado en *The Shining Girls*. La encarnación del retroceso en el crononauta. Progreso en la temporalidad normativa de las "Shining Girls." Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Time has a sociocultural dimension. Because temporality is not a universal, uniform concept it has undergone profound revision and debate for over a century in several ways, from Henri Bergson's time philosophy to feminist, queer or postcolonial approaches to time. The prevailing model at present is the goal-oriented and productive clock time of capitalism (Bryson 23) where the sequential chain of events is the normative representation of time.¹

Broadly speaking, two-time cultures have traditionally been outlined:

[T]he linear/cyclical distinction sees the former as the goal-oriented time of history and production in the public sphere, in which events and processes unfold one after another and time's arrow points irrevocably to the future and to each individual's death. Cyclical time, in contrast, is seen as the time of reproduction and caring in the private sphere, characterised by repetition and the here and now as the wheel of time endlessly revolves. (Bryson 136–137)

Assuming this basic distinction, some feminist thinkers have tackled time as gendered—as lived, understood or constructed differently by the genders. Such opposition between circular and linear time lies at the core of several feminist approaches given that, in Fanny Söderbäck's words, it "structures the very regime of patriarchy" (304). As the mathematical quantification of time improved, patriarchal time-keeping replaced

¹ In this paper my use of the term "chrononormativity" has been inspired by Elizabeth Freeman's critique of the linear organization of time in capitalism and heterosexuality. "Chrononormativity" will be employed to refer to the dominant conception of time as linear and future-oriented that endorses developmental life courses.

matriarchal astronomical models, favoring the measurement of human—that is, mostly masculine—linear progress (Göttner-Abendroth 113–14).

Among those studies that have argued for the existence of a particular women's time resulting from traditional gender roles, Simone de Beauvoir wrote that men's lives connect with the linearity of history ("to mould the future") while women's lives ("biologically destined for the repetition of Life") relate to the circularity of reproduction (90–91). In her well-known essay "Women's Time," Julia Kristeva hoped for a triumph over the dichotomy between the feminine "cyclical time" (of repetition and biological rhythms) and the masculine and patriarchal linear time (of development, history, language and politics) (16–17). In the volume edited by Frieda Johles Forman and Caoron Sowton *Taking Our Time: Feminist Perspectives on Temporality* the governing idea is that linear time is phallocentric, hostile and deterministic, replacing women's subjective experience of recurrent temporality.

This dualistic approach has been criticized for the essentialism implied in the equation of women's time with biological or natural time. Furthermore, it has been found flawed "for its failure to acknowledge the ways that 'linear time' is lived by women as well as men" (Browne 23n45). Valerie Bryson warns against "any simple identification of 'men's time' and 'women's time,'" although she remarks that "there are identifiable gender differences in time use, that these will generate different ways of relating to and understanding time, and that those associated with men will be privileged" (118–19). As Rita Felski puts it,

those who believe that linear time is masculine and cyclical time feminine usually point to the dramatic contrast between the grand narratives of male historical time and the repetitive everyday time of women. This difference then serves as evidence of a vast gendered gulf in temporal experience. . . . The perception that cyclical time is a uniquely female province is highly misleading. Such a perception arises from the fact that cyclical time is often seen as natural time, and hence the sphere of women. (*Doing Time* 20)

Although the polarity "women's time" and "men's time" is not categorical and can be subject to much debate, it provides a valid methodological instrument to approach Lauren Beukes' *The Shining Girls*, a novel that reverses these time models to portray women in linear, historical time and so deal with feminist issues like gender violence, women's independence, and social justice.

Connecting the fight for women's rights and linear time is necessary here. To quote Felski's words again, "feminism cannot do without an orientation to the future. . . . We have a powerful urge to organize things in an upward curve" ("Telling Time" 23). Women's progress regarding social equality has in fact been narrated in specific geometrical ways. We are by now familiar with the four *waves* of feminism, which is a forward-looking narrative of accomplishment and cyclical advance. Some feminist thinkers have opposed such teleological model of feminism that assumes a linear progression and some sort of final goal (e.g., Grosz; Hemmings; Browne; McBean). These critiques of the evolutionary model of the feminist movement perceive that the waves or phases model tends to leave out the multiplicity of women's experiences and the recurrence of certain discriminatory phenomena that have not receded with the emergence of successive new waves. Furthermore,

the treatment of the past as a complete story that has led up to the present can also lead to a "closedness to the future," as it encourages us to think that the identified direction will necessarily continue, and hence can prevent us from considering the future in terms of unpredictability, or a range of possibilities. (Browne 11)

In other words, the linear narrative constructed around progress, with its associated idea of inevitable advance, might overshadow the signs of regression. Although women's rights and gender equality have experienced recurring backlashes over the years, a wide-reaching reversion of equality policies has recently been observed in Europe and the United States, fueled by nostalgic discourses. This backsliding of gender equality involves a serious attack against women's rights regarding birth control, sexuality, and all types of violence against them. However problematic the terms "progress" and "backlash" may be² when we discuss such regressive discourses, the narrative of linear advance still constitutes a powerful image that metaphorizes feminists' fight for social change.

This paper aims to explore the ways in which Lauren Beukes' novel applies the time-travel device to address endangered women's rights, especially through the contrast between the circular time-traveling of its male main character and the linear life course of its female protagonist.

² See for instance "Backlashes Then and Now" in Faludi, and the special issue of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* edited by Piscopo and Walsh.

The novel's main plotline happens to be set two years after the publication of Susan Faludi's *Backlash* in 1991, and serves to illustrate those occurrences in history

triggered by the perception—accurate or not—that women are making great strides. These outbreaks are backlashes because they have always arisen in reaction to women's 'progress', caused not simply by a bedrock of misogyny but by the specific efforts of contemporary women to improve their status, efforts that have been interpreted time and again by men—especially men grappling with real threats to their economic and social well-being on other fronts—as spelling their own masculine doom. (Faludi 10)

In the novel, the geometrization of time as circular and ahistorical by means of the time-travel metaphor creates a powerful image for the recurring resistance to change in matters that concern women's identity and agency. Counter-progress and backlash have persistently impregnated the public discourse to jeopardize advances regarding gender relations and social justice, as Lauren Beukes explains:

I didn't want to do a Bill and Ted and go back to the dinosaurs and Shakespeare, Hitler and all the rest of it. I was interested in how the 20th century shaped us and how much has changed and how much has stayed the same. . . . The whole book is a time travel loop but I also get to look at loops of history—the Depression, the fact that women's rights are still an issue today. (qtd. in Black)

Therefore, by presenting masculine regression as opposed to women's progress(ion), the novel showcases the gender asymmetries of decades ago that nevertheless resound as eerily familiar to twenty-first century readers.

1. TIME TRAVEL AS DISRUPTED ADVANCEMENT IN *THE SHINING GIRLS*

The graphic representation of history as an ongoing line mirrors the thermodynamic concept of the unidirectionality of time ("time's arrow"). This concept has frequently been revised or openly challenged in time-travel fiction—a genre that interrogates constructions of the past and our sense of the future by revising dominant representations of history, usually

linear, and offering alternative geometrizations³ of human experience. In 1970, Joanna Russ declared that time travel was “out of fashion” (“The Image of Women” 200). Russ would be wrong now if one is to judge by the remarkable presence of time traveling in recent popular media (there is even a popular board game called “That Time You Killed Me”). Time-travel fiction is not new by any means but has lately populated our streaming media services with time-travel movies and TV series, many of which have been based on novels.⁴ Rüdiger Heinze quotes from a study by Andrew Gordon to claim that the proliferation of time-travel stories and films may be explained by a “pervasive uneasiness about our present and uncertainty about our future, along with a concurrent nostalgia about our past” (Heinze 225–26). In time-travel plots, disturbances in physical chrononormativity connote deep commotions of established orders and of the very basic parameters (time and space) that define identity, allowing for other non-normative experiences of time. In agreement with David Wittenberg, in time-travel fiction “many of the most basic theoretical questions about storytelling, and by extension about the philosophy of temporality, history, and subjectivity, are represented in the form of literal devices and plots, at once both convenient for criticism and fruitfully complex” (150). However consistent with physical theories or internally coherent they may be, all these stories “show us a deeply unsettling, ‘unreliable’ universe, where time is ‘out of joint’, and where notions of free will, control, and autonomous agency are highly questionable or at least problematic” (Heinze 225).

Fictions that employ time-disruptive strategies prove extremely effective to spotlight concepts like progress or nostalgia. In particular, non-linear narrative timelines have been useful to represent women’s own experience of time as well as gender inequalities experienced in their participation in the public and private domains. By way of examples, Joanna Russ’ *The Female Man*, Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry* and, more recently, Ted Chiang’s “Story of Your Life” question linear time models and introduce alternative temporalities for women to subvert chrononormativity and to unfold their subjectivities out of “patrilinear

³ I borrow the term from George Slusser and Danièle Chatelain, who analyze the geometrization of human experience into narrative forms “that, when contrasted to the old sense of a linear life-line, are paradoxical in nature” (162).

⁴ Beukes’ novel itself has been adapted into a TV series, now streaming on AppleTV+.

time" (to borrow the term from Donaldson). While the premise of Beukes' *The Shining Girls* is science fantasy, the novel raises questions regarding gender (in)equality and social (counter-)progress. This paper will analyze how the novum⁵ (Suvin 117) of time traveling allows us to explore masculine power over women in light of the shapes of time discussed above.

The Shining Girls is Beukes' third novel, following *Moxyland* and *Zoo City*, for which she won the Arthur C. Clark Award in 2012. Set in Chicago,⁶ the novel spans from 1929 to 1993, traveling from the Great Depression to the narrative present and through the postwar of the 1940s, the Red Scare of the 1950s, and other historic milestones. It tells the story of a time-traveling serial killer, Harper Curtis, who has been hunting Chicago women for sixty years. In 1931, he finds a key in a coat he has just stolen, which opens the door to a fanciful house with an extraordinary room in it, where names of women and strange objects glow on the walls. Harper somehow knows he must start a mission to kill all these women to extinguish the "glow" (the potential) they already show as little girls. He finds out he can travel through time by simply leaving "the House," to which he returns after every crime. Harper gives the young versions of his victims some of the artifacts of "the Room" to mark them as targets, and to kill them years later. However, one of his victims, Kirby Mazrachi, survives the terrible assault. In 1993, she starts her internship in a newspaper with a reporter (Dan Velasquez) who is now covering sports but reported on her story back in 1989. As they investigate her own and similar crimes, they track Harper through the connecting objects the killer has been leaving on his victims as some sort of chronological breadcrumbs.

In Beukes' story, chrono-traveling is employed to murder women who struggle for independence, outstanding careers or sexual freedom—that is, undesired gender performance in the patriarchal order. At first, the novel appears to be one more instance of time-travel romance of the kind which has proliferated since the 1980s, but we soon discover how Beukes revises the genre. The attractive chrononaut does look for women through time—only not to love them but to kill them. Sex is still present in the formula, for Harper "revisits the [crime] scenes years later or before, skipping

⁵ Suvin defines the novum as a "strange newness" (116–17) that is nevertheless scientifically plausible, like androids or the meeting with aliens.

⁶ The Chicago River had its flux reversed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rivers have traditionally symbolized the flow of time, so the novel's setting suits the time-travel trope.

decades, to jerk off over the place a girl died" (Beukes 209). Yet, his desire involves the aggressive attitude of the dominant male who refuses to change his prejudiced worldview. He is thus determined to protect it with violence,⁷ as his typical batterer talk betrays: “‘It’s not my fault, sweetheart,’ he says. ‘It’s yours. You shouldn’t shine. You shouldn’t make me do this’” (Beukes 167).

2. THE EMBODIMENT OF BACKLASH IN THE CHRONONAUT

In Lauren Beukes’ novel, Harper’s dominion over time is a figurative representation of power structures where man not only prevails but also executes those that threaten his prerogative. This section will address the circular, ahistorical time of the chrononaut against the linear time of the other characters—mainly Harper’s victims. *The Shining Girls* geometrizes femininity and hegemonic masculinity in a peculiar way that reverses standard, though questionable, gendered shapes of time. In contrast with other stories that employ the time-travel novum to create alternative chronologies that defy patrilinear time, this novel keeps women characters aligned with time’s arrow while Harper travels to the future to hunt down his victims and then returns “home” (that is, his own timeline in the late 1920s): “Here we go. Round and round, like your Ferris wheel” (Beukes 6).

Among the organizational and narrative possibilities of time traveling⁸ (like the causal loop, the journey backwards to alter the past, or the journey onwards to discover the consequences of the present) Beukes chooses to apply a circular structure whereby events are consistently organized around a closed time loop. The central character inside this loop is a man with time to kill—sixty years, to be precise. Harper “can’t push

⁷ Lauren Beukes has written novels about post-apartheid South Africa (*Zoo City*; *Moxyland*), which is her birth country. It is easy to see a connection between *The Shining Girls* and its author’s sociopolitical background in terms of violent erasure and oppression of the Other, “the legacy of apartheid: the arbitrary and artificially applied divides between people” (Beukes qtd. in Caraivan 217).

⁸ As with other physical, logical or epistemological matters in the novel, Beukes does not include the idea of reverse causality (effect before cause) in the loop she creates for Harper, which is relevant to the plot. For an extended explanation of causal loops in closed time cycles in science, philosophy and narrative, see Lewis, Nahin (ch. 4), Hanley, or Dowe.

past 1929" and "the farthest he can go into the future is 1993" (Beukes 90), while the female protagonist and the other characters move forward into their future in compliance with time's arrow and conforming to normative temporality. Harper's loop journeying is a symbolical ring that encloses his victims, similar to the flea circus that Kirby is setting up when she first meets him at the age of six (Beukes 4). Apparently, like the bugs captured for training under an inverted cup, women cannot escape this circular structure of predetermined events that entraps them and makes them easy to seek out, more so because they stay in or around Chicago when they become adults. Harper's murdering cycle provides him with power and pleasure and affirms his sense of masculine superiority: "It's a game. To find the girls through different times and places. They're playing along, ready and waiting for the destiny he's writing for them" (Beukes 127).

The Shining Girls introduces some milestones to place characters in history, such as the Great Depression, the aftermath of WWII, the Red Scare, the Vietnam War, and the construction of the Sears Tower. While linear time provides the "shining girls" with opportunities to evolve and prosper, as will be further explained in the following section, in Harper's eyes it only brings entropy and destruction. For instance, the novel constantly alludes to the deterioration of a city that "has changed its color, from dirty whites and cream to a hundred shades of brown. Like rust. Like shit" (Beukes 62) and "keeps expanding its reaches further and further into the countryside, like mould laying claim to a piece of bread" (Beukes 281). In 1934, he derides the banners of the World's Fair that proclaim a "Century of Progress": "It is pathetic . . . , the future painted up all gaudy like a cheap whore, when he has seen the reality of it, fast and dense and ugly" (Beukes 276). In fact, no matter how far into the future he travels to commit his murders, he "always returns home" (Beukes 91) to a house that resists entropy and change, keeping its 1930s splendor alive despite the crumbling neighborhood that surrounds it. Not only does he lament the changes he witnesses with every journey to the future, but his very body defies age and remains intact throughout his 60-year-long vital loop, which makes us perceive him as an emblem of immutability. Unlike other time-travel stories, where "the malleability of time and history" allows for the exploration of counterfactuals, alternative histories or futures, or altering the past (Heinze 213–14), the nostalgic chrononaut in this novel abhors change and displays a conservationist intention.

The Shining Girls follows the Wellsian tradition "based on pre-existing hierarchies relating to gender, race and class that benefit the white

male time traveler" (Bussière 33). Harper is a destitute, unstable, and lame ex-soldier struggling through the Great Depression. Violence, especially against women, is his escape valve for his anger and wounded sense of manhood. Ironically, domesticity empowers him when he finds "the House" (a realm traditionally associated with women) and "the Room" (a powerful symbol of female subjectivity and agency since Virginia Woolf) that enable him to move through time at will. Only two men are seen operating this time machine of sorts in the novel: "You need the key. And the will to shift the time to where it needs to be" (Beukes 303). Harper merely willpowers the gate to other points of the loop: "He only has to think of a time and the door will open onto it, although he can't always tell if his thoughts are his own or if the House is deciding for him" (Beukes 89). Either way, the system works with or for him to support his masculine power and control over events to the point of believing the House "was always his. Always him" (Beukes 380).

Beukes never explains why or how the time travel occurs in the novel beyond the fact that the House serves some pre-established design, "setting the gears in motion for something that has already happened" (Beukes 194). When Harper enters the room for the first time, he sees the names of some women written on the wall. Although the names are unknown to him, they are written in his own handwriting:

It's enough. The realization. Like a door opening up inside. The fever peaks and something howls through him, full of contempt and wrath and fire. He sees the faces of the shining girls and knows how they must die. The screaming inside his head: *Kill her. Stop her.* (Beukes 37)

Harper's predetermined actions mirror the self-justifying arguments of abusers, in particular those men who are violent to women on account of their (the women's) transgressions within the patriarchal system. Many are the scenes in the story where Harper mentions that things should stay as they are meant to be. His own frame of reference (white and male) discerns what or what not is "in place":

Everything is as it has to be. (Beukes 6)

Everything happens for a reason. (Beukes 14)

She's here, somewhere. As it is meant to be. (Beukes 63)

All the pieces must be put into place. (Beukes 66)

Everything is as it is meant to be. As he determines it. (Beukes 308)

Readers progressively realize he intends to destroy the potential of outstanding women who may have a future impact on their communities or occupations. While the historical background of the novel shows great advances in the lives of the underprivileged, the white male acts as the controlling center of the story, with time-traveling at the service of his masculine insecurities when confronting women's power.

He therefore feels he must kill these women to make things fit into place and time. When he first visits the Room, he does not know the glowing objects are the souvenirs he took from the scenes of the crimes he has already—and not yet—committed: a toy pony, a baseball card, a contraceptive blister-pack, a lighter, a cassette tape, a tennis ball, a bunny clip, a pair of costume butterfly wings and a lab ID badge. Harper trades the objects across times, taking one from a crime scene and then leaving it on another woman's body. They stand for quantum entanglements (see Nahin 294–04) for women who, like a kind of Schrödinger's cat, "are not dead yet, who are perpetually dying or marked to die" (Beukes 356). These mementoes obviously become anachronistic when taken out of their own time, which infuses them with considerable power: not only are they key elements in the perpetrating of the crimes, but they also symbolize out-of-date discourses and practices regarding women.

Harper links his victims through time with these tokens, making women somewhat interchangeable and thus consolidating his perception of womanhood as a monolithic concept. Indeed, to his eyes all the girls are the same, which in part enables Kirby to finally track him down: he is not able to envision the glitches in his plan, the malfunctions, basically derived from the singularities of the women he attacks. All his victims, regardless of their occupation, race or sexuality, are independent women without men to support them, therefore understood in their own times as "deviant and subversive" (Beukes 143), as Willy Rose, the lesbian architect, words it. Harper's pattern, where nothing can deviate, must destroy deviants.

Although only men seem to be capable of operating the gate to other times, Harper Curtis acts as the only backlashing, repressing and obstructing agent in the story. In fact, Beukes is careful to offer an array of masculinity types to parallel the diversity of her "shining girls." For example, when Harper cannot pay for his hospital stay when he breaks his foot in 1931 the doctor answers: "Pity [you don't have syphilis]. There's a study starting in Alabama that would have paid for all your medical care if you did. Although you'd have to be a Negro" (Beukes 24). Dan

Velasquez, Kirby's mentor at the *Chicago Sun* and assistant to her hunt, is a different type of man from Harper, one "not interested in playing the alpha male" (Beukes 177). Abandoned by his wife, he is insecure about his own seductive abilities, balding, and hates traveling. As a frequent flyer to cover games, he "changes planes" in another sense. He is aware of the advances made by women in public spaces and discourses but is happy to move in the same direction. Harper, on the contrary, embodies the cultural and socio-economic forces that suffocate women's advancement; the recurrent counter-progressive narratives that resent changes in power relations; the cyclical suspicion of women's participation in culture, economy and politics; and the structural, physical and symbolical violence against women. By traveling back and forth to stop women's progress he personifies the hostility of repeated backlashing against gender equality across time.

3. THE NORMATIVE TEMPORALITY OF THE “SHINING GIRLS” AS PROGRESS

In *The Shining Girls*, Harper exerts violence towards both men and women, although it is the "shine" (i.e., their latent talents) of small girls that triggers his murdering instinct: "The House . . . wants *potential*—to claim the fire in their eyes and snuff it out" (Beukes 63–64). Harper spots them early on their lifelines, while they are blooming and moving forward with projects and goals. He murders them when they have already become grownups, but by always referring to them as *girls* he symbolically freezes them in a pre-adult stage, hence doubly interrupting their process towards full womanhood and autonomy.

These women are not represented as members of a uniform category, despite Harper's perception of them. His ten victims—nine murdered plus Kirby, who gets away—epitomize the less favored participants in the progress narrative via class (most are poor), ethnicity (African American, Asian American, Latina), sexuality (lesbian, transgendered) and health (drug addict). However unprivileged, the gains of earlier feminist struggles have enabled them to be independent, participate in their communities and hold paid jobs. They are intensely individualized and shine in their own ways and times (in parentheses the time of their deaths in the hands of or attributable to Harper): Jeanette (1931) is a dancer who covers her body in radium glow for her show, to rise "above the competitive mediocrity" (Beukes 74) she observes in other dancers; Zora (1943) lost her husband

during WWII and now welds “gun turrets that will tear those Nazi shits into mincemeat” (108); Alice (1951) is a trans woman who jumps off a roof before Harper can kill her; Willy (1954) is a lesbian architect and a suspected Communist—she is not—who “had to fight for this job like she fought to get a place at MIT” (139); Margot (1972) is a teacher who volunteers with the Jane abortionist group, “real good at holding hands and explaining what’s happening” (258); Julia (1984) is an economics student who “always said she was going to be the first woman CEO of Goldman Sachs” (42); Jin-Sook Au (1993) is a “passionate housing worker” who “made a real impact” (287–88) in the community; Mysha (1993) is a biologist on the verge of an important discovery; Catherine (1993) is an artist “brighter than the [fireworks] that boomed in the sky” (284) who is losing her glow to drugs.

The only survivor to Harper’s assault, Kirby Mazrachi, is aware of the male design of society that her attacker embodies and determined to play a part in social change. For instance, to prosper as a sports reporter she insists on entering the room where a hand-turned scoreboard is operated, despite the opposition she faces: “I think it’s really a gentleman’s club where the most powerful men in America plan the future of the country, with cocktails and strippers, while an innocent baseball game plays out below” (Beukes 150). Harper manages to dim her glow for a while but does not extinguish it completely.

While Harper incarnates chronological mobility, the girls represent social mobility. The novel depicts them as historic subjects in the process of becoming meaningful women, in contrast to the man who time-travels in circles and always returns to the same point. All the “shining girls” are single and economically independent, thus escaping the repetitive cyclical “women’s time” defined by the womb or the home. Instead, Beukes embeds them within a historical narrative of sociocultural and political action. Only Zora has children and could therefore be perceived in relation to domestic life, but as a proficient African American welder she is clearly opening doors for others in the public sphere. These characters undergo backlashing experiences due to their sexuality or their jobs, or because they simply want to, and will, make a difference. Interestingly, the “masculinist” linearity of history plays as an advantage in this novel. It allows for the visibility of women’s contribution to social progress, presents them as agents of historical change, and values women outside the essentialist inscription in cyclical time. As summarized by Bryson, “recalling women’s past achievements and/or giving gender relations a

history can provide a political weapon that undermines claims about women's inferiority or the inevitability of contemporary arrangements and encourages the exploration of alternatives" (104). By counterbalancing Harper's loop, the characters of the "shining girls" draw attention to the role of women in history and also underline the value of time's arrow in the feminist project. In short, Beukes depicts

how history changed individual women on a very normal level, and these women shine, they are bright sparks in the darkness but in a way that's achievable. None of the shining girls was going to be the next president of the United States, or stop the financial crash, but they made a difference in their contexts. (qtd. in Caraivan 226)

Despite Harper's equalizing effort, the narrative highlights these women—makes them "shine"—against their historical background. For these women time and history are important, for they provide the dimension where they can develop their sense of themselves, their projects and their right to carry them out. The individualization of their characters avoids the anonymity of statistics or the transience of media treatment of gender violence which usually involves the attitude "[g]irls get murdered all the fucking time" (Beukes 121), as Kirby verbalizes it. Harper extinguishes the spark in these women, preventing them from reaching their full potential as active members of artistic, social and political life. However, Harper is only the time-traveling instrument that physically takes their life away. Throughout the novel we come across several instances of women finding obstacles to their personal and collective growth, from prejudices and stereotypes to oppressive legislations and sexual harassment. Each of Harper's "shining girls" personify some small but significant contribution to women's advances throughout the twentieth century. Due to space limitations, only two examples will be provided here. The first one relates to abortion rights. In the novel we can observe the furtive activities of the Jane organization in the 1970s:

The service is listed in the phone book, under 'Jane How', but how would you know if you didn't? Ditto the ads in the alternative newspapers or pasted up at the laundromat. There's no way for a girl like Jemmie to find them except by personal referral, and that took three and a half months and a replacement social worker who was sympathetic to the cause. (Beukes 256)

Harper's journey to 1972 to kill Margot, a Jane activist, echoes present-day maneuvers to diminish abortion rights and return to bleaker times in women's history. His chrono-traveling thus metaphorizes regressive attitudes while it validates women's achievements through time, alerting readers of impending backlashes.

The second example concerns assumptions about the bodily and behavioral features of "true" womanhood. Harper first meets Alice (formerly Lucas) in 1940 while she is a teenager working in a road show. There is "a new prudishness in the air lately" (Beukes 221) so the owner of this girly show has adapted the act, which now warns about

"the dangers of decadence and desire and how easily the fairer sex may be led astray. Or do the leading . . . The strumpet! The hussy. The harlot. The wicked temptress! The ambitious young office girl with her eye on the boss. Intent on coming between husband and wife. Women, learn how to spot her. Men, learn how to resist her. This lascivious predator in lipstick is a danger to society!" (Beukes 224–25)

When the show owner sees Alice's body under the Fallen Woman outfit, he asks her to leave and suggests she find some specialty show:

"Or join a carnival. Some of them still do he-she-it. Or be a bearded lady. Can you grow a beard?"
"I'm not a freak."
"You are in this world, princess." (Beukes 229)

Alice's character causes a turning-point in the novel. When she is first presented to us, she is playing the Fallen Woman, figuratively the only performance she is allowed as a trans—not "standard" or "satisfactory"—woman. In 1951, her adult self is working for Sears telephone sales and has had a few bad love affairs, but "Alice wants more. She wants it all," so she intends to go to San Francisco "where it's easier, the rumors say, for women like her" (Beukes 307). She would have become one of the forerunners of the San Francisco LGTBI community if she had not chosen to jump off a roof instead of letting Harper murder her. This event takes place nearing the denouement of the novel and defies Harper's governing discourse about predetermined outcomes: "This is not the way it is supposed to be" (Beukes 312). The fact that she chose how to die, like she chose how to live, is a crack in Harper's pattern because the loop is now

open by the sheer will of a woman. When he leaves a pill blister by Alice's body, the closed chain of anachronistic tokens has lost its power as a symbol of confinement: "He takes the contraceptive packet out of his pocket and stares at it, as if the *circle* of colored pills marked by the days of the week might be an omen he could not read. But it tells him nothing" (Beukes 312, my emphasis).

Alice's death episode connects with Kirby's detective work in the narrative structure of the novel. Three pages (although twenty-two years) later, when Harper reads in the paper that Kirby has survived his attack and is in intensive care, he thinks "[t]he words are not right" (Beukes 216). At this point in the plot Harper starts realizing his scheme may be at risk, but by now we have already read that Kirby is after him. He travels back to the past to "unravel where he has gone wrong [because] the stars must realign" (Beukes 351), but he cannot fix past events because he does not travel in a causal loop. Now that the cycle has been broken, "his control slipping, like a truck's axle out of jack" (Beukes 323), it will be a woman—Kirby—who will realign things.

At the outset of the story, Beukes portrays her as tragically disjointed both in anatomical and chronological terms. Her chrononormative body should move forward from childhood to adulthood and (ideally, in a patriarchal order) reproduce, but Harper's attack caused severe injuries to her body with lingering aftereffects. "Her stomach bulged, like she was going to give birth to an alien" (Beukes 50–51), which mocks the gestation she is now capable of, but not experiencing as an adult woman. When Dan Velasquez first meets Kirby, she is 25 but looks like "a girl barely out of kindergarten, surely, with crazy kindergarten hair sticking up all over the place" (Beukes 70). The traumatic assault blocks her development and sends her to a space of stagnation:

She tried running for a while, after it happened. Dumped her studies—even though they offered her a sympathetic leave of absence—sold her car, packed up and went. Didn't get very far. Although California felt as strange and foreign as Japan. Like something out of a TV show, but with the laugh track out of sync. Or she was; too dark and fucked up for San Diego and not fucked up enough, or in the wrong ways, for LA. . . . She should have kept moving, gone to Seattle or New York. But she ended up back where she started . . . stuck in here, a hostage in her head. (Beukes 50–51)

The excerpt above implies that Kirby is as misplaced as Harper is mistimed. Nevertheless, she restarts her process of maturing thanks to her investigation. She transcends her own death and those of the “shining girls,” whose linear life courses have been tragically ended. Dan’s words help us understand that, instead of peacefully drifting to death, she returns to life against all odds:

“I’m a *grotesque*.”

...

“You’re no shrinking Ophelia, that’s for sure.” (Beukes 132)

She begins her own hunt of the man she suspects is a serial killer by searching through past crimes for “out of place artifacts” (Beukes 236). Browsing through photographs in the newspapers that covered Harper’s crimes over the years, Kirby recognizes a toy that a mysterious stranger gave her as a child (one of the anachronistic items she has been hunting for, which triggers the destruction of Harper’s loop existence and the resolution of the case). Her mother keeps the plastic pony of Kirby’s childhood in a “broken freezer” (Beukes 320) used for storage. Being out of order, the freezer suggests that, after her symbolical return to pre-adulthood, she is no longer congealed in time now that she has found the impulse to recommence her development. Moreover, the freezer stands by a “spinning wheel” (Beukes 321), the instrument used by the Moirai to spin the linear thread of life, here figuratively ready to spin Kirby’s thread further on.

Beukes’ novel is organized around the tensions between the cycle and the line, representing the tortuous but onwards movement of women towards equality, which is consistent with the “corkscrew” image proposed by Faludi:

An accurate charting of American women’s progress through history might look more like a corkscrew tilted slightly to one side, its loops inching closer to the line of freedom with the passage of time—but, like a mathematical curve approaching infinity, never touching its goal. Woman is trapped on this asymptotic spiral, turning endlessly through the generations, drawing ever nearer to her destination without ever arriving. Each revolution promises to be “*the revolution*” that will free her from the orbit that will grant her, finally, a full measure of human justice and dignity. But, each time, the spiral turns her back just short of the finish line. (Faludi 61–62)

Although she succeeds in ending Harper's crimes, Kirby represents the struggling motion of the spiral, the painful going back and then further out again—like women's ceaseless fight for their rights in the face of obstacles. Far from ending the novel on the positive note of Harper's death, the Postscript describes how another man finds the key to the House, "waiting for him on the front porch" (Beukes 386), ready to hinder progress again.

CONCLUSIONS

In *The Shining Girls*, Beukes proposes a look into the future by engaging with the past by means of the time-travel trope. The novel holds a mirror to reflect on our present political and sociocultural situation, and to discuss progress in terms of causes and effects. It also compels readers to reconsider advances in women's rights by modeling time in unusual patterns, whereby the man lives in circular time and the "shining girls" in linear, chrononormative time. As the story implies, women's contact with regressive discourses has fatal consequences.

Harper Curtis' circular time traveling epitomizes backlashing attempts to deny women their right to have a future, to own their bodies, to earn a living, and to pursue successful careers. Kirby's detective work is not only an exercise in justice and healing but also a feminist one against recurrent inequality, that is, "a work of recovery, of anamnesis, of unearthing a forgotten history and silenced stories . . . to change structures and patterns that have been repeated for generations" (Söderbäck 303–04). By identifying the entangled objects as anachronisms, Kirby finally breaks Harper's cycle and shows that predetermined logic can be subverted if agents involved in it take action. We can interpret the novel's anachronistic items as an invitation to reflect on outdated discourses and impending counter-progressive policies, and also as a symbol of genealogical connection, that is, the legacies that women leave to others after them to dismantle repressive and violent structures that, unfortunately, seem to be timeless.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wants to thank the reviewers for their careful reading of the manuscript and their constructive comments.

REFERENCES

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H.M. Parshley. Jonathan Cape, 1956.

Beukes, Lauren. *The Shining Girls*. Harper, 2013.

Black, Claire. "Lauren Beukes on Time Travel in *The Shining Girls*." Interview with Lauren Beukes. *The Scotsman*, 1st June 2013, www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/lauren-beukes-on-time-travel-in-the-shining-girls-1573120/.

Browne, Victoria. *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, doi: 10.1057/9781137413161.

Bryson, Valerie. *Gender and the Politics of Time: Feminist Theory and Contemporary Debates*. Policy Press, 2007, doi: 10.46692/9781847422972.

Bussière, Kirsten. "Feminist Future: Time Travel in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*." *Journal of Science Fiction*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2019, pp. 33–42, publish.lib.umd.edu/index.php/scifi/article/view/482/.

Butler, Octavia E. *Kindred*. Beacon Press, 1988.

Caraivan, Luiza. "Portraits of South African Women in Lauren Beukes' Writings." *Gender Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, pp. 214–28, doi: 10.1515/genst-2017-0014.

Chiang, Ted. "Story of Your Life." *Stories of Your Life and Others*. Tor, 2002.

Donaldson, Eileen. *A Chronology of Her Own: The Treatment of Time in Selected Works of Second Wave Feminist Speculative Fiction*. 2012. University of Pretoria, PhD dissertation, repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/28698/thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

Dowe, Phil. "Does Lewis' Theory of Causation Permit Time Travel?" *Philosophies*, vol. 94, no. 6, 2021, pp. 87–98, doi: 10.3390/philosophies6040094.

Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. 1991. Three Rivers Press, 2006.

Felski, Rita. *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*. New York UP, 2000.

Felski, Rita. "Telling Time in Feminist Theory." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2002, pp. 21–28, www.jstor.org/stable/4149213/.

Forman, Frieda Johles, and Caoron Sowton, editors. *Taking Our Time: Feminist Perspectives on Temporality*. Pergamon, 1989.

Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke UP, 2010, doi: 10.1215/9780822393184.

Göttner-Abendroth, Heide. "Urania – Time and Space of the Stars: The Matriarchal Cosmos through the Lens of Modern Physics." *Taking Our Time: Feminist Perspectives on Temporality*, edited by Frieda Johles Forman and Caoron Sowton, Pergamon, 1989, pp. 108–19.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*. Duke UP, 2005, doi: 10.1215/9780822386551.

Hanley, Richard. "No End in Sight: Causal Loops in Philosophy, Physics and Fiction." *Synthèse*, vol. 141, no. 1, 2004, pp. 123–52, www.jstor.org/stable/20118470/.

Heinze, Rüdiger. "Temporal Tourism: Time Travel and Counterfactuality in Literature and Film." *Counterfactual Thinking - Counterfactual Writing*, edited by Dorothee Birke, et al., De Gruyter, 2011, pp. 212–26, doi: 10.1515/9783110268669.212.

Hemmings, Clare. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Duke UP, 2011, doi: 10.1215/9780822393702.

Kristeva, Julia. "Women's Time." Translated by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1981, pp. 13–35, www.jstor.org/stable/3173503/.

Lewis, David. "The Paradoxes of Time Travelling." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1976, pp. 145–52, www.jstor.org/stable/20009616/.

McBean, Sam. *Feminism's Queer Temporalities*. Routledge, 2015, doi: 10.4324/9781315761015.

Nahin, Paul J. *Time Machines: Time Travel in Physics, Metaphysics, and Science Fiction*. Springer-Verlag, 1999.

Piercy, Marge. *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Women's Press, 1993.

Piscopo, Jennifer M., and Denise M. Walsh, editors. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Symposium: Backlash and the Future of Feminism), vol. 45, no. 2, 2020.

Russ, Joanna. *The Female Man*. Women's Press, 1994.

Russ, Joanna. "The Image of Women in Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, edited by Rob Latham, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, pp. 200–10.

Söderbäck, Fanny. "Revolutionary Time: Revolt as Temporal Return." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2012, pp. 301–24, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/661710/.

Slusser, George, and Danièle Chatelain. "Spacetime Geometries: Time Travel and the Modern Geometrical Narrative." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1995, pp. 161–86, www.jstor.org/stable/4240423/.

Suvin, Darko. "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre." *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, edited by Rob Latham, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, pp. 116–27.

Winterson, Jeanette. *Sexing the Cherry*. Vintage Books, 1991.

Wittenberg, David. “Time Travel and the Mechanics of Narrative.” *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, edited by Rob Latham, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, pp. 149–76.



Narrative Empathy in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*

La empatía narrativa en *The Blind Assassin* de Margaret Atwood

TERESA GIBERT

Institution address: Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), Departamento de Filologías Extranjeras, Facultad de Filología, Paseo de Senda del Rey, 7. 28040 Madrid

E-mail: gibert@flog.uned.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-6194-9901

Received: 01/05/2025. Accepted: 10/10/2025.

How to cite this article: Gibert, Teresa. "Narrative Empathy in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp. 139–166.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/8ct3xr29>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#). / Artículo de acceso abierto distribuido bajo una [Licencia Creative Commons Atribución 4.0 Internacional \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Abstract: Empathy plays a key role in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000), a complex novel consisting primarily of the fictional memoir of Iris Chase, its eighty-two-year-old protagonist and first-person narrator. Working within the theoretical framework of Suzanne Keen's research on narrative empathy, the aim of this article is twofold: to examine the representation of empathy in *The Blind Assassin* and to explore the capacity of the novel to encourage readerly empathy towards a character who is frank enough to acknowledge that she has not provided the emotional support expected from her, and bitterly regrets her destructive lack of affective empathy.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; *The Blind Assassin*; narrative empathy; affect theory; fictional memoir.

Summary: Introduction. The Representation of Empathy and the Development of Readerly Empathy. The Quest for Consolation and Self-Empathy. Conclusions.

Resumen: La empatía ejerce un papel crucial en *The Blind Assassin* (2000), una compleja novela de Margaret Atwood constituida principalmente por unas memorias de ficción cuya protagonista y narradora es la octogenaria Iris Chase. Este artículo, elaborado dentro del marco teórico de Suzanne Keen sobre la empatía narrativa, tiene un doble objetivo: estudiar la representación de la empatía en *El asesino ciego* y analizar la capacidad de la novela para promover la empatía lectora con un personaje que reconoce con franqueza no haber aportado el apoyo emocional que se esperaba de ella y lamenta amargamente su falta de empatía afectiva.

Palabras clave: Margaret Atwood; *The Blind Assassin*; empatía narrativa; teoría de los afectos; memorias de ficción.

Sumario: Introducción. La representación de la empatía y el desarrollo de la empatía lectora. La búsqueda de consuelo y autoempatía. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

“Empathy is the grand theme of our time.”

(Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy* 12)

“The Age of Reason is being eclipsed by the Age of Empathy.”

(Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization* 3)

In the current disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates on empathy, we come across the opposing views of those who eulogize it and those who decry it. Between the two extremes are those who, being in favor of empathy, question some of its often-praised advantages and highlight its shortcomings in a wide range of fields, including that of literary studies. Among the many examples of this matter of controversy, one can mention the arguments propounded in *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* (2009) by the celebrated biologist and primate ethologist Frans de Waal, who enthusiastically extols “the role of empathy and social connectedness” (5) together with “emotional engagement” (72). In a similar vein, welcoming the growing awareness of empathy, the American sociologist and economist Jeremy Rifkin contends in *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (2009): “The evidence shows that we are witnessing the greatest surge in empathic extension in all of human history” (452). By contrast, psychologist Paul Bloom wrote the provocative book *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (2016) to persuade his readers “to be against empathy” (3) and to promote instead “rational compassion” as “a better moral guide than empathy” (23), on the ground that the latter is an irrational emotion which makes us prone to bias and distorts our moral judgment. Specifically referring to fiction, Bloom observes: “Our bias shows up when we think about the power of fiction to stir up our empathy” (48). He acknowledges that some novels have been beneficial because they “prompted significant social change by guiding readers to feel the suffering of fictional characters” (e.g., *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Bleak House*) but, less optimistically, he underscores the negative consequences

of other novels, which have led people in the opposite direction by putting empathy at the service of ignoble causes such as racism (48).

In addition to the antithetical conclusions reached in recent times by different scholars who have explored the role of rhetorical empathy, the long-standing academic prejudice against affective reactions in the interpretation of literary texts and the twentieth century widespread rejection of traditional ethical criticism should be borne in mind. Amiel-Houser and Mendelson-Maoz "challenge the concept of empathy and the assumption that empathy is a fundamental element of ethical reading" while they contend that "ethical criticism must extend its scope beyond the ethics of narrative empathy" (199). They illustrate their arguments through a perceptive reading of *Alias Grace*. Their approach can be applied to the analysis of other Atwood's first-person narrators of fictional autobiographical accounts, such as the protagonist of her succeeding novel, *The Blind Assassin*, who shares with Grace the use of "manipulative rhetoric to evoke empathy" (212) among many similar features.¹

Before embarking on an analysis of the intersection between empathy and one of Margaret Atwood's most famous creative works, it seems appropriate to conduct a brief survey of her views on this topic. Although the literary representation of empathy is not among her favorite subjects of discussion, she has mentioned it several times in her critical writings. For instance, in "Are Humans Necessary?" she comments on John Wyndham's "Compassion Circuit," a 1954 story "in which empathetic robots, designed to react in a caring way to human suffering, cut off a sick woman's head and attach it to a robot body." In the same article, she humorously refers to Susan Swan's "The Man Doll," a short story "in which the female character creates a man robot called 'Manny,' complete with cooking skills and compassion circuits, who's everything a girl could wish for until her best friend steals him, using the robot's own empathy module to do it." More recently, in a post on *The Tale of Two Cities* published in her Substack blog, Atwood explains about a character portrayed by Charles Dickens as "the perfect embodiment of the mid-Victorian ideal": "Lucie Manette cannot be ruthless. She's too susceptible to the suffering of others. Her virtues are empathy, compassion, and pity. And nurturing" ("The Woman Thing").

¹ Several critics have compared Grace (based on the historical Grace Marks) and Iris both as characters and narrators. See Howells, Ingersoll ("Modernism" and "Waiting"), Robinson (347–48), Staels (148), Tolan (*The Fiction* 109–13), and Wilson (73–74).

Much of Atwood's poetry proves that, instead of refraining from the expression of authorial empathy, she is actively engaged in it. For instance, writing the twenty-seven poems ultimately collected in the cohesive volume entitled *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) was for Atwood an intricate literary exercise of authorial empathy with a real human being who was also a writer. Susanna Moodie (1803–1885) was an English emigrant and pioneer in the bush farms of Upper Canada whose prose Atwood deemed disappointing, but whose personality she found so striking that she felt prompted to reconstruct her nineteenth-century experience from a twentieth-century perspective, hypothesizing about her subjectivity ("Afterword" 62). Atwood remarked that she had been impressed by Moodie's voice, "not her conscious voice but the other voice running like a counterpoint through her work" ("Afterword" 63). Despite the obvious differences between the two women writers, Atwood underlined how much they shared, so much that she felt as if each of them could speak on behalf of the other: "I said for her what she couldn't say, and she for me" ("Writing *Susanna*" 75).

Regarding readerly empathy, in Atwood's critical writings there is evidence of her disdain for some sentimental approaches to her fiction and for certain naïve responses to her characters, chiefly on the part of those who expect her to create good "role-models," a term she dislikes ("The Curse of Eve" 217).² Nevertheless, such comments about this aspect of the reception of her fiction do not imply that she disapproves of her readers' empathetic engagement, but rather that she objects to certain instances of *empathic inaccuracy*, which "occurs when a reader responds empathetically to a fictional character at cross-purposes with an author's intentions" (Keen, "A Theory" 222). Atwood's reluctance to be perceived as an author whose priority is to reach a wide audience that feels with her characters should not mislead us into thinking that her fiction does not foster narrative empathy. Writers who do not openly call upon their readers' sharing of emotions and sensations of immersion may still provoke empathetic engagement by using, sometimes unintentionally, other empathy-inducing techniques in their fiction.

² In "The Curse of Eve" (1978) Atwood declares, "If I create a female character, I would like to be able to show her having the emotions all human beings have—hate, envy, spite, lust, anger and fear, as well as love, compassion, tolerance and joy—without having her pronounced a monster, a slur, or a bad example" (227).

As I intend to discuss *The Blind Assassin* within the theoretical framework of Suzanne Keen's widely recognized scholarly research on narrative empathy, I will borrow her best-known and highly influential definition of the term as published in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, a rewording she confirmed in her contribution to the volume *Rethinking Empathy Through Literature*: "Narrative empathy is the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (Keen, "Novel Readers" 21). Keen has clarified her definition as follows:

Narrative empathy thus involves the authorial empathy of writers in the act of creation, the empathy of the audience(s) on the receiving end, and the textual evidence that bears the traces of strategic empathizing in narrative techniques and representations of fictional worlds. ("Empathetic Hardy" 366)

Although Keen's concept has some detractors (Cuder et al. 2024), the expanding theorizing and scholarly commentary on narrative empathy encourages further investigation within the field. My aim is to combine an analytic with an empathetic reading of Atwood's tenth novel, adopting Keen's assumption that "the two modes are not incompatible," as she claimed in the preface to her book *Empathy and the Novel* (x). Accordingly, I will both examine the representation of empathy in *The Blind Assassin* and ponder the capacity of the novel to encourage the empathy of many of its readers.

1. THE REPRESENTATION OF EMPATHY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF READERLY EMPATHY

Exploring the empathetic effects produced by Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) entails a detailed analysis of the fictional memoir contained in this award-winning book.³ Iris Chase is the eighty-two-year-old protagonist and first-person narrator of a multi-layered novel which includes her confessional memoir, an embedded romance novella (entitled "The Blind Assassin"), a futuristic science-fiction story inserted within the

³ Atwood gave a brief account of her process of writing *The Blind Assassin* in "Margaret Atwood on *The Blind Assassin*" (2013).

novella, and numerous interspersed newspaper clippings.⁴ Iris is presented as exercising full control over all the information contained in *The Blind Assassin*, because Atwood makes her both write the main narrative and intercalate a number of pseudo-factual documents purportedly drawn from Canadian newspapers and magazines: brief reports and articles (some of them inspired by real events, but actually of Atwood's contriving), birth announcements and obituaries, except for the protagonist's own obituary, whose authorship is ascribed to Myra Sturgess, one of the characters (519). Another exception is the two excerpts from an article about the *Queen Mary*'s maiden voyage published by J. Herbert Hodgins, the editor of *Mayfair*, in the July 1936 issue of the magazine (347–48). Each of the genres juxtaposed in one of Atwood's most technically sophisticated novels adds to its complexity and contributes to its richness, but it seems preferable to focus firstly on the memoir itself.⁵ This is because narrative empathy is mainly derived from this fictional piece of life writing rather than from the other collected textual materials, some of which may even disrupt the reader's attachment and immersion with their distancing or estrangement devices. It is in the memoir that Atwood demonstrates how her involvement with empathy is far from being simplistic, for she thoroughly explores its potential as well as its limits.

Unlike Susanna Moodie, whose emblematic figure Atwood would evoke first in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and many years later in her historical novel *Alias Grace* (1996) together with Grace Marks, a Canadian housemaid convicted for murder in 1843, the protagonist of *The Blind Assassin* is an entirely fictional character. It should be underscored that, in spite of the fact that the real world is continually referenced via the many historiographic elements mixed together in Iris Chase's fragmented memoir (for example, through allusions to the two World Wars, the Depression Years in Canada and the Spanish Civil War), we are dealing

⁴ To avoid confusion, most critics refer to the embedded novella as "The Blind Assassin" and to the whole book as *The Blind Assassin*. In her novel Atwood always italicizes the title of the novella-within-the-novel instead of using such quotation marks.

⁵ See Dvorak's analysis of "the embedded narratives in Atwood's palimpsestic Booker Prize-winning novel" (59), which "has a profoundly metatextual Russian doll story-within-a-story structure" (65). Stein also uses the "Russian wooden doll" image, emphasizing how the nested stories are "surprisingly similar" ("A Left-Handed Story" 135). Paying attention to the layered narrative structure of *The Blind Assassin*, Michael examines not only how the various "narratives work but also how they can be manipulated to subvert their limits" (88).

with a fictional memoir, rather than a memoir written by an actual person. In *Empathy and the Novel* Suzanne Keen calls attention to the importance of fictionality as a key feature in prompting empathetic readerly responses when she asserts that “the very fictionality of novels licenses our feeling responsiveness because it frees us from responsibility to protect ourselves through skepticism and suspicion. Fiction may invoke empathy in part because it *cannot* make direct demands for action” (106). Applying Keen’s observation to the analysis of *The Blind Assassin*, one could argue that the fictionality of Atwood’s novel may spark a sense of protective freedom which can lead some readers to emotionally connect with Iris Chase much more easily than they would if they had to carry the burden of responsibility implied by the need to respond effectively to the plight of a true human being. In other words, such readers may feel comfortable when empathizing with Iris precisely because she is a fictional character invented by Atwood rather than a real woman.⁶

Iris Chase’s long autobiographical account constitutes the greater part of *The Blind Assassin*, covering almost the entire twentieth century. Born in 1916, Iris goes back two generations to evoke the details of her immediate ancestry, so that her memoir reaches as far back as 1899, which is the year when her family mansion was completed in a small town of southern Ontario. Thus, the memoir is extensive enough to provide time for empathy to develop with an octogenarian who reviews her whole life during what turns out to be her last twelve months, from May 1998 to May 1999. The memoir is interspersed with the much shorter caustic comments which Iris makes about her decaying existence in this final year, so that there is a frequent shift between her past and her present. Both these diary-like entries and the recurrent metanarrative commentary of the memoir itself help Iris to offer the broken fragments of her life in a very moving way, fueled by her conviction that she must hasten on to finish her autobiography before her death, which she anticipates because of her heart condition (222–23).

The contents and the conversational tone of the protagonist’s lucid and lively comments about her ongoing deterioration as an old woman intensify the empathetic effects primarily generated by the autobiographical account of her past existence. The fact that

⁶ Leah Anderst claims that real autobiographies may have “just as much potential for creating empathetic responses and for arousing strong emotions in readers as do novels and short stories” (273).

autobiography (including fictional autobiography as far as it imitates and adopts many conventions of autobiography in the strict sense of the term) is a self-reflexive genre allows the old Iris to empathize with her former *remembered selves*, that is, the series of non-identical selves she remembers having been in her past life (Gibert, "Haunted" 45, 60; Robinson 349). To be able to empathize with her multiple *remembered selves*, Iris not only needs to undergo a role-taking shift to represent them as separate from her *remembering self* (the author writing the memoir) but must also perceive each of them as distinct from one another, with different interrelated identities. This differentiation, which is clearly outlined throughout the narrative, is an essential requirement for Iris's earlier *remembered selves* to become the target of her present empathy.

Additionally, her thorough account of the tragic events of her shattered life contribute to stimulating genuine empathy with her.⁷ Indeed, readers tend to respond feelingly to a character who casts herself as the victim of a long series of misfortunes, including the premature death of her mother, her father's post-traumatic stress disorder as a WWI veteran, her victimization at the hands of a sadistic male tutor, her sister's emotional instability and eventual suicide at the age of twenty-five, her family's bankruptcy, her unhappy marriage, her hapless love affair, and her estrangement from her daughter and granddaughter. In sum, suffering is concomitant with all her life stages, from childhood into adolescence, persisting in her adulthood, and filling her old age. Whereas we do not claim that her memoir elicits universal empathy in all kinds of readers, we can presume that many individuals will be prone to respond empathetically to certain situations of her life, even if they have never undergone the same experiences.⁸ Some aspects are likely to arouse strong and effortless character identification with Iris on the part of readers, even though difference may prevail over similarity in many cases. After all, one need not be an orphan to spontaneously empathize with a girl striving to overcome grief after an untimely parental death. Nor does one need to be

⁷ In "A Theory of Narrative Empathy" Keen underscores that in empathy "we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others" (208).

⁸ Rejecting the hypothesis of universality, in "Narrative Empathy: A Universal Response to Fiction?" Keen clearly answers the question asked in her title: "The proposition that narrative empathy qualifies as a literary universal could have no less likely an advocate than me."

a victim of domestic violence to easily empathize with a woman submitted to psychological and physical abuse by her husband.⁹

Iris refuses to remain inconsolable amid the most devastating episodes she must go through, but her quest is often futile because she goes in the wrong direction when she favors violence over peace and love. Her acts of aggression intended to cause harm may help her temporarily relieve tension, but invariably end up increasing her grief. On most occasions she cannot achieve lasting solace, but just a fleeting sense of comfort. Curiously enough, she gives a straightforward explanation that her search for consolation implies making use of physical or verbal violence whenever her sadness turns into anger. She frankly elucidates her first experience of this phenomenon, which occurred in the earliest stage of her process of mourning for her mother. She recalls how, feeling "desolate, and also grouchy and bloated," she lashed out in anger (97). In her memoir she describes in graphic detail and comments on a crucial scene, an incident which would mark her existence forever by making her relive her childhood frustration again and again. On the day after her mother's funeral, having been allowed by her nursemaid to stuff herself with food left over from the funeral reception held at Avilion, Iris was sent out into the garden with her sister Laura. Still in her black dress, which was too hot for that warm day, Iris was immersed in a sunlight that made her squint. Since her dark state of mind could not bear so much brightness and heat, she directed her fury against "the intense greenness of the leaves, the intense yellowness and redness of the flowers" to the extent of thinking "of beheading them, of laying waste" (96–97). Filled with resentment against "their assurance, the flickering display they were making, as if they had the right," she anthropomorphized the flowers by attributing to them the ability to control their moods. Instead of being consoled by nature, she took offence at it, just as she explicitly rejected the solace of religion and any belief in the afterlife.¹⁰ In the middle of this emotional turmoil, nine-year-old Iris expected six-year-old Laura to understand and share her sadness about their mother's death. But little Laura, who epitomized the lack of cognitive empathy because she suffered from what Atwood called

⁹ When an interviewer told Atwood that *The Blind Assassin* had made her cry, the novelist retorted: "Other readers have wept too" (Ross 19).

¹⁰ In his book *On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times*, the Canadian historian and political theorist Michael Ignatieff reflects on the challenges of the search for solace in an age of disbelief, when the traditional language of consolation has almost vanished from our modern vocabulary.

“a mild form of autism” and could be identified as Asperger’s syndrome (Gibert, “Unraveling” 38), was incapable to satisfy Iris by responding to her distress. Skeptical Iris was so vexed at witnessing how Laura, believing that their mother was with God in heaven, “was annoyingly light-hearted, as if she didn’t have a care in the world,” that she deliberately pushed her sister off the ledge of the lily pond onto the grass to hurt her (97). In her search for consolation, Iris became furious, as her feelings of grief for her mother were converted into feelings of anger which this time she directed at her sister, rather than at the colorful garden flowers.¹¹ Many years later, recalling how Laura had wailed, the elderly Iris comments in a parenthetical aside: “(I have to admit I was gratified by this. I’d wanted her to suffer too—as much as me. I was tired of her getting away with being so young)” (97). Obviously, such gratification was ephemeral and did not even provide her a few moments of true solace.

Furthermore, later in her memoir Iris records how, on the night before her wedding, she had a strong argument with Laura, who did not want her to get married to Richard. Iris was so angry at hearing the home truths delivered by Laura that she was on the verge of deliberately hurting her sister once again. The words Iris used to conclude her telling of this episode corroborate that she hid the source of her relief because she was ashamed of deriving comfort from her violent reactions against her sister: “I could have hit her. It was, of course, my secret consolation” (237).

The last conversation between the two sisters, just before Laura’s death in 1945, took an unexpected turn when Iris, who had assumed she would “be consoling Laura, commiserating with her, hearing a sad tale,” ended up instead in the position of being lectured (485). Exasperated by her younger sister’s “infuriating iron-clad confidence,” Iris “wanted to shake her” (487). Then, she closed her eyes and had a flashback of the garden scene with “the too-hot sun glinting on the rubbery green leaves” (487). This had happened back in 1924, when her “fingers itched with spite” and she felt compelled to push little Laura off onto the grass, a typical aggression of child behavior (488). However, in 1945 their final

¹¹ Iris emphasizes the connection between grief and rage during a grieving process when she observes that, at the unveiling of the war memorial on Remembrance Day, “Father stood with head bowed, but he was visibly shaking, whether from grief or rage it is hard to say” (149). When rendering an account of one of her shell-shocked father’s fits of temper, she notes that she sat in her room holding hands with her sister while “listening to the fury and grief rampaging around” over their heads “like an interior thunderstorm” (204).

conversation was not an innocuous squabble, but a serious quarrel in which Iris committed the worst act of cruelty she could bestow upon her adult sister. She broke down to her two terrible pieces of news about the only man Laura had ever been passionate about and with whom she was still infatuated: firstly, that Alex had been killed in the war, and secondly, that he had been Iris's secret lover "for quite a long time" (487). On this occasion, Iris blindly pushed Laura to suicide, thus becoming one of "the blind assassins" of Atwood's novel.¹²

Time and again Iris demanded Laura to empathize with her, but in fact she did not even try to reciprocate while her vulnerable sister was alive. To start with, she found it difficult to stand in Laura's shoes due to their deep-rooted sibling rivalry, and only achieved empathy with her after she committed suicide, an event about which Iris felt terribly guilty. It was easier for Iris to empathize with people dwelling in the afterworld than with those who were living close to her in the harsh world of reality. For instance, the elderly Iris remembers how, as a teenager, she used to romanticize her late grandmother Adelia, whom she had not met, but whose traces remained in the family mansion of Avilion long after her death of cancer in 1913 (63). At the age of thirteen or fourteen, Iris projected her own youthful longing for a lover into a highly improbable story involving furtive meetings between her elegant grandmother and an imaginary charming lover (60). Many years later, Iris would empathize again with her grandmother when she realized that she had also been "married off" by her father for financial reasons (59).

Iris hated her own marriage of convenience to the wealthy businessman and political conservative Richard Griffen and was likewise convinced that marriage did not suit her at all.¹³ In her old age, long after she was widowed, she avowed: "I shouldn't have married anyone" (36). She never loved her despotic husband, but her early lack of affective empathy with him was replaced by an uncommon cognitive aptitude to detect his thoughts and feelings. Despite her initial blindness and passivity, Iris gradually sharpened her sight to comprehend his behavior and ended up sharing with him perspective-taking well enough to manipulate him and even cheat on him without being caught. Subsequently, she used her awareness of his emotional states for the sake of taking revenge on him,

¹² Tolan discusses the depiction of sisterhood in her "gendered analysis of the novel" ("Was I" 78).

¹³ Stein analyzes Richard as a twentieth-century Bluebeard figure ("Margaret").

calculating her reactions with the aim to inflict him maximum damage. Her grief and anger at discovering how her dead sister had been sexually abused by Richard triggered her desire for vengeance, which Iris accomplished when she succeeded in breaking him mentally and driving him to suicide (aboard the boat where he first raped Laura) with the publication of “The Blind Assassin” under Laura Chase’s name.

Although Iris utterly hated Winifred, the only in-law she mentions in her memoir, her hatred did not prevent or restrain her from understanding her domineering sister-in-law’s standpoint with unusual perspicacity and insight from their first to their last encounter. Intuition enabled Iris to devise plans anticipating her sister-in-law’s desires with an aim to frustrate them. However, the outcome of her endeavors was often unsatisfactory. Throughout her memoir Iris gives the impression that her cognitive empathy was so high that she was able to predict Winifred’s internal states, accurately attribute her some specific emotions, and even figure out the exact words which her sister-in-law would have uttered in a given situation involving both of them.¹⁴ For example, at the beginning of their relationship, Iris visualized herself becoming an object of derision in “a string of funny anecdotes” which Winifred “would retail to her chums” while engaging in conversations that would incorporate disparaging remarks such as “*Dressed like a charity case. Ate as if they’d never fed her. And the shoes!*” (233). Resenting Winifred’s sense of superiority and condescension, Iris developed a talent to counteract their noxious effects by ridiculing her arrogant sister-in-law, a mild form of retaliation which proved momentarily soothing.

As for her daughter, Iris explains that she called her Aimee because she “certainly hoped she would be loved, by someone” (431). Iris portrays herself as an unsuitable mother when she records what she had thought about her baby shortly after giving birth: “I had doubts about my own capacity to love her, or to love her as much as she’d need” (431). This premonition came true, as Iris would acknowledge when Aimee died at the age of thirty-eight, after a miserable childhood, a troublesome

¹⁴ Here I am specifically referring to *cognitive empathy*, excluding *affective empathy*. Psychologist C. Daniel Batson notes that the experience of “knowing another person’s internal state, including his or her thoughts and feelings” is called *empathy* by some researchers and *cognitive empathy* by others (4). According to clinical neurologist Paul J. Eslinger, “empathy refers to the cognitive and emotional processes that bind people together in various kinds of relationships that permit sharing of experiences as well as understanding of others” (193).

adolescence, and a final “lengthy struggle with drug and alcohol addiction” (19). Again, as had happened after her sister’s suicide, Iris wished to empathize with and console her daughter when she was no longer on earth. Too late did Iris recognize that Aimee had been traumatized first by the death of her aunt Laura, then by that of Richard, and eventually by her mother and her aunt Winifred fighting over her custody. Retrospectively, Iris enumerated the main adversities which young Aimee had been unable to cope with: “Laura went over the bridge when Aimee was eight, Richard died when she was ten. These events can’t help but have affected her. Then, between Winifred and myself, she was pulled to pieces” (432). Iris “kept hoping for a reconciliation,” but her hope was in vain (434). Finally, her deep pain was somewhat alleviated when she learned that Aimee had turned against Winifred as well, a shared misfortune “which was some consolation at least” according to Iris (434). Once again, Iris admitted her propensity to look for consolation in discovering that other people were suffering as much as her.

In the last year of her existence, Iris turns to her granddaughter Sabrina, the only member of her family who is still alive. But Sabrina is missing; she might be in a distant country, perhaps in India (191), maybe “on some mission or other—feeding the Third World poor, soothing the dying; expiating the sins of the rest of us” (288). Iris is certain that, although she had been unable to love her daughter, she “would have loved” her granddaughter (435). Unfortunately, Iris had no opportunity to express her feelings directly to Sabrina, because she did not gain custody over her, and was not allowed by her sister-in-law to see the girl. Iris even got back “the cards and letters and birthday presents for Sabrina” with Winifred’s *Return to Sender* handwritten notes printed on the envelopes (47). Therefore, right now the only way for Iris to convey her love for her estranged granddaughter is through the pages of her memoir, which she explicitly addresses to her, disclosing that Sabrina’s “real grandfather was Alex Thomas,” not Richard Griffen (513). Early in her memoir Iris affirms that she is writing it neither for herself, nor for a stranger, but maybe “for no one” (43). However, as the story progresses, not only does she overtly express her desire that her absent granddaughter should empathize with her when she reads her memoir, but also gives signs that she is actively seeking her readers’ empathy.

One of the most striking scenes of the memoir is the violent last meeting between Iris and her daughter, three weeks before Aimee’s death. Aimee accused Iris of lack of motherly love and of having killed Laura,

whom Aimee mistakenly thought was her real mother. Iris was so upset by her daughter's insults and "threatening manner" that she "got to the front door" of the apartment and fled (436). In her memoir, Iris tells Sabrina how deeply repentant she is for not having consoled Aimee:

Perhaps I should have stretched out my own arms. I should have hugged her. I should have cried. Then I should have sat down with her and told her this story I'm now telling you. But I didn't do that. I missed the chance, and I regret it bitterly. (436–37)

Iris does not speak about empathy here, but clearly evokes this concept, together with that of compassion, while admitting her failure to share her daughter's perspective, understand her anger and console her.

One may wonder whether readers can possibly empathize with such an unempathetic character as Iris looks like when dealing with her sister and her daughter. Is she worthy of readerly empathy? The increasing scholarly interest in surveying the portrayal of empathy in works of fiction has set off debates in which this kind of issue has been addressed from various critical perspectives within the field of literary studies. The collection of essays entitled *Rethinking Empathy Through Literature* contains several approaches to this matter of discussion. For instance, Suzanne Roszak, while examining the representation of both cognitive empathy and affective empathy in two American novels, *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), contends that James Baldwin and Patricia Highsmith "craft protagonists who challenge the reader's impulse to empathize with them by committing acts of betrayal—and, in Highsmith's novel, murder—that position them as fundamentally lacking in empathy themselves" (150). Moreover, in her contribution to the same volume, "Empathy and the Unlikeable Character: On Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*," Rebecca N. Mitchell highlights the role played by a character's likeability in the production of powerful affective responses. Mitchell claims that the protagonists of these two French novels never become loveable characters, and draws attention to Emma Bovary's "exceedingly limited empathic abilities" (122). Although Iris Chase is not as unappealing as Emma Bovary and Thérèse Raquin, and is far from being an evil character such as Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, she is not as likeable or as pleasant as the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, with whom it is hard not to empathize. Iris tends to portray herself in an unfavorable or unflattering light in a memoir which is not an apology for

her past life. Indeed, she refrains from embellishing her performance of the roles of wife and mother, and often exposes the objectionable or disturbing aspects of her behavior, including her failure to empathize with her sister and her daughter. Her declarations of self-vindication are fewer than those of self-reproach, which show that she is painfully aware of her shortcomings and mistakes. Rather than simply blaming others for her calamities, she acknowledges her responsibility in the tragic course of events with which she is involved, especially in those concerning the suicide of her sister and the estrangement of her daughter. Paradoxically, this frequent self-disparaging attitude may have a positive impact upon the creation of empathy because it invites readers to engage emotionally with her much more spontaneously than if they had perceived on her part any attempts to depict herself as a model of virtue or as an innocent victim eluding her culpability as a victimizer. But, in fact, one can just conjecture and speculate about Iris's capacity to generate empathy on the part of readers because, as Sneja Gunew observes, "When one embarks on the critical literature of emotions, feelings, and affect, one soon discovers that there are no certainties" (12).

The person with whom Iris manages to establish the longest and strongest empathetic bond is her nursemaid Reenie, a motherly figure who nurtured both girls with more tenderness than their own mother, Liliana. According to Iris, Liliana's "comportment as a mother had always been instructive rather than cherishing. At heart she remained a schoolteacher" (85).¹⁵ Reenie's manner of inculcating values and habits was different, and the exact opposite of the ways in which the girls were taught at home in succession, after their mother's death, by two inadequate tutors. Motherless and emotionally estranged from their wounded father, their only referent for empathy was Reenie.

When Iris receives the shocking news of her sister's alleged car accident, she recalls how Reenie always tried to console her and her sister Laura during their childhood in their mother's absence. She concludes that some people are unable to express their pain and remain inconsolable:

¹⁵ Iris underscores this aspect of her mother's personality with comments such as "She wasn't in the habit of speaking to us about feelings, and especially not about love—her own love or anyone else's, except God's" (102).

She'd scoop us up and sit us on the white enamel kitchen table, alongside the pie dough she was rolling out or the chicken she was cutting up or the fish she was gutting, and give us a lump of brown sugar to get us to close our mouths. *Tell me where it hurts, she'd say. Stop howling. Just calm down and show me where.*

But some people can't tell where it hurts. They can't calm down. They can't ever stop howling. (2)

Reenie continued to be a caregiver for both sisters assisting them with extraordinary cognitive and affective empathy until she was compelled to change her attitude towards Iris. In her memoir, the elderly Iris explains that Reenie first blamed her for not having prevented the sexual abuse Laura had suffered from Richard, and later for having driven Laura to suicide. Iris's certainty about Reenie's estrangement is clearly articulated in one of her parenthetical asides: "(Once Laura had gone off the bridge, she forgave me even less. In her view I must have had something to do with it. She was cool to me after that. She died begrudgingly.)" (445).

In contrast to Reenie, her daughter Myra remained loyal to Iris during all her life and after the latter's death, for she wrote the obituary and arranged the private funeral and public memorial service. We may presume that Iris's corpse was found by Myra in the back garden where the deceased had been writing the final pages of her memoir, which she had intended to keep in her steamer trunk until Sabrina's return (520). Supposing that Iris had no time to place the last pages with the rest of her account, Myra would have been the first reader of the memoir and perhaps the one who took charge of its publication. Although Iris formally names Sabrina as her addressee, she includes frequent parenthetical asides directed to Myra, such as "Myra, take note if you're reading this" (184), "Which may be news to you, Myra" (446), and "If you're reading this, Myra" (504). Iris resorts to this rhetorical device of apostrophe in a much more elaborate manner when she writes, "you'll have to excuse me for mentioning it, Myra, but really you shouldn't be reading this, and curiosity killed the cat" (388). This is her communicative strategy to introduce the disclosure of an important secret about Myra's parentage: her suspicion that her father, Norval Chase, instead of Reenie's husband, was also Myra's biological father. If this were true, it would mean that Myra was Iris's half-sister rather than just the "long-time family friend" mentioned in her obituary (519).

Throughout the novel there is no mention of any other friends with whom Iris and Laura could have socialized and established empathetic relations, either as children or in adulthood. In the absence of any other social connections, generous Myra and her devoted husband Walter look after old Iris, who resents being watched over and feels plagued by their warnings and loving reprimands. Decrepit Iris mockingly reflects on her “resistance to confronting an aged self” (Reed 22), having to face an everyday struggle with her “weak knees, arthritic knuckles, varicose veins, infirmities, indignities” (311). Iris makes numerous amusing comments about her ailments, knowing that her “crude references to bodily functions usually put a stop to Myra” (373). Despite the frustration caused by her aging body, Iris’s humorous, honest and realistic depiction of such indefatigable tending to her diet, laundry and general well-being helps to promote readerly empathy towards her two empathetic caregivers.

Unlike many other of Atwood’s novels, *The Blind Assassin* exclusively offers the narrator-protagonist’s version of herself and of the story, which is told from her perspective and cannot be corroborated. We see everything with her eyes (the narrative “I” corresponding to the “eye” of the aptly named Iris), even the numerous photographs (phototexts) which add authenticity and verisimilitude to her memoir thanks to their apparent objectivity.¹⁶ With metafictional reflexivity, Iris declares that she will not tell “the truth” expected by the addressee she is apostrophizing, and puts forward her narrative unreliability, for she decides what information to withhold or conceal: “I look back over what I’ve written and I know it’s wrong, not because of what I’ve set down, but because of what I’ve omitted” (395).¹⁷ Nathalie Cooke convincingly demonstrated the following “paradox: the more Atwood’s narrators admit their unreliability, the more reliable they seem to become” (208). Although in 1995 Cooke could not refer to *The Blind Assassin*, published five years later, this paradox is fit to describe how Iris creates a sense (or an illusion) of narrative reliability despite being “a liar, at least in matters that concerned

¹⁶ On the crucial role of the photographs described in the novel, see Barzilai and Wilson.

¹⁷ Likewise, the protagonist of *Alias Grace* suggests her unreliability when she tells Dr. Jordan, who is pursuing the truth about Grace’s guilt or innocence: “Perhaps I will tell you lies” (41). Parkin-Gounelas, in her psychoanalytic reading of *The Blind Assassin*, finds “the experience of deception or duplicity at the center of Atwood’s novel” (682). In her review of the novel, Elaine Showalter called its narrator “wildly unreliable” (53). Filtness, Vickroy (257) and other critics have also dealt with the issue of Iris’s unreliability.

her dead sister,” in Atwood’s words (“Margaret Atwood”). For example, Iris gains rather than loses credibility from her readers by stating that she deliberately lied about Laura’s notebooks in the threatening farewell letter she wrote to her husband (502). In the same way, we tend to believe that Iris is sincere with us and we empathize with her when she confides that during her honeymoon she “was learning which lies, as a wife,” she “was automatically expected to tell” (305), or when she says that she lied to her doctor about drinking coffee (372), or when she makes us aware of her telling of white lies to avoid typical caregiver reprimands from Myra. To a certain extent, the supposed narrative reliability paradoxically deployed by Iris when highlighting her unreliability increases or at least contributes to the potential for readerly empathy with her.

2. THE QUEST FOR CONSOLATION AND SELF-EMPATHY

The word “empathy” and its cognates are absent from *The Blind Assassin*, and the word designating its closely related concept of “sympathy” appears only once.¹⁸ It is significant that Iris uses this term negatively to reject the idea of receiving sympathy from unfamiliar people, for fear of its potential danger. During her sorrowful honeymoon, a waiter kindly asked her why she was sad, and she answered that she was not sad while she began to cry. By denying the obvious, she tried to avoid becoming the recipient of solace from the waiter. Recalling the scene in her old age, she justifies her need to be wary of certain exercises of compassion with a sharp remark which probably replicates a previously internalized warning: “Sympathy from strangers can be ruinous” (304). Then, she reinforces her suspicion against the waiter’s urge to console her by adding that the following day he “propositioned” her, although she admits that her limited knowledge of French might have led her to misunderstand his intentions to relieve the distressed young woman’s suffering (304). Whether the waiter’s concern for her well-being was genuine or not remains a mystery which Iris cannot or does not want to solve. What is clear, however, is that the elderly Iris regrets having missed the opportunity of being consoled in her youth,

¹⁸ According to consensus, to empathize means “to feel with” (to feel what the other is feeling) whereas to sympathize means to “to feel for” (to feel concern for another’s well-being or sorrow for the other). Considering that this important distinction is often overlooked, Coplan warns “scholars outside of psychology who frequently use the terms empathy and sympathy interchangeably” although “they are distinct phenomena” (145). Empathy and sympathy sometimes conflate, but they do not always occur simultaneously.

considering that now she is no longer able to inspire the same kind of emotional response. The octogenarian sums it up as follows, “A sad pretty girl inspires the urge to console, unlike a sad old crone” (304).

When Iris was still young and beautiful, she sought consolation in her clandestine encounters with her lover, the labor activist Alex Thomas, the father of her only child. Iris and Alex became the unnamed protagonists of “The Blind Assassin,” whose relationship was poetically depicted as a source of solace for the female partner, the best remedy to heal her emotional wounds by helping her to efface sad souvenirs: “She goes to him for amnesia, for oblivion. She renders herself up, is blotted out; enters the darkness of her own body, forgets her name” (261).¹⁹ While recording her past both in the frame narrative and in the novella-within-the-novel, Iris not only expresses her reluctance to recall some sorrowful episodes, but also declares her willingness to forget certain details of her hard life, hoping that oblivion will heal her emotional wounds. Thus, she explicitly sets forth the advantages of forgetfulness as an exercise of *happy forgetting* to facilitate the erasure of memories which become too painful to bear (Gibert, “Haunted” 56). This kind of forgetfulness is blended with the form of memory loss resulting from the long-term psychological impact of the numerous traumatic experiences she endured throughout her existence.²⁰

Since the quest for consolation constitutes a central motif in “The Blind Assassin,” the theme of desolation (or disconsolation) receives particular attention in this romance novella. For example, from the distance of a room window of a bachelorette overlooking Allan Gardens in downtown Toronto, the unnamed male partner sees “two disconsolate men” who are picking up “crumpled papers on the grass … with steel-tipped sticks and burlap bags” (249). Later, while sitting at one of the booths of the unstylish Top Hat Grill, the lovers watch how “at the other booths sit lone disconsolate men with the pink, apologetic eyes and the faintly grimy shirts and shiny ties of bookkeepers” (358). These “disconsolate” anonymous men who loom in the background of the novella contribute to heightening the depressive atmosphere of the

¹⁹ Ridout contends about the lovers’ encounters, invariably dominated by storytelling rather than by their “sexual activities,” which “are usually described in a few short sentences”: “What is so striking about the descriptions of Iris’s affair with Alex Thomas is that they are far more textual than sexual” (20).

²⁰ For an interpretation of *The Blind Assassin* as a trauma narrative, see Bouson and Vickroy (270–73).

unattractive spatial settings in which the two lovers surreptitiously meet during the Great Depression.

Desolation also figures prominently in the science-fiction story inside the novella-within-the-novel. When the female lover complains to her partner that he only tells her “sad stories” and suggests that there could be “happy parts in between,” he promises “a happy story” and begins to recount the sci-fi story of the Lizard Men of Xenor (349–50). After five pages of narration, she asks him if this is his “idea of a happy story,” and he announces that there is more to follow (354). So, he goes on along the same lines until he says he has finished the story of happiness she wanted (356). Her immediate reaction indicates that their definitions of happiness differ, and she gives the impression that her request will never be fully satisfied. Happiness is nonexistent in the Planet of Xenor and does not last long in the Planet of Zycron. As the plot of the romance novella progresses, we learn that the female protagonist of “The Blind Assassin” used to escape from her current situation and take refuge in this imaginary place which is destroyed at the end. “Zycron, she thinks. Beloved planet, land of my heart. Where once, long ago, I was happy. All gone now, all destroyed. She can’t bear to look at the flames” (469).

The sci-fi story offers an exploration of the transformative potential of storytelling as a means of escape. Words are so powerful that they can turn desolation into consolation and vice versa, contingent on perspective. The manipulation of language is at its height in this sci-fi story when it comes to labelling a tribe of barbarian invaders: “By their enemies they’re called the People of Desolation, but they term themselves the People of Joy” (117). Hence, the same people receive opposite appellations, depending on whether they are negatively designated by their enemies or choose a positive name for themselves. After all, even in outer space, desolation and joy are at odds and can be alternatively applied to the same reality according to one’s point of view.

Finally, the male lover of the novella commits part of his sci-fi story to paper and, once the couple is separated, the female lover “haunts the drugstores, the train station, every chance news-stand” hoping to find a piece of his pulp fiction which will prove that he is still alive, “but the next thrilling episode never appears” (402). As a result, the temporary consolation which the female protagonist (Iris) received from the author of this fantasy world (Alex) vanished forever just as the Planet of Zycron had disappeared, leaving her in despair.

By alternating some declarations of self-vindication and many more of self-reproach in her confessional memoir, Iris seems to assuage her feelings of guilt over her failures. In the face of sorrow sometimes she seeks comfort and reassurance from those close to her heart (e.g., her nursemaid Reenie and her lover Alex), and on other occasions she rejects the emotional help she is being offered by those she distrusts (e.g., the French waiter). In the diary-like comments she makes during the last twelve months of her life, Iris balances her seriousness with doses of acid humor as an antidote to dejection. But, above all, in the periods of bereavement or of loneliness generated by grief she tends to search for solace in literature both as a reader (exemplifying the consolatory power of poetry) and as a writer, specifically by authoring the romance novella she publishes under the name of her sister as "a memorial" for her, that is, as "a commemoration of wounds endured ... and resented" (508). Additionally, the romance was a memorial for Iris herself and for her lover, since she began writing it as a sort of therapy or cure during her "long evenings alone" while waiting for his return from World War II, and she went on composing it as a self-healing tool after she received the news that he had been killed in action (512). Writing "The Blind Assassin" helped Iris assuage the distress caused by the death of her lover, directing empathy towards herself. At last, when Iris feels her final days approaching, she resorts to one of the best self-empathy acts which a creative artist can perform: she reviews her past in detail through recollection and conveys her existence by means of a life narrative, verbalizing her distress and alternatively choosing what to remember and what to forget.

CONCLUSIONS

Margaret Atwood creates narrative empathy throughout *The Blind Assassin* by resorting to a wide range of techniques designed to reveal the inner thoughts and changing emotional states of her protagonist and extremely self-conscious first-person narrator. Iris Chase is engaged in a complex process of introspection which finally leads her to express regret over her failures and repentance for her destructive lack of affective empathy towards her sister and her daughter. Presenting herself both as victim and victimizer rather than evading responsibility, Iris elicits cognitive and affective empathy from many of her readers. Despite her acknowledged lies, her memoir skillfully conveys a sense of veracity and credibility through a high degree of verisimilitude, the inclusion of

phototexts, realistic characterization, and plausible plot development. The invitation to readerly empathy also arises from the enhancement of mimetic illusion through distance-reducing metanarrative commentary and from the closeness of Iris's apparently reliable and seemingly authentic confessional voice addressing us in a conversational tone. Empathetic reading evolves with ease thanks to the effectiveness of various artistically blended narrative devices. Thanks to them, we are incited to proceed under the impression that we have been allowed full access to Iris's mind and heart to the point that we can adopt her perspective. Some of us may even come to think that we are able to share what we believe to be her intimate feelings and emotions in the numerous vividly portrayed scenes of the novel.

Atwood's dexterous handling of narrative empathy fosters a richer and more nuanced understanding of some aspects of human behavior. Additionally, the successful "sharing of feeling and perspective-taking" achieved while reading *The Blind Assassin* can enhance the impact of the social critique offered by a novel strongly committed to giving a voice to the silenced female victims of domestic violence.

FUNDING

Research funds for the completion of this article have been provided by the Faculty of Philology of the UNED, which is hereby gratefully acknowledged.

REFERENCES

Amiel-Houser, Tammy, and Adia Mendelson-Maoz. "Against Empathy: Levinas and Ethical Criticism in the 21st Century." *Journal of Literary Theory*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2014, pp. 199–17, doi: 10.1515/jlt-2014-0009.

Anderst, Leah. "Feeling With Real Others: Narrative Empathy in the Autobiographies of Doris Lessing and Alison Bechdel." *Narrative*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2015, pp. 271–90, doi: 10.1353/nar.2015.0017.

Atwood, Margaret. Afterword. *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, by Atwood, Oxford UP, 1970, pp. 62–64.

Atwood, Margaret. *Alias Grace*. Bloomsbury, 1996.

Atwood, Margaret. "Are Humans Necessary? Margaret Atwood on Our Robotic Future." *The New York Times*, 4 Dec. 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/opinion/margaret-atwood-on-our-robotic-future.html/.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Blind Assassin*. Nan A. Talese / Doubleday, 2000.

Atwood, Margaret. "The Curse of Eve – Or, What I Learned in School." *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*, by Atwood, Anansi, 1982, pp. 215–28.

Atwood, Margaret. "Margaret Atwood on *The Blind Assassin*." *The Guardian*, 9 Aug. 2013, www.theguardian.com/books/2013/aug/09/blind-assassin-atwood-book-club/.

Atwood, Margaret. "The Woman Thing, Part I. A Tale of Two Cities, and a Tale of Two Strong Women." *In the Writing Burrow*, 17 July 2025, margaretatwood.substack.com/p/the-woman-thing-part-1/.

Atwood, Margaret. "Writing *Susanna*." *The Illustrated Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Cormorant Books, 2014, pp. 71–75.

Barzilai, Shuli. "'If You Look Long Enough': Photography, Memory and Mourning in *The Blind Assassin*." *Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, The Blind Assassin, Oryx and Crake*, edited by J. Brooks Bouson, Continuum, 2010, pp. 103–23.

Batson, C. Daniel. "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena." *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, edited by Jean Decety, MIT Press, 2009, pp. 3–15.

Bloom, Paul. *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. Harper Collins, 2016.

Bouson, J. Brooks. "'A Commemoration of Wounds Endured and Resented': Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* as Feminist

Memoir.” *Critique*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2003, pp. 251–69, doi: 10.1080/00111610309599950.

Cooke, Natalie. “The Politics of Ventriloquism: Margaret Atwood’s Fictive Confessions.” *Various Atwoods*, edited by Lorraine M. York, Anansi, 1995, pp. 207–28.

Coplan, Amy. “Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2004, pp. 141–52, www.jstor.org/stable/1559198.

Cuder-Domínguez et al. “Cultures of Empathy: Introduction.” *European Journal of English Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1–9, doi: 10.1080/13825577.2024.2420945.

Dvorak, Marta. “The Right Hand Writing and the Left Hand Erasing in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*.” *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2002, pp. 59–68, doi.org/10.4000/12483.

Eslinger, Paul J. “Neurological and Neuropsychological Bases of Empathy.” *European Neurology*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1998, pp. 193–99, doi: 10.1159/000007933.

Filtness, Emma. “‘The end or *The End*’: Ageing, Memory and Reliability in Margaret Atwood’s Fictional Autobiography, *The Blind Assassin*.” *Ageing and Fiction*, special issue of *EnterText*, vol. 12, 2014, pp. 42–57.

Gibert, Teresa. “Haunted by a Traumatic Past: Age, Memory and Narrative Identity in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*.” *Traces of Aging. Old Age and Memory in Contemporary Narrative*, edited by Marta Cerezo and Nieves Pascual, Transcript Verlag, 2016, pp. 41–63, doi: 10.1515/9783839434390-003.

Gibert, Teresa. “Unraveling the Mysteries of Childhood: Metaphorical Portrayals of Children in Margaret Atwood’s Fiction.” *ES Review. Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 39, 2018, pp. 29–50, doi: 10.24197/ersjes.39.2018.29-50.

Gunew, Sneja. "Subaltern Empathy: Beyond European Categories in Affect Theory." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2009, pp. 11–30.

Hodgins, J. Herbert. "In Search of an Adjective." *Mayfair*, July 1936, pp. 26–27.

Howells, Coral Ann. "'Don't ever ask for the true story': Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, and *The Blind Assassin*." *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities*, by Howells, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 25–52.

Ignatieff, Michael, *On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times*. Metropolitan Books, 2021.

Ingersoll, Earl G. "Modernism/Postmodernism: Subverting Binaries in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin*." *Margaret Atwood Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp. 4–16.

Ingersoll, Earl G. "Waiting for the End: Closure in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2003, pp. 543–58, www.jstor.org/stable/29533604.

Keen, Suzanne. "Empathetic Hardy: Bounded, Ambassadorial, and Broadcast Strategies of Narrative Empathy." *Poetics Today*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2011, pp. 349–89, doi: 10.1215/03335372-1162695.

Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford UP, 2007.

Keen, Suzanne. "Empathy Studies." *A Companion to Literary Theory*, edited by David E. Richter, John Wiley & Sons, 2018, pp. 126–38.

Keen, Suzanne. "Narrative Empathy." *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, 22 Jan. 2013, www-archiv.fdm.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/node/42.html.

Keen, Suzanne. "Narrative Empathy: A Universal Response to Fiction?" *Literary Universals Project*, 7 Oct. 2017, literary-

universals.uconn.edu/2017/10/07/narrative-empathy-a-universal-response-to-fiction/.

Keen, Suzanne. “Novel Readers and the Empathetic Angel of Our Nature.” *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*, edited by Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, Routledge, 2014, pp. 21–33.

Keen, Suzanne. “A Theory of Narrative Empathy.” *Narrative*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2006, pp. 207–36, dx.doi.org/10.1353/nar.2006.0015.

Michael, Magali Cornier. “Narrative Multiplicity and the Multi-layered Self in The *Blind Assassin*.” *Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, The Blind Assassin, Oryx and Crake*, edited by J. Brooks Bouson, Continuum, 2010, pp. 88–102.

Mitchell, Rebecca N. “Empathy and the Unlikeable Character: On Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin*.” *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*, edited by Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, Routledge, 2014, pp. 121–34.

Parkin-Gounelas, Ruth. “‘What Isn’t There’ in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*: The Psychoanalysis of Duplicity.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2004, pp. 681–700, doi: 10.1353/mfs.2004.0065.

Reed, Alison. “Disembodied Hands: Structural Duplicity in Atwood’s *Blind Assassin*.” *Margaret Atwood Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2009, pp. 18–25.

Ridout, Alice. “‘Without memory, there can be no revenge’: Iris Chase Griffen’s Textual Revenge in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*.” *Margaret Atwood Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2008, pp. 14–25.

Rifkin, Jeremy. *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. Penguin, 2009.

Robinson, Alan. “*Alias Laura*: Representations of the Past in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*.” *Modern Language Review*, vol. 101, no. 2, 2006, pp. 347–59, doi: 10.2307/20466787.

Ross, Val. "The Elusive Margaret Atwood." *Quill and Quire*, vol. 66, no. 9, Sep. 2000, pp. 18–19.

Roszak, Suzanne. "Conformist Culture and the Failures of Empathy: Reading James Baldwin and Patricia Highsmith." *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*, edited by Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, Routledge, 2014, pp. 150–61.

Showalter, Elaine. "Virgin Suicide." *New Statesman*, 2 Oct. 2000, p. 53.

Staels, Hilde. "Atwood's Specular Narrative: *The Blind Assassin*." *English Studies*, vol. 85, no. 2, 2004, pp. 147–60, doi: 10.1080/00138380409609832.

Stein, Karen F. "A Left-Handed Story: *The Blind Assassin*." *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*, edited by Sharon Rose Wilson, Ohio State UP, 2003, pp. 135–53.

Stein, Karen F. "Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* as a Modern 'Bluebeard.'" *21st Century Gothic: Great Gothic Novels Since 2000*, edited by Danel Olson, Scarecrow Press, 2011, pp. 32–41.

Tolan, Fiona. *The Fiction of Margaret Atwood*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2023.

Tolan, Fiona. "'Was I My Sister's Keeper?': *The Blind Assassin* and Problematic Feminisms." *Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, The Blind Assassin, Oryx and Crake*, edited by J. Brooks Bouson, Continuum, 2010, pp. 73–87.

Vickroy, Laurie. "Sexual Trauma, Ethics, and the Reader in the Works of Margaret Atwood." *Critical Insights: Margaret Atwood*, edited by J. Brooks Bouson, Salem Press, 2012, pp. 254–75.

Waal, Frans de. *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*. Harmony Books, 2009.

Wilson, Sharon Rose. "Fairy Tales, Magic Photographs in Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*." *Once Upon a Time: Myth, Fairy Tales and Legends in Margaret Atwood's Writings*, edited by Sarah A. Appleton, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 73–94.

Students' Perceived Usefulness and Satisfaction with ChatGPT in Writing: A Quantitative Analysis

La utilidad percibida y satisfacción de los estudiantes con ChatGPT en la escritura: Un análisis cuantitativo

NAFISEH ZAREI

Institution address: Department of Language & Literature, Far Eastern University.
Nicanor Reyes Street, Sampaloc, Manila, Philippines 1015
E-mail: nzarei@feu.edu.ph
ORCID: 0009-0007-8929-6360

IVAN DOLPH FABREGAS

Institution address: Department of Language & Literature, Far Eastern University.
Nicanor Reyes Street, Sampaloc, Manila, Philippines 1015
E-mail: idffabregas@feu.edu.ph
ORCID: 0009-0007-5056-6394

Received: 09/01/2025. Accepted: 06/05/2025.

How to cite this article: Zarei, Nafiseh and Ivan Dolph Fabregas. "Students' Perceived Usefulness and Satisfaction with ChatGPT in Writing: A Quantitative Analysis" *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp. 167–189.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/6es65z75>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Abstract: The rapid advancement of technology has raised concerns about Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education. This study examines students' perceptions of ChatGPT's usefulness and their satisfaction with its application in writing. Informed by the theoretical underpinnings of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), it investigates whether perceived usefulness would be a predictor of students' acceptance of ChatGPT as a writing aid. Findings reveal positive perceptions of ChatGPT for idea generation but a neutral view of its indispensability in writing. A weak negative correlation was found between perceived usefulness and writing satisfaction. This study contributes to the discussion on AI integration in writing classes, providing insights for optimizing AI tools to enhance academic writing.

Keywords: ChatGPT; perceived usefulness; writing satisfaction; AI-assisted writing; ESL students
Summary: Introduction. Methodology. Results and Discussion. Conclusion and Recommendations

Resumen: El rápido avance de la tecnología ha generado preocupaciones sobre la Inteligencia Artificial (IA) en la educación. Este estudio examina las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre la utilidad de ChatGPT y su satisfacción con su aplicación en la escritura. Usando el Modelo de

Aceptación Tecnológica (TAM), se investigan los factores que influyen en la aceptación de ChatGPT como una herramienta de apoyo en la escritura. Los resultados revelan percepciones positivas de ChatGPT para la generación de ideas, pero una visión neutral sobre su indispensabilidad en la escritura. Se encontró una débil correlación negativa entre la utilidad percibida y la satisfacción con la escritura. Este estudio contribuye a la discusión sobre la integración de la IA en las clases de escritura, proporcionando ideas para optimizar el uso de herramientas de IA con el fin de mejorar la escritura académica.

Palabras clave: ChatGPT; utilidad percibida; satisfacción con la escritura; escritura asistida por IA; estudiantes de ESL

Sumario: Introducción. Metodología. Resultados y discusión. Conclusiones y recomendaciones

1. INTRODUCTION

Technology, especially in the twenty-first century, has revolutionized a myriad of practices in various fields. In education, technology has been proven to provide tools that facilitate students' digital literacy skills while educators guide these students in developing the critical and effective use of these tools for motivation (Zarei and Fabregas, "Innovative" 77). Recently, much attention has been paid to research focusing on AI. Particularly in academia, AI chatbots have been the subject of many scholarly investigations, primarily because of the initial perception that they seemed to be a threat to academic practitioners. In more recent research, however, these chatbots, seen as a technology that will inevitably be part of education, are already considered to have some benefits for both teachers and students. ChatGPT, for example, can now be used for interactive learning, assessment activities, and giving feedback (Baidoo-Anu and Owusu Ansah 52). It can also encourage critical thinking and problem-solving skills through its real-time question-answering and explanation capabilities (Zarei and Fabregas, "The Incorporation" 31). However, this is not to say that ChatGPT does not have any drawbacks. One of the biggest limitations of AI chatbots is that they can generate wrong information; thus, overreliance on particular AI technologies can be problematic. In fact, frequent AI use could undermine critical thinking skills through cognitive offloading (Gerlich 1). Nonetheless, AI chatbots can, when used responsibly, leverage teaching and learning. Wu and Yu believe that higher education students are more impacted by the use of AI chatbots (like ChatGPT) as compared to those in primary or secondary education (1). While this can be country-specific or education system-specific, it is the interest of the present study to look at whether the same situation can be observed in a Philippine context.

Writing is often seen as the more challenging skill to develop (Jun 89; Gustilo 27) as compared to the other three macro skills (reading, speaking, and listening). As such, it is expected that students will try to seek assistance from various resources available to them, which include chatbots. Students resort to AI chatbots like ChatGPT because they can save time, provide information in almost all areas, and provide feedback, thus illuminating particular ideas (Ngo 4; Huallpa et al. 106). In the Philippines, recent research has revealed that Filipino students are apprehensive when it comes to conducting research; a study by Bastida and Saysi demonstrated that this apprehension is due to several factors, such as language proficiency, task management skills, procedural competence, digital competence and learning tools, personal competence and efficacy, teacher's feedback and evaluation, goal orientation, emotional stability, learning assistance, and external influence. Chatbots, as a technology that can readily provide a refined (albeit AI-generated) written output, can address these factors. Thus, students conveniently utilize chatbots for academic writing.

Teachers then have the responsibility to monitor students' use of AI chatbots in their written outputs. AI-generated text detectors such as Turnitin aid educators in checking students' work. They also prevent students from submitting purely AI-generated outputs. Hence, many students can only do so much with AI chatbots. At best, these chatbots serve as a guide and support for students writing for academic purposes. Previous studies have shown that AI chatbots improve students' writing skills, e.g., in the use of grammar (Shaari 53), even outperforming human assistance (Kim 37). Thus, there is an assumption that AI chatbots, to some extent, also motivate students when it comes to academic writing. Because of these, the present study investigates the extent of ChatGPT's influence (especially in a positive light) on Filipino college students' writing. It also looks into the relationship between students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT and their writing satisfaction.

1.1 Problem Statement

The increasing integration of AI chatbots like ChatGPT in educational settings raises questions about their efficacy in enhancing students' writing proficiency. While past research has acknowledged AI chatbots' benefits in providing interactive learning and feedback, concerns remain regarding potential drawbacks, such as the creation of incorrect information and the

promotion of over-reliance (Baidoo-Anu and Owusu Ansah 57). This study aims to investigate students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT and their satisfaction with using this tool.

1.2 Research Questions

1. To what extent do students perceive ChatGPT as a useful tool in enhancing their writing skills?
2. What is the level of students' satisfaction with their ChatGPT-aided writing?
3. Is there a significant relationship between students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT and their satisfaction with their writing outcomes?

1.3 Research Hypotheses

1. Students perceive ChatGPT as a significantly useful tool in enhancing their writing skills.
2. Students exhibit a high level of satisfaction with their ChatGPT-aided writing.
3. There is a significant positive relationship between students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT and their satisfaction with their writing outcomes.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study investigates students' perceptions of ChatGPT and how it connects to their writing satisfaction, contributing to the ongoing discourse on the use of AI technologies in language training. The findings of the study can also assist educators in developing strategies for successfully integrating AI chatbots into language-learning curricula, which will enhance students' proficiency in academic writing and boost their engagement with the material. Additionally, understanding how ChatGPT impacts students' writing skills can assist in developing interventions that are specifically meant to address the challenges that students face when learning a language, such as language proficiency, process skills, and digital competence. By using ChatGPT to support students' writing

development, teachers may create more personalized and inclusive learning environments that meet a range of learning needs and references.

1.5 Literature Review

This section reviews previous research on the use of ChatGPT in language learning, with a particular focus on academic writing proficiency and motivation across diverse educational settings. It highlights key recent studies examining its potential as a learning aid, the challenges of overreliance, and the role of AI in enhancing students' academic performance while addressing both the benefits and limitations of ChatGPT in academic writing contexts. Lastly, it reviews studies on the advantages and disadvantages of using ChatGPT on Filipino students' behavior and communication skills.

Several studies have examined ChatGPT's usefulness as an AI tool and its impact on students' writing proficiency in language learning contexts. For example, using TAM, Yilmaz et al. showed that there is an overall positive perception of ChatGPT. Song and Song assessed ChatGPT's effectiveness in increasing writing proficiency and motivation among Chinese students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a mixed-methods study, with the findings of their research revealing that pupils who got AI-assisted instruction showed significant improvements in both writing proficiency and motivation when compared to traditional methodologies. Even though ChatGPT helped Chinese EFL students dramatically increase their writing ability and motivation, Song and Song's study raises important questions about the potential biases in the evaluation processes and the generalizability of the results to other studies on students' writing ability. It is important to consider the complicated concerns raised in these studies regarding contextual accuracy and an over-reliance on AI technology when evaluating ChatGPT's effectiveness in helping students improve their writing skills.

To gain additional insight into how students viewed and utilized ChatGPT for second language acquisition, Zhang et al. carried out a qualitative study, using surveys and interviews to gain greater insight into the ways that ChatGPT impacts language learning. Their study showed the importance of considering students' perspectives to help them write more effectively and how AI-based chatbots may be used to create more effective language learning materials that are tailored to each student's needs. Mahapatra used a mixed-methods intervention study to examine

ChatGPT's efficacy as a formative feedback tool for ESL students' writing ability. The results of this study showed a significant favorable impact on students' academic writing abilities, demonstrating ChatGPT's potential as a reliable writing aid and supporting ideas of feedback as a dialogic tool. This study suggests that, when educated appropriately, ChatGPT can be a helpful tool for offering feedback in large writing classes. While Mahapatra's study demonstrated the positive impacts of ChatGPT on ESL students' academic writing skills, a critical perspective would emphasize the relevance of taking potential biases and limitations into consideration in the study design and implementation. The results suggest that ChatGPT may be a helpful feedback tool in large writing classes, but more research is needed to evaluate its effectiveness across a variety of student demographics and writing contexts, including those relevant to the present study on students' writing proficiency. Özçelik and Ekşi investigated how ChatGPT aided in the development of writers' register knowledge for English writing (5). According to the results of their study, students believed ChatGPT was beneficial for learning formal registers, but they were skeptical about its capacity to teach neutral and informal languages.

Overall, the findings of the above studies demonstrate how ChatGPT can transform language learning by enhancing writing proficiency, motivation, and the acquisition of register knowledge. They also stress how important it is to consider the perspectives of the students, problems like contextual accuracy and over-reliance, and the larger implications and applications of AI in language learning scenarios. However, with these encouraging results, further investigation is still required to fully comprehend ChatGPT's long-term effects on students' writing proficiency.

According to recent studies, using AI tools like ChatGPT in language training is becoming more and more common. When using ChatGPT and other AI writing tools, Marzuki et al. looked into how EFL teachers evaluated the quality of their students' writing. Their research, which used qualitative methods, found that the use of AI writing tools improved students' writing quality, particularly in terms of organization and content. These findings demonstrated the potential benefits of enhancing EFL students' writing abilities with ChatGPT and other AI technologies. Athanassopoulos et al. conducted a study on the efficacy of ChatGPT as a learning tool for improving foreign language writing, especially for socially disadvantaged populations like refugees and migrants. The findings of their study revealed how ChatGPT enhances vocabulary and

grammar when writing in different languages. Moreover, the results indicated that the improved student versions of the work included more words overall, more unique words, and an average of more words per phrase. This demonstrates that ChatGPT can be a useful tool for helping language learners, especially those who are facing more difficult language situations. Critical factors need to be taken into account. Even though the above studies showed how ChatGPT can improve writing proficiency in language learning environments, more investigation is required to tackle the shortcomings and examine ChatGPT's efficacy across a range of educational environments and student demographics. It is also necessary to evaluate the ramifications of incorporating AI technologies, such as ChatGPT, into language instruction. These include issues with over-reliance on AI tools and making sure that students from a variety of backgrounds have equal access to these resources.

Students using ChatGPT, or any AI tool for that matter, should first be aware of its functions for them to assess whether it can be helpful to them or not (Hockly 448). This will entail the productivity of students, especially in writing, equipping them with skills in using ChatGPT for language practice (Kohnke et al. 538). In the context of the Philippines, the study of Javier and Moorhouse provided an implication that these skills needed by the students may be developed with the assistance of teachers themselves to increase the benefits of such an AI tool in improving students' writing skills. Despite the benefits, however, ChatGPT also has negative effects. While Filipino college students moderately agree that ChatGPT can help give detailed answers "till they are happy with the response," they also believe that ChatGPT can be biased, prone to mistakes, or misused (Fabella 1638). ChatGPT, thus, despite its positive effects, "may still inflict hindrances in the learning process of the students" (Fontanilla et al. 33).

Many other studies support the stance that ChatGPT offers both benefits and drawbacks in academic writing among Filipinos. In Santiago et al.'s work, they showed that AI chatbots, including ChatGPT, are valued tools for enhancing writing, e.g., through paraphrasing and proofreading. They also stated that other benefits include improving quality, efficiency, and clarity of writing, as well as reducing errors, saving time, and fostering creativity. Drawbacks were also found by the authors, which are mainly due to overreliance on particular AI technologies, leading to hindered critical thinking and risks of incorrect suggestions and plagiarism. These drawbacks, especially plagiarism, could manifest mainly due to

ChatGPT's style of writing being different from that of an actual human writer. The study of Nañola et al. showed that Filipino student-written outputs dominantly used a collective voice, whereas AI-generated outputs primarily employed an individualized voice. Moreover, there are differences in sentence constructions and textual identities. Thus, cautious use of ChatGPT is suggested for students, especially since AI-generated text detection tools are readily available for assessing their writing.

Observations of Filipino educators also show the seemingly unavoidable pitfalls of ChatGPT despite its many potentials. For example, Barrot demonstrated that although ChatGPT can be a valuable writing tool that can produce human-like texts, generate comprehensive essays, grade students' written work, correct grammar, and to a certain extent reduce students' stress in language learning, it may also produce unintelligible responses, use unnecessary statements, lack capabilities in checking plagiarism, follow rigid writing templates, and generate inaccurate or non-existent bibliographic information. These can then lead to concerns regarding learning loss and decreased creativity and critical thinking. Hence, Barrot suggested that students be trained to evaluate the information ChatGPT offers and be encouraged to write their original outputs and use ChatGPT solely as a means to refine them.

When students understand the proper use of ChatGPT and how to properly employ it, it could offer many positive impacts. In a study carried out by Caratiquit and Caratiquit on ChatGPT's effects on students' academic performance in a Philippine educational institution, they found that ChatGPT positively impacts academic performance by enhancing students' learning motivation. As an academic support tool, ChatGPT piques students' interest, curiosity, and intrinsic motivation. This is provided through the AI tool's helpful resources, advice, and interactive elements. Caratiquit and Caratiquit claimed that "[t]hrough appropriate utilization, ChatGPT assumes a critical function in fostering educational advancement and facilitating superior outcomes in students' scholastic pursuits" (31).

Even in regional contexts of the Philippines, ChatGPT's academic impacts have also been explored. Vidal demonstrated ChatGPT's language translation abilities, which can be helpful in the context of Philippine regional institutions where students speak native Philippine languages as their first language (L1). The author also asserted that ChatGPT has the potential to enhance communication skills. It has been shown that while ChatGPT has its benefits for Filipino students, it offers disadvantages at

the same time. This could mean that the perception of these students in the use of ChatGPT may also vary depending on how (dis)advantageous it is to them. In the work of Hernandez et al., they showed that Filipino students' behavior on ChatGPT use may be influenced by factors like habit and intentions. Students' intention on ChatGPT is influenced by factors like performance expectancy and personal innovativeness. Thus, although Filipino students benefit from using ChatGPT, not everyone is interested in its use; some Filipino students do not find it effective, and this results in their reduced engagement with ChatGPT (Bote et al.). This calls for more investigations on the effects of ChatGPT on student performance, especially in writing, in connection with how they perceive the use of such an AI tool. This is addressed by the present study.

1.6 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study builds on the position that students' perception of ChatGPT influences their satisfaction with using such an AI tool. This study thus adopts Davis's Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to understand undergraduate students' perceptions regarding the use of ChatGPT in connection with the development of their writing skills. According to TAM, the features of a particular technology affect how an individual views its "usefulness" and "ease of use." On the one hand, the perceived usefulness is determined by various factors: image, output quality, result demonstrability, subjective norm, and job relevance. On the other hand, the perceived ease of use is determined by perceptions about computer self-efficacy, external control, computer anxiety, computer playfulness, perceived enjoyment, and objective usability.

In light of TAM, students' perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use regarding ChatGPT ultimately influence their overall satisfaction with the use of the tool in connection with their writing outcomes. The concept of the connections among these variables is presented in Fig. 1.

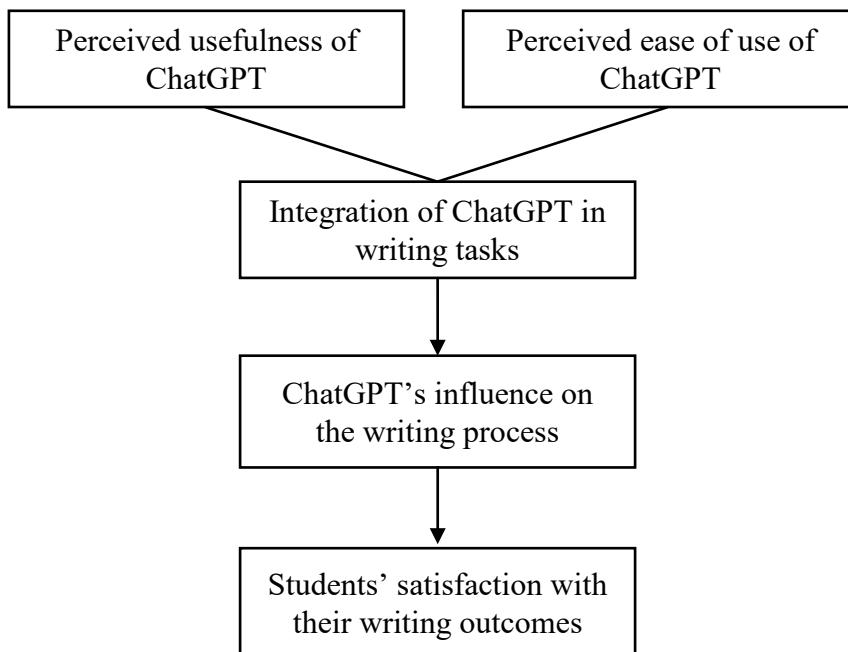


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

As seen in Fig. 1, students' choice of integrating ChatGPT in their writing tasks is influenced by the crucial elements of TAM: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. This integration, in turn, results in the actual influence of ChatGPT in the writing process. For example, students can integrate ChatGPT into their writing process by asking how to properly structure their paper or how they could lucidly write and incorporate their ideas. Finally, when the writing task is done with the aid of ChatGPT, students' writing satisfaction with their writing outcomes can be measured (and compared with other students.) Through this visualization, the effectiveness of ChatGPT in students' writing can be investigated.

2. METHODOLOGY

This preliminary study adopts a quantitative research design. A random sampling technique was employed to gather data from 200 undergraduate ESL students who were enrolled in a Purposive Communication course at a private university in Manila, Philippines. All participants were confirmed

to have fundamental internet proficiency, as this study focused on students' academic writing skills using ChatGPT. Moreover, they were already familiar with ChatGPT, having previously used it for academic writing tasks. The study was conducted in two complete semesters (36 weeks) in 2024.

For the research procedures, the researchers sent a letter to the university's General Education Department, which is in charge of the Purposive Communication classes. This letter requested authorization for data collection from the participants of the study. A Likert Scale Questionnaire (LSQ) was adopted and adapted according to the objectives of the study (see Appendix). Prior to the actual data collection, two experts in the field checked the validity and reliability of the LSQ. Some questions were revised according to the feedback from the two experts. The LSQ was then pilot-tested with a group of 50 students, after which it was sent to all the participants via email. There are two parts of the LSQ: one set of questions focused on students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT and another focused on their satisfaction with their ChatGPT-aided writing. Based on the survey, both these sets of questions have an excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.960 and 0.973, respectively). The data were analyzed quantitatively using the statistical treatments employed: Mean, Standard Deviation, Pearson Correlation, Regression, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first research question that this study asks is about students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT in their writing. Based on the survey of 200 respondents, the highest-rated aspect of satisfaction points to brainstorming ideas for essays. Specifically, this item in the questionnaire states, "I find ChatGPT useful in brainstorming ideas for my essays." On a 1 to 4 Likert scale, the mean score of this item is 2.99, suggesting that most respondents agree with the statement as it leans close to 3 towards agreement but not strong agreement. This indicates that the respondents find ChatGPT generally useful for brainstorming, even though it may not be generally viewed as highly effective. The standard deviation of this item is 0.740, reflecting moderate variability. This suggests that while many respondents find ChatGPT helpful for brainstorming, other opinions vary in such a way that some respondents are neutral or less enthusiastic. Meanwhile, the lowest mean score applies to the item that states,

“ChatGPT has become an essential part of my writing process.” With a mean of 2.60, it implies that respondents somewhat disagree or are neutral about ChatGPT being an essential part of their writing process. A standard deviation of 0.820 indicates that while most respondents have related opinions, there is still some variability, suggesting varying levels of reliance on ChatGPT among respondents. The implication of a low mean combined with a relatively high standard deviation when compared to other items suggests that not all respondents see ChatGPT as essential, with some viewing it as helpful only in certain or limited aspects of writing. The overall mean of all the items regarding the perceived usefulness of ChatGPT is 2.799. This indicates an overall lean toward an agreement (not a strong agreement) that the use of this AI tool is useful among the respondents. The 15 items about the perceived usefulness of ChatGPT have a Cronbach’s Alpha value of 0.960, indicating excellent internal consistency among the 15 items in the survey. This means that the items are highly reliable in measuring the same underlying idea. A high Cronbach’s Alpha (i.e. one that is close to a value of 1) signifies that the respondents answered consistently across similar items, reflecting a strong correlation among them. Thus, the categories/items are dependable in terms of evaluating user perceptions in this context.

For the second research question, this study asks about students’ level of satisfaction with their ChatGPT-aided writing. Based on the survey, the item with the highest mean score ($M = 2.86$) is the one that states, “ChatGPT meets my needs by providing writing assistance.” This implies that respondents mostly agree that ChatGPT meets their writing assistance needs. This indicates a generally confident or positive insight into ChatGPT’s usefulness in writing tasks. The standard deviation of this item is 0.685, which is considered low according to the range signified by the Likert scale used. It indicates fairly consistent responses and shows that most respondents share a comparable level of agreement, thus supporting the idea that the respondents find ChatGPT effective in giving writing assistance with no significant disagreement. The high mean and low standard deviation reveal that the item “ChatGPT meets my needs by providing writing assistance” signifies a key strength of ChatGPT. Meanwhile, the item with the lowest mean score ($M = 2.45$) states, “I feel more confident in my writing when I use ChatGPT.” This shows that respondents are closer to a neutral or slightly disagreeing with the view regarding confidence in their writing when using ChatGPT, suggesting that the use of the AI tool has not significantly enhanced their writing

confidence on average. This also reveals that it is a weaker area of ChatGPT's recognized effects compared to other features. The standard deviation of this item ($SD = 0.831$) indicates that there is some diversity in responses, suggesting that while some respondents feel more confident in using ChatGPT, others do not share this experience. Thus, the moderate SD displays that ChatGPT's ability to instill confidence varies depending on the user. The overall mean of the 15 items about students' level of satisfaction with their ChatGPT-aided writing is 2.708. Similar to the perceived usefulness, this indicates that the respondents are leaning towards agreement (not strong agreement) that they are satisfied with their writing as aided by ChatGPT. The Cronbach's Alpha value of the 15 items is 0.973. This value suggests excellent reliability of the scale. It indicates that the items are highly consistent and measure the same construct, revealing students' satisfaction with ChatGPT-aided writing. The consistency between Cronbach's Alpha and Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items confirms that the scale's reliability is not affected by differences in item variances. With such a high Cronbach's Alpha, the 15 items/indicators on students' satisfaction with ChatGPT-aided writing show that the items effectively capture various scopes of satisfaction, such as ChatGPT's usability, effectiveness in writing assistance, and impact on confidence or learning.

When the overall perceived usefulness is placed alongside the level of students' satisfaction with their ChatGPT-aided writing, there are some interesting observations. Looking at the mean and standard deviation (Perceived usefulness: $M = 2.7987$, $SD = 0.10197$; Satisfaction: $M = 2.7080$, $SD = 0.10936$), the two sections are fairly close, indicating that the responses are generally consistent but clustered in the mid-range of the four-point Likert scale. To determine if there's a significant relationship between perceived usefulness and satisfaction, the Pearson correlation is employed. Based on the statistical results ($r = -0.249$), there is a weak negative correlation between the perceived usefulness of ChatGPT and satisfaction with ChatGPT-aided writing. A p -value of 0.370 (greater than the threshold of 0.05) indicates that the relationship is not statistically significant.

The analysis has been taken further to determine if perceived usefulness predicts satisfaction. Using regression analysis, results ($R = 0.249$) indicate a weak relationship between students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT and their satisfaction with their writing outcomes. However, it is not practically significant. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 =$

0.062) shows that only 6.2% of the variation in students' satisfaction with their writing is explained by the perceived usefulness of ChatGPT, which is quite low. The Standard Error of the Estimate (0.10990) reveals a relatively small value, indicating predictions are somewhat close to actual data, but the practical value is limited by the weak relationship. A Durbin-Watson value of 1.327 is within acceptable limits (1.0–3.0), indicating no serious autocorrelation among residuals. Using ANOVA, results show that there is no evidence that students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT predicts students' satisfaction with ChatGPT-aided writing ($F = 0.862$, $p = 0.370$). Overall, the regression analysis confirms that students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT does not significantly predict students' satisfaction with their ChatGPT-aided writing outcomes. The low R^2 value and non-significant ANOVA suggest that factors other than perceived usefulness may be more important in determining students' satisfaction with ChatGPT-aided writing.

Based on the results, the hypotheses presented in this study are rejected. This study first hypothesized that students' perception of ChatGPT would be a significantly useful tool in enhancing their writing skills. However, as previously presented, the respondents do not have strong agreement on ChatGPT's usefulness. Secondly, it was hypothesized that students would exhibit a high level of satisfaction with their ChatGPT-aided writing. However, it was again revealed that the respondents do not have strong agreement that they are satisfied with ChatGPT's assistance. Lastly, it was hypothesized that there would be a significant positive relationship between students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT and their satisfaction with their ChatGPT-aided writing. Based on the correlation analysis, this hypothesis is also rejected. To reiterate, there is no statistically significant relationship between students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT and their satisfaction with ChatGPT-aided writing. Moreover, students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT does not predict satisfaction.

One would expect that a useful tool could lead to a satisfactory outcome. The results of this study show that, on average, students' perceived usefulness of ChatGPT and their satisfaction with ChatGPT-aided writing tend to be in a position that only leans toward the positive, rather than being overtly positive. This implies that ChatGPT can either be helpful or unhelpful. It coincides with previous research, which has shown that students believe that ChatGPT can be beneficial, but, at the same time, they can also be skeptical about it (Özçelik and Ekşi 3). The present study

only partially concurs with other findings, where ChatGPT has various advantages, ultimately resulting in students' improvement (Athanasopoulos et al. 818; Mahapatra 7; Marzuki et al. 1; Song and Song 2). In the Philippines, previous studies have found that ChatGPT has both benefits and drawbacks. In the present study, the responses of the students are, on average, between disagreement and agreement (though more partial toward agreement) that ChatGPT is a useful tool and that they are satisfied with its assistance. These findings could coincide with Barrot's and Santiago et al.'s findings, where it was revealed that ChatGPT can be a valuable tool but can also offer various drawbacks. More specifically, the findings of the present study concur with what Fabella revealed in his work that Filipino college students agree that ChatGPT can be helpful but can also be biased, prone to mistakes, or misused.

An important contribution that this study offers is the avenue for further investigating the relationship between students' perceived usefulness of AI tools and their actual satisfaction after using such tools. While many previous studies have shown the benefits (and drawbacks) of ChatGPT, the literature rarely talks about how perceptions of ChatGPT would lead to actual student satisfaction with their writing output. And it has significant implications for making educational policies about the use of ChatGPT in writing. If students do not find ChatGPT significantly beneficial, and if they are not satisfied with their ChatGPT-aided writing, then AI policies must be adjusted accordingly. Employing the theoretical underpinnings of TAM, this study was able to examine students' perceptions of the usefulness of ChatGPT and connect it with their satisfaction with their ChatGPT-aided writing. Specifically, TAM has been helpful in this study in its aspect of how individuals view a specific technology's usefulness. In the case of this study, the usefulness of a fairly new technology, ChatGPT, as perceived by college students, has been investigated. The usefulness aspect of TAM is then extended to analyze its connections with students' satisfaction with their writing when ChatGPT is used. Thus, TAM has proven to be a good tool in the investigations done in the present study (Yilmaz et al. 58).

4. CONCLUSION

This study provided valuable insights into ESL students' perceptions and satisfaction with ChatGPT as an aid in completing academic writing. Although students generally perceived ChatGPT as a useful tool for

specific aspects of writing, such as brainstorming ideas, it is not considered an essential part of the overall writing process. The findings of the study showed moderately positive satisfaction (no strong agreement) with ChatGPT-aided writing. Despite moderate satisfaction with the tool, the study highlights that perceived usefulness alone does not significantly account for students' satisfaction with AI-assisted writing. As found in the statistical analysis using Pearson correlation, there is a weak negative correlation between perceived usefulness and satisfaction ($p = 0.370$). Using regression analysis, findings reveal a weak relationship between perceived usefulness and satisfaction ($R = 0.249$). Therefore, other factors, including individual student characteristics, teaching methodologies, or the contextual application of ChatGPT, may play a substantial role in determining satisfaction with AI-assisted writing.

While ChatGPT indicates significant potential in supporting academic writing, its optimal influence hinges on strategic integration and a comprehensive understanding of the factors impacting students' satisfaction. By addressing these factors, educators and researchers can utilize AI tools to enhance students' academic writing. This study paves the way for future research to investigate further the multiple factors that influence students' satisfaction with AI tools. Investigating aspects such as user experience, individual digital competencies, and the interplay between AI assistance and traditional teaching methods could provide a more holistic understanding of how to maximize the effectiveness of AI in educational settings. In summary, this study contributed to the expanding body of research on the integration of AI tools, specifically ChatGPT, to enhance students' academic writing. By examining students' perceptions of the tool's usefulness and their satisfaction with AI-aided writing, the study provides valuable insights into how AI chatbots can be effectively utilized to support academic writing, especially among Filipino ESL students.

This study recognizes that other aspects, like prompting, might affect the students' responses to the survey. For instance, poor use of prompting might result in less satisfactory answers. Future studies can then include this aspect in investigating students' use of ChatGPT. In addition, future research could further explore the long-term impact of ChatGPT on writing proficiency by conducting longitudinal studies to track students' progress over time. In addition, investigations into the specific mechanisms through which ChatGPT influences academic writing quality, such as its role in idea generation, grammar improvement, and vocabulary

enhancement, could deepen our understanding of its educational potential. Moreover, comparing the effectiveness of ChatGPT across different student demographics or disciplines would provide a comprehensive understanding of its applicability in diverse learning contexts. Qualitative studies could explore students' attitudes toward AI-assisted learning deeper, offering a more complex understanding of their experiences. Lastly, controlled and effective use of ChatGPT in teaching could be a good avenue for future investigations.

REFERENCES

Athanassopoulos, Stavros, et al. "The Use of ChatGPT as a Learning Tool to Improve Foreign Language Writing in a Multilingual and Multicultural Classroom." *Advances in Mobile Learning Educational Research*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2023, pp. 818–24, doi: 10.25082/AMLER.2023.02.009.

Baidoo-Anu, David, and Leticia Owusu Ansah. "Education in the Era of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI): Understanding the Potential Benefits of ChatGPT in Promoting Teaching and Learning." *Journal of AI*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2023, pp. 52–62, doi: 10.2139/ssrn.4337484.

Barrot, Jessie S. "Using ChatGPT for Second Language Writing: Pitfalls and Potentials." *Assessing Writing*, vol. 57, 2023, doi: 10.1016/j.asw.2023.100745.

Bastida, Ernesto Jr. L., and Jhonies G. Saysi. "Factors Contributing to Research Writing Apprehension Among Senior High School Students in a Private Educational Institution in the Philippines." *American Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 11, no. 6, 2023, pp. 421–29, doi: 10.12691/education-11-6-11.

Bote Aezel, Anne M., et al. "Quantifying NSHS Students' Engagement: Assessing the Efficacy of Language Model Generative AI in Educational Research." *International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2024, pp. 902–09, www.multiresearchjournal.com/arclist/list-2024.4.1/id-2310/.

Caratiquit, Kevin D., and Lovely Jean C. Caratiquit. "ChatGPT as an Academic Support Tool on the Academic Performance Among Students: The Mediating Role of Learning Motivation." *Journal of Social, Humanity, and Education*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2023, pp. 21–33. 10.35912/jshe.v4i1.1558.

Davis, Fred D. "Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, and User Acceptance of Information Technology." *MIS Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1989, pp. 319–40, doi: 10.2307/249008.

Fabella, Frederick Edward. "Attitudes Toward the Positive and Negative Features of ChatGPT by Selected First-Year College Students." *International Research Journal of Modernization in Engineering Technology and Science*, vol. 5, no. 10, 2023, pp. 1632–39, doi: 10.56726/IRJMETS45426.

Fontanilla, John Bernard, et al. "Educators' Perspectives on the Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Writing Competence." *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Publications (IJMRAP)*, vol. 6, no. 6, 2023, pp. 29–34, www. d.researchbib.com/f/3jnJcgpzSjYzAioF93pP1wo250MJ50Y3IjoT9u MUZiZwN1Zl8kZF9WFx1FDINgIwMBAInkBQIMZwZhpTEz.pdf.

Gerlich, Michael. "AI Tools in Society: Impacts on Cognitive Offloading and the Future of Critical Thinking." *Societies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2025, pp. 1–28, doi: 10.2139/ssrn.5082524.

Gustilo, Leah E. "Differences in Less Proficient and More Proficient ESL College Writing in the Philippine Setting." *The Philippine ESL Journal*, vol. 16, 2016, pp. 27–45, www.files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED566412.pdf/.

Hernandez, Alexander A., et al. "Predicting the Use Behavior of Higher Education Students on ChatGPT: Evidence from the Philippines." *2023 IEEE International Conference on Teaching, Assessment and Learning for Engineering (TALE)*, 2023, pp. 1–7, doi: 10.1109/TALE56641.2023.10398324.

Hockly, Nicky. "Artificial Intelligence in English Language Teaching: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." *RELC Journal*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2023, pp. 445–51, doi: 10.1177/00336882231168504.

Huallpa, Jorge Jinchuña, et al. "Exploring the Ethical Considerations of Using ChatGPT in University Education." *Periodicals of Engineering and Natural Sciences*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2023, pp. 105–15, doi: 10.21533/pen.v11.i4.200 .

Javier, Darren Rey C., and Benjamin Luke Moorhouse. "Developing Secondary School English Language Learners' Productive and Critical Use of ChatGPT." *TESOL Journal*, 2023, doi: 10.1002/tesj.755.

Jun, Zhang. "A Comprehensive Review of Studies on Second Language Writing." *HKBU Papers in Applied Language Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2008, pp. 89–123, www.lc.hkbu.edu.hk/book/pdf/v12_05.pdf.

Kim, Na Young. "A Study on the Use of Artificial Intelligence Chatbots for Improving English Grammar Skills." *Journal of Digital Convergence*, vol. 17, no. 8, 2019, pp. 37–46, doi: 10.14400/JDC.2019.17.8.037.

Kohnke, Lucas, et al.. "ChatGPT for Language Teaching and Learning." *RELC Journal*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2023, pp. 537–50, doi: 10.1177/00336882231162868.

Mahapatra, Santosh. "Impact of ChatGPT on ESL Students' Academic Writing Skills: A Mixed Methods Intervention Study." *Smart Learning Environments*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2024, doi: 10.1186/s40561-024-00295-9

Marzuki, et al. "The Impact of AI Writing Tools on the Content and Organization of Students' Writing: EFL Teachers' Perspective." *Cogent Education*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2023, doi: 10.1080/2331186X.2023.2236469.

Nañola, Elisa, et al. "Recognizing the Artificial: A Comparative Voice Analysis of AI-Generated and L2 Undergraduate Student-Authored Academic Essays." *SSRN*, 2023, doi: 10.2139/ssrn.4617190.

Ngo, Thi Thuy An. "The Perception by University Students of the Use of ChatGPT in Education." *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, vol. 18, no. 17, 2023, pp. 4–18, doi: 10.3991/ijet.v18i17.39019.

Özçelik, Nermin Punar, and Gonca Yangın Ekşi. "Cultivating Writing Skills: The Role of ChatGPT as a Learning Assistant—A Case Study." *Smart Learning Environments*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2024, doi: 10.1186/s40561-024-00296-8.

Santiago, Cereneo S., et al. "Utilization of Writing Assistance Tools in Research in Selected Higher Learning Institutions in the Philippines: A Text Mining Analysis." *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, vol. 22, no. 11, 2023, pp. 259–84, doi: 10.26803/ijlter.22.11.14.

Shaari, N. D. "Conversational AI in Enhancing Students' Writing Skills Among Vocational Students." *Proceedings of the 11th MELTA International Conference in English Language Education*, 2022, pp. 53–55.

Song, Cuiping, and Yanping Song. "Enhancing Academic Writing Skills and Motivation: Assessing the Efficacy of ChatGPT in AI-Assisted Language Learning for EFL Students." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 14, 2023, pp. 1–14, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1260843.

Vidal, Joshua. "Emerging Technologies: The Birth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Education." *SSRN*, 2023, doi: 10.2139/ssrn.4512063.

Wu, Rong, and Zhonggen Yu. "Do AI Chatbots Improve Students' Learning Outcomes? Evidence from a Meta-Analysis." *British Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2023, pp. 10–33, doi: 10.1111/bjet.13334.

Yilmaz, Halit, et al. "Student Attitudes Towards ChatGPT: A Technology Acceptance Model Survey." *International Educational Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2023, pp. 57–83, doi: 10.58693/ier.114.

Zarei, Nafiseh, and Ivan Dolph Fabregas. "The Incorporation of Technology in Teaching the English Language." *Asian Journal of Social Science Research*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2023, pp. 27–33, doi: 10.5281/zenodo.10437747.

Zarei, Nafiseh, and Ivan Dolph Fabregas. "Innovative and Creative English Teaching Strategies: A Conceptual Framework." *Recoletos Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2024, pp. 73–84, doi: 10.32871/rmrj2412.01.06.

Zhang, Jiang, et al. "The Impact of ChatGPT on Students' Writing Proficiency in Second Language Acquisition: Students' Perception and Experiences: A Qualitative Analysis." *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1–9, doi: 10.51483/IJAIML.4.1.2024.1-9.

APPENDIX**Likert Scale Questionnaire**

Please respond to the following statements by selecting a number from 1 to 4, where 1 indicates "Strongly Disagree," 2 indicates "Disagree," 3 indicates "Agree," and 4 indicates "Strongly Agree."

Section 1: Perceived Usefulness of ChatGPT in Enhancing Writing Skills

1. Using ChatGPT enhances my writing skills.
2. ChatGPT improves the quality of my written assignments.
3. I find ChatGPT valuable for organizing and structuring my essays.
4. ChatGPT helps me articulate my ideas more clearly in writing.
5. I believe ChatGPT contributes positively to the development of my writing skills.
6. ChatGPT assists me in overcoming writer's block.
7. I find ChatGPT useful in brainstorming ideas for my essays.
8. ChatGPT helps me refine my grammar and language usage in writing.
9. The feedback provided by ChatGPT enhances my writing clarity.
10. ChatGPT is an effective tool for improving my academic writing style.
11. ChatGPT helps me discover new approaches to writing tasks.
12. The ease of using ChatGPT allows me to focus more on improving the quality of my writing.
13. I feel that ChatGPT is a reliable tool for improving writing efficiency.
14. Using ChatGPT reduces the time I spend revising my drafts, allowing me to focus on enhancing the overall quality of my writing.
15. ChatGPT has become an essential part of my writing process.

Section 2: Students' Satisfaction with ChatGPT-Aided Writing

16. I am satisfied with the quality of the writing I produce with the help of ChatGPT.
17. ChatGPT meets my expectations for assisting in my writing tasks.
18. I feel more confident in my writing when I use ChatGPT.

19. ChatGPT contributes significantly to my overall satisfaction with my writing process.
20. Overall, I am highly satisfied with the writing outcomes I achieve using ChatGPT.
21. I am satisfied with how ChatGPT helps me manage my time in writing tasks.
22. The writing feedback from ChatGPT helps me improve my writing.
23. I feel satisfied with the creativity ChatGPT brings to my writing.
24. ChatGPT meets my needs by providing writing assistance.
25. The suggestions made by ChatGPT are satisfactory in enhancing my writing.
26. I am satisfied with how ChatGPT encourages me to experiment with different writing techniques or styles.
27. I am satisfied with how ChatGPT keeps me engaged to refine my writing throughout the process.
28. ChatGPT positively assists me in completing writing tasks and producing higher-quality work.
29. I am satisfied with the variety of writing styles and techniques I can explore with the assistance of ChatGPT.
30. The feedback and suggestions provided by ChatGPT aid me improve my writing substantially.

Radical Intimacy in Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo*

Intimidad radical en *Intermezzo* de Sally Rooney

JOSÉ CARREGAL-ROMERO

Institution address: Avda. de las Fuerzas Armadas, s/n, Faculty of Humanities, Universidad de Huelva, 21007, Huelva.

E-mail: jose.carregal@dfing.uhu.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-1402-9387

Received: 06/03/2025. Accepted: 02/07/2025

How to cite this article: Carregal-Romero, José. "Radical Intimacy in Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp. 190–211.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/nfh5j274>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Abstract: Drawing on care ethics and vulnerability theory, this study addresses the prominent role of intimacy in Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo* (2024), set in contemporary Ireland. Written in a language that focuses on the protagonists' interiority, bodily sensations, and emotional world, the novel vividly portrays a "radical" sense of intimacy which helps characters reassess their phobias and insecurities within their closest relationships. As will be argued, intimacy in Rooney's *Intermezzo* is not just a matter of human connection, but of a personal transformation that allows protagonists to move away from the neoliberal and patriarchal values, norms, and stereotypes of today's world.

Keywords: Sally Rooney; *Intermezzo*; ethics of care; intimacy; vulnerability.

Summary: Introduction. Vulnerability and the "bodymind" language of vulnerability. Intimacy and self-transformation within relationships. Conclusion.

Resumen: Haciendo uso de teorías sobre vulnerabilidad y ética del cuidado, este ensayo aborda el papel clave que Sally Rooney da a la intimidad en *Intermezzo* (2024), ambientada en la Irlanda contemporánea. Escrita en un lenguaje donde aflora lo interior, lo emocional y las sensaciones del propio cuerpo, la novela construye una noción "radical" de la intimidad, que da lugar a que los personajes reconsideren sus fobias e inseguridades en el ámbito de sus relaciones afectivas. Se explicará cómo, en *Intermezzo*, la intimidad no se limita a la conexión emocional, sino que lleva a los protagonistas a alejarse de ciertos valores, normas y prejuicios de la sociedad neoliberal y patriarcal de hoy en día.

Palabras clave: Sally Rooney; *Intermezzo*; ética del cuidado; intimidad; vulnerabilidad.

Resumen: Introducción. Vulnerabilidad y el lenguaje íntimo del "cuerpomente". Intimidad y auto-transformación en las relaciones. Conclusión.

INTRODUCTION

Set in Dublin in the autumn of 2022, Sally Rooney's fourth novel, *Intermezzo* (2024), revolves around the conflict and reconciliation between two brothers, the 22-year-old Ivan—a skilled chess player and a temporarily employed data analyst who lacks solid career prospects—and Peter—32 years of age, a prestigious barrister, albeit a highly tormented individual. Whereas Ivan discovers the passion and intensity of first love in the company of Margaret (aged 36, married but separated from an alcoholic husband), Peter still mourns his lost love life with Sylvia, now a close friend, and futilely attempts to repress his feelings for the “unsuitable” Naomi, who is 23 and squats in a tenant building. Both brothers are grief-stricken by the recent death of their father but will not seek consolation in one another; they instead remain estranged until the end of the story. As also occurs in Rooney's previous novels, *Intermezzo* dramatises the personal crises of characters who eventually learn to see through their own phobias and social conditioning. Her protagonists progressively reassess their hurts and abandon their obsessions when they stop being self-defensive and instead embrace emotional openness, care, and interdependency within their most valuable relationships. Rooney's work is thus representative of a trend in contemporary Irish fiction, which foregrounds “themes of subjective isolation and disorientation,” in order to express a “yearning to reach back and connect” (Bracken 146, 148), and thus “cultivate a sense of empathetic understanding” (Cahill 604).¹ Even though there is much suffering and self-loathing, there is also hope and redemption in her novels, which become “quite optimistic about the human condition and about relationships,” in Rooney's own words (Allardice).² Her fiction ultimately

¹ Rooney's fiction also aligns with what Silvia Pellicer-Ortí and Merve Sarıkaya-Şen argue in their Introduction to a special issue on “Contemporary Literature in Times of Crisis and Vulnerability,” when they highlight “the capacity of literature to make evident the interconnectedness bonding us humans through vulnerability and trauma but also through empathy and solidarity”. “The imaginative world,” they further explain, “can make explicit the fact that we are all bonded and inseparably connected and can reunite characters, situations, times and places in multidirectional and intersectional ways that mobilise our political awareness and caring affects” (326).

² Many readers have, however, labelled her three first novels as “sad girl lit,” because they are “stories about introspective, essentially privileged young women” suffering much anxiety and insecurity about themselves and their relationships (Allardice). Yet optimism seems obvious in the final chapters of all her novels. We see it in *Normal People* (2018), for example, in Marianne's realisation that her beloved Connell “brought her

favours a basic principle of care ethics whereby individuals gain “self-respect” and “moral maturity” not through neoliberal markers of social success, like wealth or popularity, but through their “ability to make and sustain connections with others” (Keller 154). Such connections enrich and strengthen Rooney’s characters’ intimate bonds, providing increased security and stability in the face of the many vulnerabilities of human life.

For most of her stories, Rooney’s central characters struggle with communication and emotional honesty, and their relationships become affected by constraints like social class distinctions, as well as gender and sexual stereotypes and objectification, causing shameful silences, anxieties, and alienation. Against the backdrop of the individualism of neoliberal times,³ Rooney addresses “the existential need to feel loved and protected”; to ease their angst, her characters must transcend illusory notions of self-sufficiency, and develop a “deeper, less self-centered appreciation” of their significant others, resisting preconceived opinions and the temptation to instrumentalise relationships (Carregal-Romero, “If you weren’t” 131). Rooney is likewise interested in personal transformation in the context of mutually caring relationships, an aspect she dramatises by being “consistently drawn to writing about intimacy, and the way we construct one another” (Barry). As reviewer Ellen Barry points out, there is a “politics of intimacy” in Rooney’s work, which counteracts the harming effects of social standards of normality, likeability or even respectability. In *Normal People* (2018), for example, Marianne and Connell’s deeply meaningful love relationship remains, for long, highly vulnerable to the judgments of others and their fears of not fitting in. If they manage to “form a lasting bond” at the start of the novel, it is thanks to their “shared sense of intimacy” (Carregal-Romero, “Unspeakable Injuries” 226). For Connell, being with Marianne away from the gaze of schoolmates feels like “opening a door away from normal life” (7), because “everything was between them only, even awkward and difficult things” (21). This intimacy helps them “navigat[e] family issues” and “social pressures,” allowing Marianne and Connell to “emerg[e] stronger and more self-aware” as the story evolves

goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her” (266), or in *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021), when Eileen tells us that “the most ordinary thing about human beings is not violence or greed but love and care” (337).

³ For more detailed appreciations of neoliberal/ capitalist culture in Sally Rooney’s works, see Darling, Carregal-Romero (“Unspeakable Injuries”) and Barros-del Río (“The Ethics”).

(Yang 847). Typically, in Rooney's work characters experience "their true selves" within relationships which give them access to "genuine emotion" and "feelings of authenticity" (Eppel).

In Rooney's *Intermezzo*, acts of intimacy between main characters are minutely described and acquire much significance, as the affects they activate usually become an engine within the story.⁴ As an expression of affinity and mutuality, of physical and/or emotional closeness, intimacy flourishes in a plurality of situations and relationships (not necessarily romantic or sexual), and thus encompasses "a field of encounters, relationalities, and entanglements within which we are queerly connected to others" (Weiss 1380). This reading of *Intermezzo* employs Sophia K. Rosa's notion of "radical intimacy" (7), an emotional force that challenges those neoliberal and patriarchal values, norms and expectations that can easily pre-determine, infiltrate into and damage people's affective lives. Because "our normative modes of relating and living often fall short ... in meeting our intimate needs" (Rosa 7), positive change can only be achieved if care and connection become central concerns. Intimacy is closely linked with affects like love, trust, and interdependency, and can create human attachments that defy and demolish social barriers and prejudices, like those based on sexist beliefs or class difference, as happens in *Intermezzo*. Some of Rooney's characters—especially the self-righteous Peter, who is "desperate for everyone to respect [him]" (420)—face much anxiety and insecurity within their relationships, and have to surmount self-imposed (but socially-induced) obstacles to unfettered intimacy (e.g. the emotionally repressed, competitive culture of masculinity affecting Peter and Ivan; Peter's sexual prejudice about Naomi, which hardly allows him to regard her as an equal partner in love; or Margaret's fear of how others will judge the age difference between her and Ivan).

Much of *Intermezzo* engages with the characters' "radical intimacies," how their feelings "of being seen" and understood by the other ultimately empower them to transcend the trappings of certain social conventions and moral standards. This sense of radical intimacy makes itself visible in Rooney's style of writing, which foregrounds sensorial experience, emo-

⁴ In interviews, Rooney has repeatedly insisted on the importance of this topic in her fiction, declaring that "what [she] [is] interested in to a large extent is intimacy, the discomfort, the loss of self – of being penetrated literally and also psychologically" (Armitstead).

tional openness, mutual care, and proximity between characters. This intimacy, as shall be explained below, eventually leads to increased self-awareness and self-transformation.

1. VULNERABILITY AND THE “BODYMIND” LANGUAGE OF INTIMACY

1.1 The Vulnerability of the Self

The centrality of intimacy in *Intermezzo* is inseparable from the ways Rooney dramatises vulnerability. Even if it is conventionally linked to situations of loss and illness, discrimination and coercion, deprivation and exposure to harm, vulnerability can be alternatively experienced as “a matter of affective openness, a form of ambiguous potential, and an occasion for becoming-other than what one is” (Gilson 141). Vulnerability is an affective state, and a salient aspect of Rooney’s stories is the psychological evolution of characters through their relationships with others. Because it entails a degree of openness, or receptivity, which potentially enriches the self, “we may well need to enter into and embrace vulnerability in order to have many other experiences that carry with them positive affective states and the possibilities of personal transformation, such as falling in love” (Miller 646). As shall be explained in further detail, love (within the couple or between friends) is Rooney’s preferred way to write about intimacy, and how the interdependency it creates, though initially feared at times, emerges as a sign of fortitude and self-growth. Generally, her texts illustrate how, “by making ourselves vulnerable to others in close relationships, . . . we open ourselves to levels of intimacy not possible with those whom we keep at an arm’s distance” (Engster 106). In *Intermezzo*, articulations of intimacy underscore the affective openness of vulnerability, of being influenced by the other. This is, in part, made obvious by Rooney’s constant and sustained references to the physical and emotional proximity between main characters, as in the examples below (words in italics are my own emphases):

“Consoling in its own way. Everything about her *nearness* is.” (16)

“Honestly just being *near* you, I feel really good . . . He looks at her, not speaking . . . Deep sensation like an opening outwards, inside.” (109)

“Low kind of aching sensation he feels, her *closeness*, heat of her flushed throat.” (131)

"The weight, the *closeness*, radiant heat of his body. Just to be touched by him, she thought . . . Her body, in his hands, was differently capable, something different, she was not the same." (391–2)

This nearness of intimacy is portrayed as nothing but healing, a way to transcend (even if momentarily) the characters' angsts and anxieties. By doing so, Rooney extensively explores what has been termed as the "vulnerability of the self—its susceptibility to impression, its malleability and openness, its formation and mutation through relation" (Gilson 47). *Intermezzo*—the title itself referring to a stage in chess which forces players to take risks—dwells on mental states of heightened susceptibility, like grief and passion, leading to situations that disconcert the protagonists' previous sense of self. Their task is to find themselves anew in relation to others, leaving behind some of their toxic (self-)judgments and prejudices.

Yet, in the social world Rooney recreates, only certain relationships (close friends and lovers, mostly) have a real emotional impact, something which may inadvertently fall in line with the isolationist practices of neoliberalism, as it "reflects the overwhelming absence of collective identification in contemporary Ireland" (Barros-del Río, "The Ethics"). Even if they hardly reimagine a more communitarian world, through their depiction of vulnerability, Rooney's novels attempt to put "the caring relationships between human beings at the centre of an ethical vision" (Pham). Within this paradigm, care is largely sustained by love, and, in Rooney's work, "what makes love intimate is that it affects our very sense of who we are as persons" (Helm 13), an experience that may initially be confusing and disorientating, but eventually rewarding. As one reviewer of *Intermezzo* aptly puts it, "Rooney's novels pose questions about what love is and how it shapes our lives" (O'Neill). Her protagonists lead intense emotional lives, and this is conveyed through a narrative style that provides unmediated access to the protagonists' interior worlds, thus highlighting their emotional vulnerabilities.

In Rooney's text, scenes move forward rapidly thanks to scant punctuation, incomplete or disjointed syntax, and unquoted dialogue, in passages where conversations, thoughts, and actions follow one another uninterrupted. As a result, Rooney's texts "magnify individual and limited perceptions of reality" (Barros-del Río, "The Ethics"). In similar ways, *Intermezzo* unfolds in close third person, in chapters that are either devoted to Peter's or Ivan's/Margaret's viewpoints. Characters' mental states are

also conveyed by a narrative style that closely resembles stream of consciousness in the case of Peter, and free indirect speech in Ivan and Margaret's chapters. Peter's turmoil (he entertains suicidal ideation and is sometimes shown under the effect of drugs and/or alcohol) finds expression in staccato sentences which underscore his obsessions and intrusive thoughts, as in the moment he walks through Trinity College and revives his past with Sylvia: "Scenery of old romances, drunken revelries. Four in the morning getting sick there outside the Mercantile, remember that. Scholarship night. Young then. Dark remembered walkways. Graveyard of youth" (13). In Ivan and Margaret's chapters, on the contrary, language usually expands to longer, more introspective sentences, especially so when they contemplate their experience of falling in love with one another: "A very strong feeling comes over him then: something inside himself warm and spreading, like dying or being born . . . It's related to her, the words she's saying, his feeling about her words" (52). Throughout *Intermezzo*, Rooney's language rarely deviates from her characters' interior worlds, and how their emotions grow and fluctuate in the near presence of their significant others.

This vulnerability of the self—"its malleability and openness, its formation and mutation through relation" (Gilson 47)—is further evoked by the ways in which protagonists enjoy intellectualising, not as a competition between them, but as an expression of their intimacy. According to Sam Waterman (230–68), Rooney's first two novels articulate a kind of sapiosexual desire which fosters human connection, as well as intellectual stimulation and increased self-knowledge. In *Normal People*, for example, both Connell and Marianne have several sexual partners, but only the sex between them is represented as meaningful and pleasurable. Oftentimes, their animated, intelligent conversations spark mutual attraction, and "[Connell] suspects that the intimacy of their discussions, often moving from the conceptual to the personal, also makes the sex feel better" (97). In *Conversations*, a similar sexual and intellectual connection was experienced by Frances and her ex-girlfriend Bobbi (now her best friend), when, as lovers, "in bed [both] talked for hours, conversations that spiraled out into grand abstract theories and back again" (304). In *Beautiful World*, however, such types of intellectual conversations do not take place between sexual lovers, but close friends Alice and Eileen in their exchange of emails, as they discuss matters such as climate change, world politics and economy, philosophy and art, which then lead to more intimate reflections on their respective lives. To Eileen, Alice confesses: "You know that

our correspondence is my way of holding on to life, taking notes on it, and thereby preserving something of my—otherwise worthless, or even entirely worthless—existence on this rapidly degenerating planet" (15). Even if their intellectual compatibility is important for both, the protagonists need to come closer in some other ways to remedy the mutual grievances they have been harbouring.⁵

Intermezzo returns to and amplifies Rooney's previous configurations of sapiosexuality, of a sexual and emotional connection that refines the sensibility and intellectual insights of characters. When he witnesses Christine's neglectful treatment of the family's pet (Alexei) and then decides to take back custody of the dog, Ivan refuses to nurse his usual bitterness at his mother, and is instead moved by "a strong pure clear feeling" while he imagines that "Margaret is in some way close to him": "Yes, the world makes room for goodness and decency, he thinks: and the task of life is to show goodness to others, not to complain about their failings" (270).⁶ From the beginning, Ivan possesses his own intellectual and moral principles (e.g. for ecological reasons, he rejects air travelling and buys second-hand clothes only), but he also comes to reconsider former ideas about himself and life in general, linking these new discoveries to his love experience with Margaret: "It has occurred to him that perhaps the mind and body are after all one, together, a simple being . . . When he and Margaret are together, for instance, the intelligence that animates instinctively his gestures, touching, is that not the same intelligence that suggests to him the move that will later trap the knight?" (260).

The elder brother—the emotionally unstable Peter, who strives to maintain a façade of being morally "impeccable" (420)—similarly reconfigures his previous views on life as the novel develops. At the end, Peter begins to come to terms with his non-conforming love relationships with Sylvia and Naomi, when he realises how the "act of naming" (418), aside from concealing a set of moral assumptions, can hardly capture the complexities of human attachments, of his sincere affection towards the two women:

⁵ For a detailed analysis of both friends' need to regain a sense of "narrative understanding" between them, see Carregal-Romero, "If you weren't" (136–7). See also Alférez for a careful consideration on the main topics of this novel, and how it compares to the previous two.

⁶ This somehow echoes Alice's reflection in *Beautiful World*, when she expresses that "we hate people for making mistakes so much more than we love them for doing good that the easiest way to live is to do nothing, say nothing, love no one" (187).

You say to yourself that a certain woman is my girlfriend: and intrinsic in this act of naming is the supposition of a number of independent facts . . . Is she or isn't she. Are they or not . . . He likes her, likes the other, and they both like him. To hold a little space for that. Surely everyone knows and accepts privately that relationships are complicated. Forget anyway about what people think . . . Why should you care, what are you so insecure about. (418–9)

Peter's newly revealed insight does not emerge in isolation; it is the result of both Sylvia's and Naomi's mutual respect (they know about the other's presence in Peter's life), their understanding attitude toward his anxieties and contradictions, their concern about his well-being, as well as their various conversations with him, where they challenge his presumptions and sense of moral rectitude. As the novel closes, far from being self-defensive, Peter welcomes these two women's influence on him and then admits to himself: "How is it possible he could have been so wrong about everything" (430).⁷

In *Intermezzo*, intimacy renders the self-vulnerable to the positive influence of the other. This interrelationship between intimacy and vulnerability is not just a matter of emotional or sexual connection, but also gives way to the characters' increased self-knowledge and more profound conceptualisations about life and relationships in general.

1.2 The “Bodymind” Language of Intimacy

Rooney's representations of intimacy have "forensic qualities" that have been noted by critics like Carol Dell'Amico, who, in her reading of *Conversations with Friends* (2017), observes the writer's "merciless, quasi-demographic exposure of her characters' lives," which "systematically betray[s] [their] vanities and weaknesses," through "pointed attention to [the] somatic body" (135). Similarly, in *Intermezzo* affects are highly mediated by the body's sensations; for example, the frequently repeated word

⁷ Rooney's Frances in *Conversations* similarly remarks that "it felt good to be wrong about everything" (233), when Nick declares his love for her. Many of Rooney's protagonists—including Peter in *Intermezzo*, Alice and Eileen in *Beautiful World*, or Marianne in *Normal People*—struggle with low self-esteem and a negative self-image. It is their experience of feeling loved and protected that reverts such situation, allowing them to perceive how wrong they were about themselves and others.

“touch” (with its several inflections) constantly foregrounds both physical and emotional intimacy, not just in sexual scenes, but in ordinary situations too. When Ivan asks Margaret whether he can bring his late father’s dog (Alexei) to her home for the weekend, she feels “her phone growing hot against the rim of her ear” and becomes “oddly touched” by his tender concern for the animal (303). Peter and Ivan also have their moments of connection: as they dine together and converse animatedly, Ivan finds himself “laughing then, feeling a little drunk” (165), “touched” by Peter’s care about him, his way of “being tactful,” and “a nice person, a good brother” (163)—this happens right before Peter’s unfortunate, sexist judgment on Margaret’s older age, which provokes Ivan’s rage, “a hot kind of trembling feeling all over his body” (167). Peter’s caring nature, which contrasts with his “untouchable righteousness” (219), is further appreciated by Naomi after her eviction, when he offers her solace, protection, and accommodation: “I’m actually touched by that, like emotionally” (227). Physical touch, too, activates emotions of mutuality, as happens to Margaret when she kisses Ivan publicly for the first time:

Touching her with his hands, drawing her close to him, he kisses her lips. Why with him is it like this, she wonders. The touch of his hands to her body, his voice when he speaks, his particular looks and gestures. Parting her lips she tastes the salt wet of his tongue. Feels his hand in her hair. The miracle of existing completely together. (178)

At this moment of intimate connection, Margaret abandons her reticence to be seen as Ivan’s lover: “How constricting, how misshapen her ideas of life have been before” (180). In another scene, Sylvia’s affectionate touch transmits her desire for Peter to reconcile himself with the loss of their former life together (she ended their love relationship after a car accident that left her with chronic pain and unable to have penetrative sex): “The touch of her hand at his face, the same and not the same: both the same and not. To reunite him with himself he thinks she means to. To feel himself continuous with his past” (416).

Taking all prior considerations into account, from the emotional attachments to the intellectual stimulation between characters, one can argue that Rooney’s representations of intimacy (and vulnerability, too) resemble what cultural theorist Akemi Nishida describes as the “between-the-lines feelings and senses that care activates,” which engender “the invisible force or energy” that “circulates *between* people,” shaping their “vitality

and well-being" (22, emphasis in the original). The impact of this "invisible force" manifests on the body as much as in the mind, and that is why Nishida adopts the concept of "bodymind" to explore "what a body can do or how a body affects or is affected by its surroundings" (24). To assess the transformative power of care and intimacy, Nishida urges us not to restrict one's attention to the more abstract realm of subjectivity, but to inspect the "subtle ways that a bodymind affects others—the heat it releases, the rhythm it beats, the odor it radiates, the touch sensed by others and with which it saturates others" (24).

Applied to *Intermezzo*, this notion of the "bodymind" may remind us of Rooney's vivid and consistent depictions of bodily sensations, such as tactile stimuli throughout the text, but also of her character Ivan's existential conviction that body and mind are not separate after all. Rooney further evokes this "force or energy" of the bodymind in passages where protagonists embrace personal change through their physical and emotional contact with others. Consider the quote below, when, after an intimate conversation with Ivan, Margaret decides to abandon her guilt and public role as the long-suffering wife of Ricky (her estranged, alcoholic husband):

In [Ivan's] arms, to be given life, and to give life also. Something miraculous, inexpressible, perfect . . . To be that person, yes . . . Sense of all the windows and doors of her life flung open. Everything exposed to the light and air. Nothing protected, nothing left to be protected anymore. A wild woman, her mother called her. A shocking piece of work. And so she is. Lord have mercy. (396–97)

Through spatial metaphor (windows and doors left open to the exposure of light and air), Rooney blends emotional and bodily sensations, stressing Margaret's newly discovered energy and vitality in the company of Ivan. The other protagonist, Peter, also experiences some moments of a bodymind communion with both Sylvia and Naomi. What sustains his love for Sylvia, for example, is their profound sense of shared intimacy, which has not gone away after their formal separation as a couple: "Ease and lightness in his body he feels . . . In companionable quiet for a time they lie there, tired he thinks, and happy, inexpressibly happy . . . To feel again" (286).

Pervasive in *Intermezzo*, Rooney's language of "radical" intimacy highlights the presence of the body and, with it, the realm of sensual experience in connection with others, in situations which disarm the characters'

defense mechanisms, thus enabling a new understanding of themselves and others. This bodymind rendition of affects becomes one other effective way in which Rooney brings intimacy to the forefront of her protagonists' psychological characterisation.

2. INTIMACY AND SELF-TRANSFORMATION WITHIN RELATIONSHIPS

As explained so far, Rooney's stories concentrate on relationship dynamics, and how one's sense of self can be transformed through intimate connection with the other. Yet the writer is not oblivious to the fact that relationships trace their specific, unique, interpersonal trajectories, and that they "do not simply arise naturally; they are constructed by material, discursive, and ideological conditions in a given context" (Robinson 5). As shall be explained, Rooney's protagonists need to move away from certain neoliberal and patriarchal values that cause conflict, misunderstanding, and/or discomfort within their most valuable relationships.

A central relationship in *Intermezzo* is the one between brothers Peter and Ivan in the wake of their father's death. As can be inferred from both brothers' memories of growing up together, several unresolved personal issues—bitter conflicts and moments of emotional neglect, cruelty, and competition between them—negatively intermix with their socialisation as males. In his close reading of Rooney's male characters, Angelos Bollas perceives a recurrent pattern of "impossible male homosociality" in contemporary Ireland:

By repressing their admiration toward one another . . . and by engaging in public expressions of belittling one another, men can find themselves in situations where homosociality becomes impossible for them. Rigid adherence to social scripts of masculinity can become an obstacle for men to form serious and meaningful bonds with one another. (8)

This situation described by Bollas greatly hinders male-to-male intimacy. In *Intermezzo*, caring, loving affects are rarely expressed between Ivan and Peter—yet, when tensions and disagreements erupt, they readily resort to aggressiveness, whether verbal or physical. At the core of their relationship is their fear or reluctance to be open about their vulnerability, as well as their unspoken desires to obtain the other's support and validation. In the episode where Naomi meets Ivan at the brothers' old family house (she starts living there after her eviction), she tells him what Peter cannot bring

himself to confess: “He’s seriously not doing well. Ever since your dad died, I’m sorry . . . And he’s upset that you’re not speaking to him, obviously . . . You know, he really loves you” (340). Ivan’s sudden reaction is to feel “embarrassed” (340), as Naomi’s words exert a kind of moral pressure on him. Ivan now recalls memories of how his elder brother used to protect him in his boyhood, and how he, in turn, failed to give the broken, tearful Peter some consolation right after Sylvia’s car accident.⁸ Like Naomi, the other two female protagonists, Sylvia and Margaret, become crucial for Peter and Ivan’s reconciliation at the end of the story. Their positive influence, which grows from these women’s attachments to the brothers, illustrates Rooney’s broader view of intimacy as including all those “relationalities” and “entanglements within which we are queerly connected to others” (Weiss 1380). On Sylvia’s advice, for instance, Peter calls his brother after the funeral to check how he is coping; Margaret, on her part, encourages Ivan to reconsider his grievances towards Peter, because “surely [their] loss is something that should be shared, expressed, consoled, not kept separate and silent” (252). In the final episode, unbeknownst to Ivan, Peter attends his brother’s chess tournament and witnesses his victory. When Margaret reunites them, they engage for the first time in an open-hearted conversation where they admit their own wrongs, express admiration for one another, and open up about their feelings: “[Dad] would be so proud of you if he were here. That’s why I wanted to be here, just to say that. And to say that he loved you, and I love you. In a low voice Ivan answers: I love you too” (434). In the last pages, Rooney has Ivan and Peter reconstruct a bond of brotherly intimacy, one which helps break the emotional barriers of masculinity and find reconciliation.⁹

In her explorations of intimacy in *Intermezzo*, Rooney also poses some important questions about morality, and what this means to her characters. Margaret and Peter, for instance, repeatedly show an obsession to be “in the right” (394), but their appreciation of what is right or wrong simply

⁸ Referring to this particular memory of Ivan’s failure to take care of Peter, reviewer Anthony Cummins astutely notes: “The greatest drama [in *Intermezzo*] comes from conversations taking place under the pressure of life-changing events in the novel’s pre-history . . . The reader always feels different layers of grief at play—buried pain exhumed by fresh hurt.”

⁹ Rooney’s Peter and Ivan are not as stereotypically masculine as some of her previous male characters, such as Nick (in *Conversations*), Connell (*Normal People*), or Alex (*Beautiful World*). Yet, the two brothers in *Intermezzo* also suffer from an emotional repression that prevents them from being open to one another.

adjusts to the social standards and widely shared values of their patriarchal, neoliberal/capitalist culture. Arguably, their mistake is to regard morality as existing “in a series of universal rules or principles,” instead of locating it in the “practices of care” and “responsibilities” they fulfill toward particular others (Robinson 4). As indicated above, Rooney’s work follows a care ethics approach where close relationships acquire an “ethical dimension” that becomes “fundamental to human flourishing” (Bowlby et al. 42). Gender norms and stereotypes feed into Margaret’s obsession about being wrong about her attraction to the younger Ivan, as she knows that, for a woman like her, it is a “shameful thing, the sexual motive” (386). Whenever she tries to convince Ivan that she is not the right person for him, his comforting, loving words make her reassess her presumptions and believe in the “truth” of their relationship (259), which, for her, has acquired “a certain moral quality” (187). As Margaret walks with Ivan on one of those occasions, she observes: “Golden-green fields stretching out into the faint blue distance. Limitless clear air and light everywhere around them, filled with the sweet liquid singing of birds” (122). As can be seen in this quote, articulated in a kind of bodymind language, their intimate bond becomes a transformative experience, allowing Margaret to look at life with fresh eyes.¹⁰ With this decision to leave her alcoholic husband for Ivan, Margaret is also escaping the self-sacrificing, nurturing role typically expected from women within their patriarchal milieu.

Like Margaret, Peter struggles with the “moral dilemma” (63) of a relationship with a younger lover, the twenty-three-year-old Naomi, who hails from a dysfunctional family, has no profession and comes to depend on him financially.¹¹ Some critics have pointed out that Rooney’s portrayals of romantic love “typif[y] and perpetuat[e] problematic role models for

¹⁰ Contrast this body-mind language with the generally descriptive tone of Ivan and Margaret’s chapters: “This morning they ate breakfast together, talking a little. She made him coffee in the cafetière and he said the coffee was good. Last night she thought: he’s too young, too much in grief over his father, it has to stop” (117).

¹¹ Cross-class relationships feature in Rooney’s four novels – in all cases, class difference has notable effects in how characters interact, and how they feel about the transaction of money between them. There is a passage in *Conversations*, for example, where Frances asks Nick, her rich married lover, to help her pay the rent, since her alcoholic father had stopped sending her money. Though Nick readily accepts to transfer the required amount, he does express some concern over the moral implications of this: “Yeah, it’s weird. I have money that I don’t urgently need, and I would rather you had it. But the transaction of giving it to you would bother me” (198).

millennials" (Barros-del Río, "Feminism" 47), as they arguably put "men in a position of superiority" over female characters that constantly underestimate and undermine themselves (51). Such power imbalance seems less obvious in *Intermezzo*; despite her underprivileged background, the younger Naomi emerges as a more emotionally stable, even wiser, character than Peter. Peter's chapters foreground his "vanities and weaknesses" for the reader (Dell'Amico 135), who easily perceives his misapprehensions and shortcomings.

Although they have been dating for a year, Peter keeps Naomi separate from friends, family, and acquaintances, sure as he is that their relationship lacks social respectability and could therefore destroy his "reputation" (74). While his past with Sylvia (then his college classmate, now a lecturer at Trinity) represents "the right life" he would like to recover (78), his present situation with Naomi is fraught with much insecurity and confusion, as their mutual longing contradicts his self-conviction that their relationship is merely a "distraction" (354). As readers slowly learn, Peter feels disoriented by the intimacy of their attachment—by "the discomfort" and "loss of self" which, in Rooney's words, intimacy can produce (Armitstead). At one point, Naomi complains: "Every now and then, you just act cold with me for no reason. Or randomly stop speaking to me. To make sure I don't get too attached. Eyes closed, he swallows. Right, he says. Or to make sure I don't" (227). Peter is, in this respect, similar to several other characters in Rooney's first three novels,¹² who face crises of "increased vulnerability and undesired dependency" (Carregal-Romero, "Unspeakable Injuries" 214), which they have to overcome in order to embrace emotional honesty and genuine connection within their relationships.

In addition, Peter's class-based prejudices—that Naomi is only using him for his money and status—poisons their affective life, creating suspicions and misunderstandings which lead to cruel and dismissive attitudes on his part. When Naomi tells him that she is in overdraft, Peter feels dismayed and troubled, and instantly wonders if she has any other "idiot showering her with money" (64). He makes

¹² Take, for instance, the self-defensive attitude of Alice in *Beautiful World*, who in the early months of her relationship with Felix, can barely accept her emotional dependence on him: "I feel so frightened of being hurt—not the suffering, which I know I can handle, but the indignity of suffering, the indignity of being open to it" (137).

an effort to emphasise that he expects nothing in return for his money . . . Then on a purely human interpersonal level she feels hurt and rejected by his coldness. Money overall a very exploitative substance, creating it seems fresh kinds of exploitation in every form of relationality through with it passes. (65)

Peter's money-related anxieties mingle with his unacknowledged sexism.¹³ For much of the novel, Peter not only disparages Margaret as a childless, unhappy, married woman who wants to take advantage of his innocent brother, but also refuses to treat Naomi as an equal, so, despite her constant reclaiming of his care and attention, he self-conveniently judges: "you don't like nice people" (72). At the heart of Peter's misappreciation is his sexual prejudice (on social media, Naomi used to sell naked pictures to make ends meet), which provokes his occasional disrespect and trivialisation of her experiences; he, for instance, thinks of her as wasting his money on "ketamine and eyelashes extensions" (125). Yet, at the same time, Peter does like her personality and is aware of his feelings for her (Sylvia, too, helps him accept such emotions). Peter's defense mechanisms crumble at the end, when he receives Naomi's loving care after his blackout (caused from binge drinking):

You think I don't have feelings?
For me? he says. I think it would be better if you didn't.
Why, you don't care about me? If something happened to me, it wouldn't affect you?
Feels himself flinching at the question and says: Don't talk like that. Of course it would. (407)

After this, Peter and Naomi take the chance to sincerely talk about the nature of their relationship, of how their "feelings got involved" (408). There is a pattern in Rooney's novels whereby love and positive interdependency become articulated through practices of care and emotional openness, which reaffirm and strengthen intimacy while easing and dismantling the characters' insecurities and false presumptions.

¹³ He ironically features as a well-respected barrister who has successfully taken cases defending women's rights in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on current theories of vulnerability and care ethics, this reading of Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo* has addressed the ways in which the novel's "politics of intimacy" (Barry) challenges the norms and values of individualism within our competitive world (present in Peter's obsession to maintain a reputation as a prestigious, morally impeccable barrister), as well as the gender stereotypes (Margaret's anxieties about the age gap between her and Ivan, and how others will judge her), and social class divides (how money creates a strange aura around Naomi and Peter's relationship) that still today provoke much conflict, prejudice, and misunderstanding. In the depiction of her characters' "radical intimacies," Rooney articulates positive representations of the openness and receptivity of the so-called "vulnerability of the self" (Gilson 47), which ultimately allows protagonists to construct and embrace a mutually supportive sense of care and interdependency within their closest relationships. In *Intermezzo*, intimacy fosters mutual understanding and self-growth,¹⁴ and this is conveyed through a close third person narrative that concentrates on the protagonists' interiority, bodily sensations, and feelings of proximity toward their significant others. Personal transformation is foregrounded in scenes where the "invisible force or energy" of intimacy, an important source of "vitality and well-being," finds expression in a kind of "bodymind" language, of physical and emotional connection (Nishida 22–24). In this process, thanks to the unfettered, "radical" sense of intimacy they build together, Rooney's protagonists manage to reorient their views and priorities away from the conventional values, social prejudice and moral standards of today's neoliberal, patriarchal world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research for this article was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, the European Regional Development Fund and the Spanish Research Agency through the research projects "INTRUTHS 2: Articulations of Individual and Communal Vulnerabilities in Contemporary

¹⁴ This is particularly the case for Peter, Ivan, and Margaret, because the narrative is focalised through these three characters. Sylvia and Naomi, on the other hand, are only seen and described from Peter's external perspective.

Irish Writing," PID2020-114776GB-I00 MCIN/AEI, and "Posthuman Intersections in Irish and Galician Literatures," PID2022-136251NB-I00, funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by "ERDF: A Way of Making Europe".

REFERENCES

Alférez, Sofía. "Sally Rooney. *Beautiful World, Where Are You.*" *ES Review. Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 43, 2022, pp. 315–20, doi: 10.24197/ersjes.43.2022.315-320.

Allardice, Lisa. "Sally Rooney: 'Falling in love when I was very young transformed my life.'" *The Guardian*, 14 Sept. 2024, www.theguardian.com/books/2024/sep/14/sally-rooney-intermezzo-interview-normal-people-conversations-friends-love-sex/.

Armitstead, Claire. "Sally Rooney: 'I don't respond to authority well.'" *The Irish Times*, 4 Dec. 2018, www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/sally-rooney-i-don-t-respond-to-authority-very-well-1.3719669/.

Barros-del Río, María Amor. "Feminism and Misogyny in Sally Rooney's Novels." *Misoginia y Filoginia: Fuerzas discursivas simbólicas en la narrativa internacional*, edited by José García Fernández, Giuliana Antonella Giacobbe and Rocío Riestra Camacho, Dickinson, 2022, pp. 45–56.

Barros-del Río, María Amor. "The Ethics of Care in Sally Rooney's Novels: Between Self and Other." *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First-Century Irish Writing*, edited by Anne Fogarty and Eugene O'Brien, Routledge, 2025, eBook.

Barry, Ellen. 2018. “How Sally Rooney became millennial fiction’s most important voice.” *Independent*, 7 Sept. 2018, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/sally-rooney-millennial-fiction-ireland-abortion-referendum-a8522256.html/.

Bollas, Angelos. *Contemporary Irish Masculinities: Male Homosociality in Sally Rooney’s Novels*. Routledge, 2023.

Bowlby, Sophia et al. *Interdependency and Care over the Lifecourse*. Routledge, 2010.

Bracken, Claire. “The Feminist Contemporary: The Contradictions of Critique.” *The New Irish Studies*, edited by Paige Reynolds, Cambridge UP, 2020, pp. 144–60.

Cahill, Susan. “Post-Millennial Irish Fiction.” *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Fiction*, edited by Liam Harte, Oxford UP, 2020, pp. 602–19.

Carregal-Romero, José. “Unspeakable Injuries and Neoliberal Subjectivities in Sally Rooney’s *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*.” *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak*, edited by M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera and José Carregal Romero, Palgrave, 2023, pp. 213–33.

Carregal-Romero, José. “‘If you weren’t my friend I wouldn’t know who I was’: Care Virtues and the Relational Self in Sally Rooney’s *Beautiful World, Where Are You?*” *International Journal of English Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2024, pp. 127–40, doi: 10.6018/ijes.574311.

Cummins, Anthony. “*Intermezzo* by Sally Rooney review -is there a better writer at work right now?”. *The Guardian*, 22 Sept. 2024, www.theguardian.com/books/2024/sep/19/intermezzo-by-sally-rooney-review-surprise-moves-in-love-loss-and-chess/.

Darling, Orlaith. “‘There are worse things than getting beaten up’: Neoliberal Violence in Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*.” *Written on the Body: Narrative (Re)constructions of Violence(s)*, edited by Marta-Laura Cenedese, Logos, 2023, pp. 17–39.

Dell’Amico, Carol. “Radical Vulnerability in Sally Rooney’s *Conversations with Friends*.” *New Hibernia Review*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2023, pp. 135–47, doi: 10.1353/nhr.2023.a919789.

Engster, Daniel. “Care Ethics, Dependency, and Vulnerability.” *Ethics and Social Welfare*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2019, pp. 100–14, doi: 10.1080/17496535.2018.1533029.

Eppel, Alan. “*Normal People*: The Self-at-Worst and the Self-at-Best.” *Journal of Psychiatry Reform*, vol. 8, no. 5, 2020, journalofpsychiatryreform.com/2020/07/05/normal-people/.

Gilson, Erinn C. *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*. Routledge, 2014.

Helm, Bennett W. *Love, Friendship, and the Self: Intimacy, Identification, and the Social Nature of Persons*. Oxford UP, 2010.

Keller, Jean. “Autonomy, Relationality and Feminist Ethics.” *Hypatia*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1997, pp. 152–64, doi: 10.1111/j.1527-2001.1997.tb00024.x.

Miller, Sarah Clark. “From Vulnerability to Precariousness: Examining the Moral Foundations of Care Ethics.” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2020, 644–61, doi: 10.1080/09672559.2020.1804239.

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

O'Neill, Cait. "Mixing Loss with Life in *Intermezzo*." *Chicago Review of Books*, 1 Oct. 2024, chireviewofbooks.com/2024/10/01/intermezzo/.

Pellicer-Ortíñ, Silvia and Merve Sarıkaya-Şen. "Introduction. Contemporary Literature in Times of Crisis and Vulnerability: Trauma, Demise of Sovereignty and Interconnectedness." *European Review*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2020, pp. 315–32, doi: 10.1017/S1062798720000666.

Pham, Yen. "Sally Rooney Wants to Start the Revolution." *Literature Hub*, 7 Dec. 2017, lithub.com/sally-rooney-wants-to-start-the-revolution/.

Robinson, Fiona. *The Ethics of Care: A Feminist Approach to Human Security*. Temple University Press, 2011.

Rooney, Sally. *Conversations with Friends*. Faber & Faber, 2017.

Rooney, Sally. *Normal People*. Faber & Faber, 2018.

Rooney, Sally. *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. Faber & Faber, 2021.

Rooney, Sally. *Intermezzo*. Faber & Faber, 2024.

Rosa, Sophie K. *Radical Intimacy*. Pluto Press, 2023.

Waterman, Sam. "Sally Rooney's Sapiosexuals." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2023, pp. 230–68, doi: 10.3368/cl.63.2.230.

Weiss, Margot. "Intimate Encounters: Queer Entanglements in Ethnographic Fieldwork." *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 1, 2020, pp. 1355–86, doi: 10.1353/anq.2020.0015.

Yang, Jasmine Gege. “‘Sharing the Same Soil’: The Critique of Post-Feminist Gender Identity and the Materiality of Body in Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* (2018).” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 65, no. 5, 2024, pp. 838–50, doi: 10.1080/00111619.2023.2252741.

From Waste to Renewal: Circular Economy and the Ethics of Degrowth in *Record of a Spaceborn Few*

Del residuo a la renovación: economía circular y ética del decrecimiento en *Record of a Spaceborn Few*

VANESA ROLDÁN ROMERO

Institution address: Campus de las Lagunillas, Edificio de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación I (D-2), 23071 Jaén, Spain.

E-mail: vrromero@ujaen.es

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5703-6106>

Received: 21/05/2025. Accepted: 03/09/2025.

How to cite this article: Roldán-Romero, Vanesa. "From Waste to Renewal: Circular Economy and the Ethics of Degrowth in *Record of a Spaceborn Few*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp. 212–242.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/qmx2wd40>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Abstract: This article examines the alternative future of Becky Chambers's *Record of a Spaceborn Few* through the frameworks of circular economy, degrowth, and critical posthumanism. As I shall argue, Chambers's novel envisions a future society that moves beyond extractive capitalism, emphasising a sustainable socio-economic system with communal labour and non-hierarchical social structures through the Fleet, a collection of ships inhabited by the descendants of the last humans on Earth. By analysing the Fleet's socio-economic system, this article explores how and to what extent Chambers criticises lineal capitalism and proposes an alternative mode of existence, potentially more aligned with critical posthumanism. Drawing on economic theory and speculative fiction, including science fiction, scholarship, the article argues that Chambers's novel offers a complex vision of post-capitalist futures, demonstrating the role of science fiction in imagining sustainable alternatives to the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Becky Chambers; speculative fiction; circular economy; critical posthumanism.

Summary: Introduction. The Fleet as a Model of Circular Economy. Death, Compost, and the Cycle of Life. Reconfiguration of labour. Limits to the Circular Model of the Fleet. Conclusions.

Resumen: Este artículo examina el futuro alternativo de *Record of Spaceborn Few* de Becky Chambers a través de los marcos teóricos de la economía circular, el decrecimiento y el posthumanismo crítico. La novela de Chambers imagina una sociedad futura que trasciende el capitalismo extractivista, poniendo énfasis en un sistema socioeconómico sostenible basado en el trabajo comunitario y en estructuras sociales no jerárquicas, a través de la Flota, un grupo de naves habitadas por los descendientes de los últimos humanos de la Tierra. Al analizar el sistema socioeconómico de la Flota, este artículo explora cómo y hasta qué punto Chambers critica el

capitalismo lineal y propone un modo de existencia alternativo, potencialmente más alineado con el posthumanismo crítico. A partir de la teoría económica y de los estudios sobre ficción especulativa, el artículo sostiene que la novela de Chambers ofrece una visión compleja de futuros poscapitalistas, demostrando el papel de la ciencia ficción en la imaginación de alternativas sostenibles al Antropoceno.

Palabras clave: Becky Chambers; ficción especulativa; economía circular; posthumanismo crítico.

Sumario: Introducción. La Flota como modelo de economía circular. Muerte, compost y el ciclo de la vida. Reconfiguración del trabajo. Límites del modelo circular de la Flota. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

During the past years, the term “circular economy” has gained increasing attention (Geisendorf and Pietrulla 772). As Corvellec et al. succinctly explain, in just a few years, “circular economy” has emerged as key in policies in China, Africa, the European Union, and the United States (421). For instance, it is a key concept in the European 2030 agenda, aiming to double its rate from a 11,8% to a 24% by 2030 (United Nations). The idea of the circular economy can be traced back to 1966, when the term was proposed by Boulding in his work, “The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth” (Geisendorf and Pietrulla 772). However, the term “circular economy” is still a concept under construction and, therefore, also in dispute (Vence et al. 2). Nowadays, one of the major advocates for circular economy is The Ellen MacArthur Foundation, a nonprofit organisation that encourages the inclusion of concepts with a circular approach from diverse areas such as the blue economy, cradle-to-cradle, closed-loop supply chains, industrial ecology, reverse logistics, resource efficiency, low waste production, biomimicry, and sustainability (Geisendorf and Pietrulla 772). According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation,

[a] circular economy is one that is restorative and regenerative by design and aims to keep products, components, and materials at their highest utility and value at all times, distinguishing between technical and biological cycles. (“Circularity Indicators”)

Hence, circular economy seeks to leave behind the disposable economy of current capitalist systems and move towards an economic system in which the amount of waste produced is, ideally, zero. In other words, the circular economy is to bring about perfect circles of slow material flows, to prompt

a shift from consumer to user, and to enable a decoupling of resource use and environmental impact from economic growth (Corvellec et al. 421).

Nonetheless, circular economy has plenty of detractors too. Corvellec et al., for instance, explain that the critiques to circular economy include its diffused limits, with uncritical, descriptive, and deeply normative policies that avoid controversies, and its focus on a win-win policy that is particularly difficult to criticise despite the “lack of any actual consensus on the magnitude of eventual economic, social, and environmental ‘win-win-win’ benefits” (Corvellec et al. 422).

In contrast, we find the concept of degrowth, a relatively new movement in the global North (Singh 138). Degrowth proponents emphasise that the movement is not “less of the same” but rather “different forms of organizing social and economic relations” that will evolve through confrontation with the existing world (Singh 138). In short, Singh explains, “instead of a concrete ‘project,’ degrowth advocates propose degrowth as a ‘keyword’ to provoke thought about alternatives and “decolonise the imaginary (of development) from growth” (138). Richter explains that, within degrowth,

economic growth and environmental sustainability are thereby considered mutually exclusive. Sustainable degrowth is defined as an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term. Degrowth first and foremost aims to abolish economic growth as a social objective. Its literature pays equal attention to social equality and ecological sustainability policies. The proposed socioeconomic overhaul would require political action on international, national, regional and grassroots levels. The term degrowth therefore not only encapsulates an academic debate, but a social and political movement. (3)

According to Schröder et al., circular economy and degrowth share a number of important principles and goals, despite the existence of non-negligible differences (190). As they argue,

[t]here are also important degrowth elements within the circular economy narrative. These elements—at least in some versions of the circular economy—underscore the need for narrowing and slowing material flows, in addition to increasing circularity. In the long-term, there is a creative destruction—an industrial structural change—element of a transformation toward the circular economy. For example, the goal of the circular economy

is to have extractive linear sectors of the economy shrink substantially. In particular, mining and fossil fuel dependent industries will need to constrict. These will be replaced with regenerative industries meant to restore the Earth's ecosystems while generating value. (Schröder et al. 191)

Moreover, as Schroder et al. argue, that although there is some agreement on the means and goals of the circular economy, there are many remaining issues that have yet to be fully resolved, including the means in which the emergence of circular economy is constrained by the context of neoliberal economic growth and the ideology of consumerism (190). According to Gertenbach et al., “[r]evolving around a critique of capitalistic regimes of growth, the main focus of the discourse on degrowth lies on alternative, often post-capitalistic social institutions, ecological reforms, and the realignment of human relationships to reassess what ‘living a good life’ (*buen vivir*) might mean beyond consumerist lifestyle” (387). In short, “[p]ost-growth, other than for example Green Growth, does not promote or pursue major technological efficiency improvements and shifts towards renewable energy production. Rather, it emphasises the need for, and benefits of changes in the ways in which societies and everyday life are organized” (Kuijer and Laschke 6). In this regard, as Vence et al. argue, “tackling the problems of climate change and the sustainability of life on the planet as we know it, with ambition and realism, requires much more profound changes” (2).

Strongly related to the ecological challenges that degrowth and circular economy seek to address is the philosophical framework of critical posthumanism. As Rosi Braidotti understands it, critical posthumanism represents a post-anthropocentric and *zoe*-centred¹ turn in thought, which rejects the human(ist) hierarchy that privileges human life (*bios*) over other forms of life (*zoe*) and dismantles the dualism between human and other-than-human entities (194). This philosophical stance calls for a profound epistemological shift, demanding that humans reconsider the ontological boundaries and ethical priorities that have structured Western thought for at least since the Enlightenment. Critical posthumanism thus undermines the human exceptionalism that has legitimised the instrumentalisation of non-human life and matter under capitalist and industrial paradigm.

¹ Braidotti states that the *zoe* is the “dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself” that includes human, non-human, and more-than human life (60).

From this perspective, crucial posthumanism resonates with the core principles of both circular economy and degrowth; while circular economy aims to replace the linear, extractive model of capitalism productions with regenerative and closed-loop systems, the degrowth advocates for a deliberate downscaling of production and consumption to foster social and ecological well-being, critical posthumanism provides the philosophical foundation for these socio-economic transformations. Moreover, critical posthumanism challenges the anthropocentric assumptions that underpin economic notions of “progress” and productivity, encouraging a reconceptualization of value beyond growth metrics. As Adelman notes, such a framework contests the humanist foundation of eternal growth (16) and opens space for envisioning sustainable social and economic systems.

Within this context, the ability to imagine alternative futures becomes a political and ecological imperative, particularly taking into account the almost cliché expression of how it is easier to imagine the world than to imagine the end of capitalism, often attributed to Fredric Jameson, who, according to Robert Tally, reiterated this claim in *The Ideologies of Theory* (Tally Jr. 267). Echoing this sentiment, science fiction writer Mark Bould remarks in an interview to authors Amy Cutler and David Higgins, that “we have stopped imagining the future” (Reimann). Degrowth, as Kallis and March contend, drawing from Latouche’s vision of it, “is an imaginary that challenges the very spirit of capitalism” (365). It articulates an ecological and post-capitalist imaginary that diverges from Malthusian “limits to growth” discourses (Kallis and March 366), offering instead a vision rooted in justice, sufficiency, and conviviality. Hence, reactivating the imagination becomes crucial for envisioning and enacting post-capitalist, sustainable futures.

In this regard, one effective way to explore alternative futures is through fiction; science fiction, in particular, holds significant potential in this regard. R.B. Gill argues that the construction of alternative worlds in science fiction acquires meaning through the lens of the reader’s own world and its established norms, providing a platform to either reinforce or challenge prevailing values and ideas (73). Similarly, Eva Menger highlights the genre’s strength in its receptivity to diverse forms of alterity that might otherwise encounter strong resistance in more conventional contexts (3). Moreover, as Mitchell and Chaudhury argue, “science fiction regularly influences not only public imaginaries but also public policy” (319), turning science fiction into a powerful tool through which imagination is the instrument to shape our present and future. Given this,

it is of particular interest to examine how these ideas of economic articulation permeate contemporary works of fiction, especially those concerned with possible futures. Becky Chambers's work is especially relevant in this regard, as she actively engages with the exploration of alternative futures in many of her works.

Renowned for her imaginative ability in crafting worlds and character-driven narratives, particularly those centred around space exploration and extraterrestrial themes, Chambers² draws on a background that blends personal curiosity with a commitment to envisioning inclusive, sustainable futures.

This article focuses on *Record of a Spaceborn Few*, in which Chambers constructs a contemplative narrative centred on the lives of ordinary individuals aboard the Exodus Fleet, a spacefaring community formed by humans who fled a dying Earth generations earlier. A central feature of the Fleet's design is the Hex, a term referring to the hexagonal layout of its residential sectors. It is also worth mentioning that the novel is narrated through a multi-focal structure, unfolding through the interwoven perspectives of four central characters: Tessa, a mother and cargo worker grappling with the uncertainties of raising a family in space; Eyas, a caretaker who ceremonially transforms human remains into compost to sustain the Fleet's oxygen farms; Isabel, an elderly archivist whose encounters with other species, particularly a visiting alien, prompt reflections on the Fleet's identity and future; and Sawyer, a planet-born outsider seeking purpose in the Fleet's way of life.

M. Hajiyeva delineates a clear contrast in speculative literature narrative: "utopian literature envisions perfected realms characterized by

² Chambers's early exposure to space-related endeavours stems from a family deeply entrenched in NASA, with an astrobiology educator and a satellite engineer in her lineage (Kehe). Chambers's fascination with space ignited during her formative years and she later channelled this passion into her studies in the arts, earning a degree in theatrical arts at the University of San Francisco. In 2014, Chambers self-published her first novel, *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet*, securing successful funding through Kickstarter (Flood). The book received critical acclaim and garnered a nomination for the Kitschies, a literary prize focusing on "progressive, intelligent and entertaining works that contain elements of the speculative or fantastic" (The Kitschies) establishing its position as the first self-published novel to achieve such recognition. This achievement led to the reissue and publication of the work by Hodder & Stoughton and Harper Voyager. Serving as the inaugural instalment of the Hugo-winning Wayfarer series (Cox), the novel was followed by three sequels: *A Closed and Common Orbit*, *Record of a Spaceborn Few*, and *The Galaxy, and the Ground Within*.

societal harmony and prosperity, often reflecting the aspirations and ideals of its creators,” whereas dystopian texts typically depict “nightmarish settings characterized by oppression, surveillance, and societal decay” (83). Chambers’s *Record of a Spaceborn Few*, however, resists a binary classification within this utopia-dystopia spectrum, potentially aligning itself with the legacy of authors such as Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and Martha Wells, whose texts often engage with dystopian and utopian traditions from a self-reflexive and critical perspective (Rogan 310), to mention but a few. Rather than presenting an uncritical utopia marked by harmony and prosperity, Chambers constructs a more nuanced speculative world through a multi-focal narrative that foregrounds complexity and internal tension. Through shifting focalisation, Chambers refuses to render the Fleet as an uncomplicated utopia; instead, the narrative remains alert to fragility and imperfection. This is exemplified in the case of Sawyer, a newcomer to the Fleet whose unexpected death—though not directly caused by the Fleet itself, but by passing scavengers—disrupts any idealised reading of this spacefaring community and introduces an element of vulnerability and risk.

Moreover, by the end of the novel, each focalised character reaches a different choice. While Isabel chooses to remain within the Fleet, affirming its values, other characters—such as Eyas and Kip—navigate their own paths of questioning, with Tessa opting to leave for a planet-based colony. These divergent trajectories already suggest that the Fleet is not a monolithic utopia but a contested space of negotiation and choice. This way, Chambers’s use of multifocal narration undermines a singular, idealised vision of the future and instead cultivates a polyphonic narrative in which multiple, sometimes conflicting, positions on community, belonging, and sustainability coexist, allowing her to explore this imagined future from multiple perspectives and thus avoiding an uncritical speculation. Accordingly, the aim of this study is twofold: first, to examine the extent to which the Fleet’s community embodies a society shaped by circular economy principles; and second, to analyse how this model informs the novel’s speculative vision of a sustainable and cooperative future.

1. THE FLEET AS A MODEL OF CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Record of a Spaceborn Few is set during the Anthropocene³ era of the so-called Wayfarer universe (Roldán-Romero 85), its narrative unfolding within the Fleet, a spacefaring community composed of humans who are descendants of those left behind by their wealthier counterparts. These affluent individuals had relocated to the Martian colonies as soon as conditions on Earth became too inhospitable for survival (Chambers, *A Closed and Common Orbit* 48). This collection of ships is first described as follows:

You could define the term [Fleet] literally: the collection of ships that carried the remnants of the Human species away from their failed planet. Perhaps the Fleet sparks some deeper association in you—a symbol of desperation, a symbol of poverty, a symbol of resilience . . . Though many Humans have never set foot in the great homestead ships, the journey of the Fleet is a history they all consciously carry. That lineage has inextricably shaped every modern Human community, regardless of foundational philosophy. In one way or another, it affects how they think of themselves, and how the rest of us see them. (Chambers, *Record* 36–38)

The narrator's description of the Fleet—both as a literal collection of ships and a metaphorical symbol of survival and resilience—compels readers to consider the ways in which systems of economic and social organisation shape identity and ecological relations. By defining the Fleet as a symbol of “desperation, poverty, and resilience,” Chambers's (*Record*) text criticises the destructive trajectories of the Anthropocene and potentially offers an alternative vision: a society that moves away from capitalist consumerism and towards a degrowth and circular economy model.

Perhaps precisely because of the origin of the Fleet, with the first humans inhabiting these ships having witnessed first-hand the collapse of an extractivist and wasteful economic system, the surviving humans structured Fleet society around the principle of avoiding the same mistakes; a collective consciousness exists which is centred on resource efficiency and waste minimisation. Every material is reused, repurposed,

³ The Anthropocene can be understood as a geological epoch in which there has been a significant shift in the relationship between humans and the global environment. Here, the human species has become a decisive and direct actor in the ongoing climate crisis (Steffen et al. 843).

and reintegrated into the system whenever possible, ensuring that waste is minimised and sustainability is maximised. Early in the novel, we read the following: “She found a nearby recycling station and put the mug and the throw-cloth in their respective bins, from which they would be collected, washed, and reused. She resumed her walk, dragging her own recycling along behind her” (Chambers, *Record* 65). From the onset of the novel, it is made evident that the Fleet naturalises not only recycling but also the reuse of all material items in a heavily organised way.

This cultural orientation leads to profound discomfort when the Fleet society is confronted with the conspicuous consumption and disregard for resources in others, particularly those of the Martian colonies, in which the wealthy first sought refuge after Earth became uninhabitable. The contrast between these two economic models—one built on equitable distribution and mindful resource management, the other on excess and disposability—becomes especially apparent in moments of cultural exchange. A striking example occurs when Kyp, a teenager Fleet inhabitant, watches a Martian soap opera:

That scene had layers, seriously—and when the conversation was done, they just . . . left their food. Like, let the server come get it while they walked out of the place. The scene would’ve made sense if one of them wasn’t hungry or had a stomach ache or something, but if that were the case, then the other one would’ve reached over and eaten the leftovers. But no. Both of them left. They left half-plates of food on the table. It was the weirdest shit. He couldn’t imagine what cleaning dishes was like in a place like that. Dealing with half-eaten food sounded disgusting. (Chambers, *Record* 89)

Kyp’s reaction encapsulates the deep cultural divide between the Fleet’s circular, necessity-driven economy and the Martian colonies’ more traditional, growth-oriented capitalist structure. To Kyp, leaving edible food untouched is not only irrational but almost unfathomable, reinforcing the idea that in the Fleet, waste is not merely discouraged but culturally unimaginable. His disbelief highlights how the Fleet’s economic and ecologically sustainable systems are not just theoretical models but are embedded in daily practices and social norms that contribute to what kinds of presents and futures we are able to imagine and, subsequently, pursue.

Furthermore, this moment underscores the psychological and ethical transformation that occurs in a degrowth-based society. The Fleet’s inhabitants are not merely participating in a sustainable system out of

necessity; they have internalised values that reject waste and prioritise mindful consumption. This aligns with the degrowth movement's advocacy for a shift in cultural attitudes—away from the pursuit of excess and toward a lifestyle that values sufficiency and long-term ecological responsibility (Singh 140). Through Kyp's reaction, the text demonstrates how the Fleet's degrowth-inspired economy fosters a mindset in which every resource is valued and treated with care, whereas the Martian economy, still operating under capitalist logics of abundance and disposability, normalises waste as an inconsequential byproduct of consumption. This contrast not only reinforces the viability of degrowth and circular economy principles but also suggests that an alternative to capitalist consumerism is not only possible but deeply transformative at both societal and individual levels.

Another aspect of the life at the Fleet is the energy used to sustain the necessary means to ensure the maintenance of the survival mechanisms such as those that produce clean water and oxygen. Early in the novel we are told that the first system for energy employed the use of hydro-generators. When Ghuh'loloan, a character of another sentient species, visits the Fleet, they discuss this matter with one of the human characters, the archivist Isabel:

“Now, the batteries,” Ghuh'loloan said, still taking notes. “Those store kinetically harvested energy, yes?”

“Originally, yes, mostly. Well . . . right, let me back up. When the Exodans first left Earth, they burned chemical fuels to get going, just to tide them over until enough kinetic energy had been generated through the floors. They also had hydro-generators.”

“Water-powered?”

“Yes, using waste water.” The brewer dinged, and Isabel filled two mugs. “As it flows back to the processing facilities, it runs through a series of generators. That system’s still in use. It’s not our primary power source, but it’s a good supplement.” (Chambers, *Record* 73)

The use of hydro-generators is particularly significant in this context, as it exemplifies a closed-loop system that repurposes waste for productive use, embodying a core tenet of the circular economy. This approach aligns with one of the primary objectives of circular economy models: replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy sources and, more broadly, transitioning away from the linear, extractive logic of capitalist consumerism towards a

regenerative, circular system (Kopnina 364). Moreover, Isabel's casual statement that the system in question is "not our primary power source, but a good supplement" further reflects the Fleet's pragmatic approach to energy sustainability. Rather than relying on a singular, all-encompassing solution, the Fleet employs an adaptive, multi-faceted energy strategy, a stark contrast to the unsustainable monocultures of fossil fuel dependency characteristic of industrial capitalism.

However, as noted previously, hydro-generated energy is no longer the Fleet's primary power source; solar energy has taken precedence. In a conversation between Isabel and Ghuh'loloan, the human character acknowledges that while the Fleet was once self-sufficient with hydro power, their energy landscape shifted when the intergalactic government, the GC, provided them with a sun, and they started collecting solar power (Chambers, *Record* 74). This dialogue highlights the Fleet's transition through successive energy paradigms—from chemical fuels to kinetic harvesting, hydro-generation, and ultimately solar energy—each phase reflecting an incremental departure from extractive practices. This progression embodies the circular economy's emphasis on optimising resource efficiency and minimising waste, illustrating a systemic shift towards long-term ecological equilibrium rather than short-term exploitation.

Furthermore, the Fleet's solar energy infrastructure originates not from human innovation but from the intervention of another species. This, I argue, alongside the novel's interspecies dialogue, reinforces both the principles of the circular economy and the ethos of critical posthumanism, which seeks to de-centre the human figure in favour of more interconnected, multispecies perspectives (Calarco 30–31). The Fleet thus emerges as a vision of technological and ecological integration that directly challenges the extractive and anthropocentric logics of the Anthropocene. Instead, it offers a model of resilience and interspecies collaboration, one that gestures towards alternative futures where energy systems are designed to sustain life rather than perpetuate growth and consumption.

2. DEATH, COMPOST, AND THE CYCLE OF LIFE

The commitment to circularity in *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (Chambers) extends beyond energy systems and resource management to encompass the most fundamental biological process: death. The Fleet's approach to

mortality embodies the same regenerative principles that govern its economy, transforming human remains into a resource that sustains life. Nowhere is this philosophy more strikingly evident than in the treatment of compost. We read that when Eyas, one of the “oxygen workers,” or composters, is at work:

She spread the stuff around the roots with her gloved hands, laying down handful after handful of rich black nutrients. She wouldn’t have minded getting compost on her bare skin but, much like pulling the wagon, it was a matter of respect. Compost was too precious to be wasted by washing it from her hands. She was meticulous about brushing off her gloves before folding them back up, about doing the same with her apron, about shaking every last crumb out of the canister. Each bit had to make its way to where it had been promised it would go. (Chambers, *Record* 65)

Hence, we can observe here that compost is treated with the utmost respect, which would align not only with environmentalism (Pergola et al. 744), but also with circular economy principles (De Corato 18; Rashid and Shahzad 2), and degrowth (Savini 6). Moreover, it is important to note the source of the compost used in the Fleet, revealed in a conversation between Eyas and a visitor to the “oxygen farms” where compost is created out of organic matter:

Eyas smiled. “Would you like to come see?” The boy shifted his weight from foot to foot, then nodded. Eyas waved him over. She spread some compost on her gloved palm. “Did M here tell you what this is?”

The boy rubbed his lips together before speaking. “People.” (Chambers, *Record* 66–67)

This excerpt highlights a restorative and regenerative process in which human bodies, after their death, are composted to nurture plant life and, by extension, create oxygen. This practice embodies the core principle of circular economy, albeit to an arguable extreme; that of maintaining the utility and value of materials, regardless of their origin, by reintegrating them into biological cycles. The actions of Eyas exemplifies how waste, in this case human remains, is not discarded but transformed into resources that continue to sustain life at the Fleet. This aligns with circular economy and the principle of Cradle to Cradle, which offers an opportunity to radically revise the current take-make-waste system of production and counter the built-in obsolescence in consumer products; circular

production is supposed to eliminate waste and limit, if not halt, the use of virgin materials (Kopnina 362). In this way, the novel aligns with the definition of circular economy given in this paper, as the Fleet shows a high degree of intentionality in closing biological loops and avoiding unused waste, where the death of one element enriches the ecosystem, ensuring that no material is wasted.

The practice of composting human bodies in the Fleet extends far beyond a simple ecological necessity; it is a deeply ideological, fundamentally imaginative reshaping of the way life, death, and materiality are understood. This practice challenges the extractive, wasteful ethos of capitalist consumerism, replacing it with an ecological vision where death is not an end but a transformation. In this way, Chambers's novel (*Record*) presents a society in which human remains are not discarded or cremated but fully and consciously reintegrated into the cycle of life, reflecting a radical departure from the dominant paradigm of burial or cremation, both of which often contribute to environmental degradation rather than renewal in modern capitalist societies (Singh 140).

Donna Haraway's concept of *humusities*—as opposed to *humanities*—provides a compelling theoretical lens for analysing this practice. Haraway rejects the anthropocentric hierarchies that position humans as distinct from and superior to other forms of life, instead arguing for a perspective in which all living beings, human and non-human alike, are enmeshed in ongoing processes of composition and decomposition. As she asserts, “[w]e are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities” (Haraway 114). This perspective reframes human identity not as separate from or elevated above the natural world but as fundamentally embedded within it. The novel's portrayal of human composting thus embodies Haraway's vision of multispecies entanglement, dissolving rigid distinctions between human and nonhuman, life and death, subject and object. As Haraway further emphasises, all beings—“critters, human or not”—compose and decompose one another, participating in the continuous processes of ecological, evolutionary, and developmental world-making (114). Under this vision, the Fleet's burial practices emerge not simply as a pragmatic solution to resource scarcity but as an ethical and philosophical commitment to interdependence, regeneration, and non-extractive forms of existence.

In contrast to capitalist societies, which prioritise individual legacy and the preservation of the human body through costly, resource-intensive

funerary practices,⁴ the Fleet's approach embraces an ethic of communal sustainability. Eyas, one of the caretakers of the dead, describes the process of composting human remains with a reverence that reinforces this ideological realignment: “[p]eople got so hung up on what a thing had been, rather than what it was now. That was why publicly distributed compost was reserved for oxygen gardens and fibre farms, the only public places in the Fleet that used soil” (Chambers, *Record* 65). Here, the novel directly admits the human tendency to become fixated on the past rather than trying to imagine transformational futures. The Fleet instead embraces impermanence and cyclical materiality, ensuring that no resource, not even human bodies, is squandered. This perspective is made explicit in a conversation between Eyas and the “oxygen farm” visitor mentioned earlier. When asked about whether or not the compost is made of “people,” Eyas patiently explains:

“Mmm, not anymore. It’s called compost. It used to be people, yes, but it’s changed into something else. See, what I’m doing here is putting this onto the plants, so they grow strong and healthy.” She demonstrated. “The people that turned into compost now get to be part of these plants. The plants give us clean air to breathe and beautiful things to look at, which keeps us healthy. Eventually, these plants will die, and they’ll get composted, too. Then that compost gets used to grow food, and the food becomes part of us again. So, even when we lose people we love, they don’t leave us.” She pressed her palm flat against her chest. “We’re made out of our ancestors. They’re what keep us alive.” (Chambers, *Record* 66)

This passage encapsulates the novel’s “compost” perspective by rejecting rigid distinctions between human and other-than-human, blending human and plant categories, potentially embracing a non-anthropocentric view of life and of what Rosi Braidotti terms the *zoe*. In contrast to capitalist societies, where death is often sanitised and distanced from everyday life, the Fleet integrates it into their ecological consciousness. In doing so, they not only embrace a circular economy but also reinforce a communal ethos

⁴ As Katsumi Shimane explains, in the past, the removal of the deceased and the performance of funeral rites were carried out collectively by relatives and members of the local community. In contemporary late-capitalist societies, however, this communal involvement has largely been replaced by monetary transactions and professional outsourcing. The social disengagement from funerary practices thus comes at the price of commodification (4–5).

in which past generations are literally and symbolically incorporated into the living world while ensuring the survival of human characters.

Chambers's approach to human composting also engages with Stacy Alaimo's idea of trans-corporeality, which similarly disrupts the notion of the human subject as a discrete, sovereign subject (17). In *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (Chambers), we read that "the people that turned into compost now get to be part of these plants," which, in turn, "keeps us alive" (66), the idea of which reflects Alaimo's understanding of the body as inherently connected with the wider environment, or indeed, the *zoe*. The novel further complicates the relationship between humans and the more-than-human by exploring the implications of bodily decomposition beyond planetary existence. The Fleet's inhabitants, despite having never set foot on Earth, remain materially and spiritually connected to it. Eyas reflects on this profound continuity:

death is not an end. It's a pattern. A catalyst for change. Death is recycling. Proteins and nutrients, 'round and 'round. And you can't stop that. Take a living person off Earth, put them in a sealed metal canister out in a vacuum, take them so far away from their planet of origin that they might not understand what a forest or an ocean is when you tell them about one—and they are still linked to that cycle. When we decompose under the right conditions, we turn into soil—something awfully like it, anyway. You see? We're not detached from Earth. We turn into earth. (Chambers, *Record* 230)

This passage reinforces Haraway's argument that human identity cannot be divorced from ecological processes and Alaimo's idea of all bodies being interconnected and vulnerable to the environment rather than isolated entities (63). Even in the artificial environment of the Fleet, humanity remains bound to Earth's cycles of decay and renewal, rejecting anthropocentric ideas of human exceptionalism and the illogical nature of lineal extractivist capitalism. In other words, the text does not merely show circular economy and degrowth in a fictional setting, rather it proposes a radical reconfiguration of subjectivity and embodiment in alignment with the feminist materialist ecologies of academics such as Alaimo.

3. RECONFIGURATION OF LABOUR

The vision of the Anthropocene as laid out in Chambers's novel aligns with discussions on the influence of consumer identity in shaping our

socio-economic systems. As Frank Trentmann argues, the emergence of consumerism as a defining aspect of Western societies has reinforced the logic of growth and disposability by turning the concept of the consumer into a collective category beyond individual explanations (14). Trentmann notes that the consumer has become so pervasive in politics, media, and academia that they are now seen as an almost “quasi-natural being” (1). Western societies have since been structured around overconsumption and material accumulation, reinforcing a capitalist logic of growth and disposability. Serge Latouche further argues that this consumer identity is a direct consequence of the growth imperative, sustained by overproduction, planned obsolescence, and the normalisation of waste (279).

In contrast, degrowth challenges this ontological framework by arguing for a fundamental shift: people must cease to be consumers and become users. Kuijer and Laschke highlight how deeply embedded consumerist mindsets have become in Western societies, to the extent that individuals, when asked about their desires, almost instinctively frame their aspirations in terms of material goods (8). For a post-consumerist society to emerge, degrowth theorists propose a dual shift: first, from individual ownership to commons-based systems where access replaces accumulation (Kuijer and Laschke 6), and second; from economic dependence on market-driven cycles to self-sufficiency and communal exchange (Kuijer and Laschke 10). This could mean the fostering of practical skills, self-sufficiency, and communal exchange, ensuring that the population is no longer dependent on market-driven cycles of production and systemic disposal of waste, as well as a reconceptualisation of the concept of labour.

In Chambers’s novel, we find a society that embodies this shift, where the concept of labour is profoundly different from that of capitalist systems, with the motto of the Fleet reading “Everybody had a home, and nobody went hungry” (*Record* 85), according, at least, to the archivist Isabel. This systemic security eliminates the fear of financial instability that often fuels overconsumption in capitalist societies, where material accumulation is perceived as a safeguard against economic uncertainty—despite the paradox that such accumulation frequently exacerbates anxiety (Soler 22). In contrast, the Fleet does not measure individual worth through purchasing power but rather through communal contribution.

This change from consumer to user is evident in the ways skill, labour, and communal work are structured in the novel, fundamentally rejecting

the market-driven valuation of work found in capitalist societies. The emphasis on skill over consumption is subtly introduced early in the novel through the character Tessa's workbench, which is described as a space where she actively engages in practical work (Chambers, *Record* 15). The mere presence of a workbench—a site of creation, maintenance, and repair—establishes a setting in which personal skill and craftsmanship hold central value. Unlike in consumerist societies, where broken items are often discarded and replaced with new purchases, the Fleet prioritises repair and resourcefulness. This is further reinforced when Tessa attempts to fix a cleaner bot using said workbench (Chambers, *Record* 16), displaying an important kind of skill in the context of degrowth. Her action is not automated, nor is it financially compensated; rather, she repairs the bot because it is necessary for the Fleet's daily operations. The absence of commodification in labour signifies a radical shift away from capitalist work structures, aligning with degrowth principles that advocate for the de-commodification of basic services and communal access to goods, rejecting market-drive valuation of work. By rejecting market-driven valuations of work, the Fleet cultivates an economic system in which labour is not a means of individual survival but a collective practice that sustains the entire community.

The Fleet's approach to labour also dismantles hierarchical distinctions between professions. While individuals freely choose their careers based on personal interest and skill, work remains inherently collective. Apprenticeship is structured as an exploratory process in which adolescents engage with different trades until they find a profession that suits them with monetary compensation not being a factor (Chambers, *Record* 43). The lack of coercion in job selection removes economic pressure from career decisions, allowing individuals to work in fields where they find fulfilment rather than being forced into jobs dictated by market demand. This system aligns with degrowth's vision of labour as a means of communal well-being rather than an instrument for profit accumulation.

However, the arguably most radical departure from capitalist labour structures is the Fleet's mandatory participation in sanitation work. The novel presents a striking contrast to market economies, where certain jobs—particularly those related to sanitation and waste management—are often assigned to marginalised workers and remain largely invisible to the rest of society (Murphy 50). In the Fleet, sanitation is a shared responsibility, reinforcing the idea that no task is beneath anyone, all

labour holding inherent value. This is made explicit when Sawyer, a planet-born newcomer to the Fleet, initially refuses sanitation work, failing to understand why it is universally required and feeling offended by being offered this kind of job. Eyas, the caretaker of the dead, explains:

[t]hey tried to give you a sanitation job because everybody has to do sanitation. Everybody. Me, merchants, teachers, doctors, council members, the admiral—every healthy Exodan fourteen and over gets their ID put in a computer, and that computer randomly pulls names for temporary, mandatory, no-getting-out-of-it work crews to sort recycling and wash greasy throw-cloths and unclog the sewage lines. All the awful jobs nobody wants to do. That way, nothing is out of sight or out of mind. Nothing is left to lesser people, because there's no such thing. (Chambers, *Record* 136)

Eyas's explanation underscores the deeply egalitarian ethos of the Fleet, where labour is distributed equitably, and essential but undesirable tasks are shared rather than relegated to an exploited underclass. In contrast to capitalist societies, where occupations are stratified based on income and perceived prestige, the Fleet acknowledges that all jobs serve a purpose and contribute to the common good. This is made explicit later in the novel:

Everything has a purpose, a recognisable benefit. If you have food on your plate, you thank a farmer. If you have clothing, you thank a textile manufacturer. If you have murals to brighten your day, you thank an artist. Even the most menial of tasks benefits someone, benefits all. (Chambers, *Record* 191)

The text dismantles the capitalist tendency to devalue certain types of labour, instead positioning work as inherently communal and interdependent. The novel explicitly reframes labour's purpose, replacing the capitalist question "What do you do?"—which exhibits a rather individualistic focus—with a more collectivist inquiry: "When an Exodan asks 'what do you do?', the real question is: 'What do you do for us?'" (Chambers, *Record* 191). This linguistic shift is crucial. In capitalist societies, labour is individualistic, evaluated by its financial returns rather than its social function. In the Fleet, by contrast, work is embedded within a system of mutual reliance, reinforcing a degrowth-oriented economic model that emphasises contribution over individual economic profit.

Furthermore, this collective ethic extends beyond formal labour and into the organisation of everyday chores; that is, the domestic sphere. Household responsibilities are distributed among neighbours within a hex (six dwellings surrounding a common area) in a way that reflects communal support rather than individual burden (Chambers, *Record* 105). This cooperative approach to labour ensures that no individual is overburdened, while also highlighting how degrowth's emphasis on skill and self-sufficiency is supplemented by strong social bonds. The Fleet's model does not advocate for isolated self-reliance but rather for interdependent resilience, where tasks are distributed according to ability and preference, rather than financial necessity. It is worth noting that the novel also extends this ethos to child-rearing, demonstrating how care work—often undervalued in capitalist economies (Huws 9)—is integrated into communal life. For instance, Tessa reflects on the flexibility of caregiving arrangements within the hex: “she could’ve asked the Parks of a hand. They didn’t have any kids, and they often helped out around the hex in terms of bathing and bedtime stories” (Chambers, *Record* 114). This casual, reciprocal system of childcare stands in stark contrast to capitalist societies, where care work is frequently privatised, expensive, and disproportionately placed in the hands of women (Huws 10). By integrating caregiving into the broader communal structure, the Fleet reinforces an economy of care that aligns with degrowth's prioritisation of communal well-being over profit.

4. LIMITS TO THE CIRCULAR MODEL OF THE FLEET

Despite the focus on circular economy and reuse, the novel does not present the Fleet as an uncritical utopia, nor does it depict its society as free from challenges, uncertainties, or the need for adaptation and improvement. Rather, *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (Chambers) offers a deep exploration of a possible alternative to capitalist consumerism—one that, while more sustainable and community-driven, is still subject to risk, loss, and existential uncertainty. The opening pages immediately disrupt any notion of the Fleet as a flawless society by presenting the sudden and catastrophic explosion of one of its ships, the *Oxomoco*, resulting in the loss of all lives aboard (Chambers, *Record* 18). This event reverberates throughout the Fleet, reminding its inhabitants—and the reader—that no system, no matter how carefully structured, is immune to disaster. The material and psychological consequences of the *Oxomoco*'s destruction

are evident in characters such as Tessa, who, while working in cargo, finds herself confronted with the wreckage: “a never-ending backlog of support trusses, floor panels, empty oxygen tanks. Things that had been vital. Things that had been viewed as permanent” (Chambers, *Record* 41). This passage underscores the fragility of even the most self-sustaining systems, as what was once deemed essential and enduring is suddenly rendered into debris. The *Oxomoco*’s destruction also has a profound emotional impact on Fleet’s inhabitants. Tessa’s child, for instance, develops an acute fear of living on a ship (Chambers, *Record* 326), demonstrating that, despite its commitment to security and well-being, the Fleet cannot entirely shield its people from trauma. By foregrounding such vulnerabilities, Chambers resists constructing an idealised vision of a post-capitalist society and instead presents a model that, while sustainable and cooperative, remains contingent upon the material and emotional realities of its inhabitants.

Furthermore, the novel does not romanticise the Fleet as a futuristic vision of human exceptionalism. The Fleet is not framed as an organic, self-sustaining paradise, but rather as a manufactured and precarious experiment, where survival depends on artificial mechanisms and meticulous management. As one character explains:

“We live inside machines. We’ve replicated the systems on Earth. There is no wind to move our air, there is no water cycle, there is no natural source for photosynthesis. This is a lab experiment. A biologist could make no real conclusions about our natural behaviour. They’d have to add the caveat ‘born in captivity’ to everything they recorded.” (Chambers, *Record* 229)

This reflection forces the reader to reconsider the Fleet’s status as a desirable alternative to planetary life. The comparison to captivity problematises the Fleet’s existence, raising questions about the long-term viability of a human society entirely dependent on technological mediation. Unlike many utopian narratives that portray the future as a return to an unspoiled, self-sufficient world (Browne 64), Chambers’s novel acknowledges the limitations of spacefaring societies.

Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the Fleet represents a vision of hope as well as choice. In the case of *Record of a Spaceborn Few* (Chambers), this ethos is illustrated by Sawyer’s decision to leave behind the exploitative economy of Mushtullo and seek a different way of life: “He’d left for good reasons, he told himself. He’d left for the right reasons. What was there for him on Mushtullo, beyond working jobs he didn’t care

about so he could buy drinks he'd piss away and shirts he wouldn't like later?" (196). Sawyer's rejection of a planet-bound existence shaped by capitalist alienation suggests that, despite its difficulties, the Fleet offers an alternative framework in which individuals are not reduced to their economic productivity or consumption habits. As Beatriz Hermida-Ramos argues in relation to another novel by Chambers, *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet*, Chambers's text frames hope as an act of political resistance rooted in vulnerability and communal care (43), where characters refuse to dehumanise one another in pursuit of capitalist gain (30), a notion that clearly extends to *Record of a Spaceborn Few* through characters like Sawyer. His choice reflects a broader theme in the novel: the search for meaning and a community where he ceases to be dehumanised by the extractivist logic of capitalism and the search for a community where he can belong, a way of life beyond consumerism, even in an environment that is neither idyllic nor without hardship.

Notably, the Fleet is not an isolationist entity but actively engages in both immigration and emigration. While many Fleet inhabitants remain within the community for life, others choose to leave, and the Fleet ensures that they are equipped with the necessary tools to survive beyond its borders. This is exemplified by the existence of the emigrant resource centre, which helps prepare Exodans for integration into the Galactic Commons, to "prepare GC-bound Exodans for life beyond the Fleet" (Chambers, *Record* 246). The very existence of such a resource suggests that the Fleet does not position itself as a closed utopia, resistant to external influence, but rather as a flexible and evolving system that acknowledges the reality that some of its members may wish to pursue other ways of life. The justification for maintaining this centre further reinforces the Fleet's pragmatic and communal ethos:

Look—there's no denying that more Exodans are leaving than coming back, but we're hardly in danger of dying out. Farms are still working. Water's still flowing. The Fleet is fine. The people I teach, they'd leave whether or not classes were available to them. But if they left without taking a class or two, they won't know what's what out there. That way lies trouble. All we're doing is giving them the tools they need to stay safe. Exodans helping Exodans. Isn't that what we're supposed to be about? (Chambers, *Record* 249)

This passage underscores a key ideological distinction between the Fleet's society and capitalist nation-states, which often view emigration as the consequence of a poor economic resources and as a loss of "human capital" (Trebilcock and Sudak 234). The Fleet does not operate under a scarcity-driven mindset, nor does it attempt to hoard human capital. Instead, it recognises that individuals may choose different paths and that preparing them for life beyond the Fleet is a form of collective responsibility rather than betrayal. The Fleet's willingness to facilitate its inhabitants' transition to external societies further underscores its non-coercive and non-totalitarian nature.

Moreover, the novel extends this non-exclusionary philosophy even further by introducing the possibility of welcoming non-human immigrants into the Fleet. Just as it has developed resources for those who leave, the Fleet has begun initiatives to integrate alien species into its community, establishing an immigrant resource centre similar to the one created for departing Exodans. In sharp contrast to the detention centres proliferating across—*institutions that increasingly criminalise human mobility (Flynn 2) under the logic of global capitalism (Flynn 6)*—the centres within the Fleet are not punitive spaces but sites of hospitality and preparation for the communal life of the Fleet. It is also worth noting that, while initial efforts to attract non-human inhabitants are met with scepticism and limited interest, the eventual arrival of three alien students signals the beginning of a multispecies society within the Fleet. The official in charge of this initiative emphasises the continuity between this project and the Fleet's existing ethos of mutual aid and resource sharing: "Our goal here today is to give you a good starting point for finding the resources and assistance you need to begin a life in the Fleet" (Chambers, *Record* 357). This moment is significant not only because it marks a shift in the Fleet's demographic makeup but also because it suggests that the Fleet's post-capitalist, circular economy model is not strictly human-specific, embodying an ethic of interspecies solidarity and coexistence.

The potential for a multispecies cooperative society further reinforces the novel's posthumanist perspective, challenging anthropocentric assumptions about economic and social organisation. Rather than positioning the Fleet as a fixed utopia, Chambers depicts it as a continuous project, one that must remain open to adaptation, migration, and interspecies collaboration. Hence, Chambers's text does not present the Fleet as an infallible utopia but rather as a realistic experiment in alternative socio-economic organization. By foregrounding its

vulnerabilities, challenges, and adaptability, the novel resists both romanticisation and dystopian fatalism, offering instead a vision of pragmatic hope. This dynamic fluidity reinforces the novel's central argument: resistance to capitalist commodification and consumerism does not require rigidity or exclusion but can be an ongoing, flexible process of adaptation and collaboration.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the novel presents the society of the Fleet as an enduring symbol, a philosophy, and a way of life that extends beyond those who inhabit it. The Fleet is not merely a collection of ships orbiting in space; it is a mindset, an ethical framework, and a historical consciousness that shapes both those who live within it and those who leave it behind. Through its material origins, its cultural practices, and its impact on those who encounter it, the Fleet functions as a living archive of humanity's past failures and a blueprint for its potential future. An alien observer reflects on the origins of the Fleet:

When their planet could no longer sustain them, the waning Humans dismantled their cities. Down came the shimmering towers of glass and metal, beam by beam, bolt by bolt . . . The Humans who did this knew they would not live to see the end result. Their years were almost universally cut short by famine and disease, but even if they had been as healthy as their ancestors, the work was too great for one lifetime alone . . . “A city made of cities,” my host told me during our first day. “We took our ruins with us.”
(Chambers, *Record* 351)

This passage reinforces the notion that the Fleet is both a product of and a memorial to the Anthropocene, an era marked by human-induced ecological collapse. The phrase “We took *our* ruins with us” (emphasis added) serves as a stark reminder that the Fleet is not a society born out of idealism, but out of necessity. Every piece of infrastructure aboard the ships is a direct link to the failed systems that preceded it, ensuring that the inhabitants of the Fleet never forget why they had to change their ways in order to survive. Rather than constructing a utopian vision of the future in which past mistakes are erased or overcome, the Fleet is constructed upon the ruins of its history, embedding memory and accountability into its very architecture. In this sense, the Fleet does not turn human corpses into humus only physically, but also ideologically: there is no idealised post-human form but rather a messy compost that exposes human's vulnerability.

The idea that the Fleet is more than just a location is further reinforced through the reflections of an alien researcher who has spent time studying its inhabitants. Long after leaving, this researcher finds themselves still reflecting on its principles:

though I have travelled far from Risheth, I have brought the Fleet with me. There is no place I can go, no activity I can engage in without thinking of them. I can't see a garden without thinking of how theirs differ, nor can I watch a sunset without thinking of the mimicked rhythms of their abandoned sun. (Chambers, *Record* 352)

This passage underscores the Fleet's capacity to influence even those outside its direct sphere. The researcher's observation highlights how the Fleet is not simply a self-sustaining, closed-loop system but a model for sustainable futures that lingers in the minds of those who encounter it. It is not an insular utopia removed from the rest of the universe but an ideological framework that can be carried forward, implemented elsewhere, and reimagined in new contexts.

One of the most compelling demonstrations of the Fleet's enduring impact is found in the characters who choose to leave it, yet remain deeply influenced by its philosophy. By the end of the novel, Tessa decides to move with her husband and children to a planetary colony. Her decision is fraught with uncertainty, as she deeply values the Fleet and what it represents. However, her husband reassures her:

"Honestly, Tess, you're the best kind of person to join a colony, because you'd bring all those right reasons with you. You believe in our way of life here? Cool. Implement those ways planetside. Make sure people don't forget. Make sure people remember that a closed system is a closed system even when you can't see the edges." (Chambers, *Record* 328)

This moment is crucial because it rejects the notion that degrowth-oriented, sustainable societies must be geographically confined. Instead, the Fleet's principles can migrate, influencing new communities and shaping the values of those who were never physically part of it. This directly challenges the idea that post-capitalist futures must be small-scale, localised, or exclusionary; instead, the Fleet's sustainability ethos is shown to be scalable and adaptable to different environments. Additionally, Tessa's new house retains a distinctive feature of Fleet homes: the

handprints of its inhabitants painted by the poor (Chambers, *Record* 370). This small yet significant detail reveals how cultural practices tied to circularity, sustainability, and communal identity endure even in new environments. The Fleet's legacy is not just its physical infrastructure but its values, its traditions, and its way of seeing the world—one that resists capitalist commodification, waste, and hierarchy in favour of an interconnected, regenerative existence.

CONCLUSIONS

Record of a Spaceborn Few offers a thought-provoking exploration of a possible future, allowing its analysis from the perspectives of circular economy, degrowth, and critical posthumanism, presenting an alternative socio-economic system that moves beyond the extractive, wasteful, and hierarchical structures of late capitalism. Through the depiction of the Fleet, the novel imagines a world in which economic value is no longer tied to consumerism but instead measured by contribution, skill, and community well-being. The novel's rejection of profit-driven labour structures, its commitment to resource regeneration, and its de-commodification of human life and death collectively challenge the ideological foundations of capitalist growth economies.

It is important to highlight that the Fleet is presented as an adaptive socio-economic experiment—one that, while largely successful in fostering sustainability and social cohesion, is also subject to risk, trauma, and external influences. The destruction of the *Oxomoco* proves the fragility of even the most carefully designed systems, while the Fleet's decision to prepare emigrants for life beyond its borders suggests a willingness to engage with external realities rather than retreat into isolationism. Similarly, the introduction of an immigrant resource centre signals an evolving, posthumanist ethos, where multispecies cooperation becomes the next step in the Fleet's socio-economic trajectory. By situating the Fleet within broader discussions of degrowth and circular economy, Chambers's novel illustrates the power of science fiction to explore alternative economic models. The Fleet's inhabitants do not merely follow sustainable practices out of necessity; they internalise values of resourcefulness, mutual care, and ecological responsibility, demonstrating that sustainability must be cultural as much as it is structural.

Thus, *Record of a Spaceborn Few* serves as a powerful literary meditation on what a possible future might look like, offering neither a rigid blueprint nor an unattainable utopia, but rather a provocation—a vision of a world where adaptation, cooperation, and circularity replace extraction, hierarchy, and disposability. As speculative fiction continues to engage with ecological and economic crises, novels like Chambers's play a crucial role in expanding our economic imagination, challenging us to consider how alternative systems might emerge from, and respond to, the failures of the Anthropocene.

REFERENCES

Adelman, Sam. “The Sustainable Development Goals, Anthropocentrism and Neoliberalism.” *Sustainable Development Goals*, edited by Duncan French and Louis J. Kotzé. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018, pp. 15-40.

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana UP, 2010.

Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.

Boulding, K. E. “The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth.” *Environmental Quality Issues in a Growing Economy*, edited by H. Jarrett. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1966, pp. 3-14.

Browne, Craig. “Hope, Critique, and Utopia.” *Critical Horizons*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2005, pp. 63–86, doi: 10.1163/156851605775009483.

Calarco, Matthew. *Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction*. Stanford UP, 2015.

Chambers, Becky. *A Closed and Common Orbit*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2016.

Chambers, Becky. *Record of a Spaceborn Few: Wayfarers 3*. Hachette UK, 2018.

Chambers, Becky. *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2014.

Chambers, Becky. *The Galaxy, and the Ground Within: Wayfarers 4*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2021.

Corvellec, Hervé, et al. “Critiques of the Circular Economy.” *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2021, pp. 421–32, doi: 10.1111/jiec.13187.

Cox, Carolyn. “Congratulations to the 2019 Hugo Award Winners!” *The Portalist*, 19 Aug. 2019, theportalist.com/2019-hugo-award-winners/.

De Corato, Ugo. “Agricultural Waste Recycling in Horticultural Intensive Farming Systems by On-Farm Composting and Compost-Based Tea Application Improves Soil Quality and Plant Health: A Review under the Perspective of a Circular Economy.” *Science of The Total Environment*, vol. 738, 2020, doi: 10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.139840.

Ellen MacArthur Foundation, and Granta Design. “Circularity Indicators: An Approach to Measuring Circular Economy.” *Ellen MacArthur Foundation*, 2015, content.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/m/5df196c8314ff61f/original/Circularity-Indicators-Project-Overview.pdf/.

Flynn, Mathew. “Capitalism and Immigration Control: What Political Economy Reveals about the Growth of Detention Systems.” *Global Detention Project*, no. 16, 2016, pp. 1-21.

Flood, Alison. “Self-Published Sci-Fi Debut Kickstarts on to Kitschies Shortlist.” *The Guardian*, 13 Feb. 2015, www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/13/self-published-sci-fi-debut-kickstarts-on-to-kitschies-shortlist/.

Geisendorf, Sylvie, and Felicitas Pietrulla. “The Circular Economy and Circular Economic Concepts—A Literature Analysis and

Redefinition.” *Thunderbird International Business Review*, vol. 60, no. 5, 2017, pp. 771–82, doi: 10.1002/tie.21924.

Gertenbach, Lars, et al. “Eating Ourselves out of Industrial Excess? Degrowth, Multi-Species Conviviality and the Micro-Politics of Cultured Meat.” *Anthropological Theory*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2021, pp. 386–408, doi: 10.1177/1463499620981544.

Gill, R. B. “The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction.” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2013, pp. 71–85, doi: 10.1353/mos.2013.0021.

Hajiyeva M. “Sounding Voices and Shifting Perspectives: Polyphony and Hetero-Glossia in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction and Cinema.” *Norwegian Journal of Development of the International Science*, no. 126, 2024, pp. 83–88, doi: 10.5281/zenodo.10655476.

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.

Hermida-Ramos, Beatriz. “Hope is the New Punk: Politics of Storytelling, Queerness and Marginalized Communities in Becky Chambers’ *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet*.” *Gaudeamus*, vol. 0, 2020, pp. 27–46, gaudeamusjournal.org/index.php/gaudeamus/article/view/7/.

Huws, Ursula. “The Hassle of Housework: Digitalisation and the Commodification of Domestic Labour.” *Feminist Review*, vol. 123, no. 1, 2019, pp. 8–23, doi: 10.1177/0141778919879725.

Kallis, Giorgos, and Hug March. “Imaginaries of Hope: The Utopianism of Degrowth.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 105, no. 2, 2015, pp. 360–68, doi: 10.1080/00045608.2014.973803.

Kehe, Jason. “Is Becky Chambers the Ultimate Hope for Science Fiction?” *WIRED*, 16 Sep. 2021, www.wired.com/story/is-becky-chambers-ultimate-hope-science-fiction/.

Kopnina, Helen. "Exploring Posthuman Ethics: Opening New Spaces for Postqualitative Inquiry within Pedagogies of the Circular Economy." *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, vol. 38, no. 3–4, 2022, pp. 361–74, doi: 10.1017/aee.2021.16.

Kuijer, Lenneke, and Matthias Laschke. "Designing for a Post-Growth Society through the Eco-Harmonist. A Critical Examination of the Role of HCI and Technology Design." *Proceedings of the 13th Nordic Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, 2024, pp. 1–13, doi:10.1145/3679318.3685405.

Latouche, Serge. "The Path to Degrowth for a Sustainable Society." *Factor X: Challenges, Implementation Strategies and Examples for a Sustainable Use of Natural Resources*, edited by Harry Lehmann, Springer International Publishing, 2018, pp. 277–84, doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-50079-9_17.

Menger, Eva. "'What It Feels to Be the Other:' Imaginations of Displacement in Contemporary Speculative Fiction." *Studies in Arts and Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2018, pp. 1–18, www.sahjournal.com/article/6075/galley/13819/view/.

Mitchell, Audra and Aadita Chaudhury. "Worlding beyond 'the' 'End' of 'the World': White Apocalyptic Visions and BIPOC Futurisms." *International Relations*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2020, pp. 309–332.

Murphy, Annie J. "Defining Essential: How Custodial Labour Became Synonymous with Safety During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *ReEssentiality of Work*, edited by Markus Helfen et al. Emerald Publishing Limited, 2024, pp. 39–56, doi: 10.1108/S0277-283320240000036003.

Pergola, Maria, et al. "Composting: The Way for a Sustainable Agriculture." *Applied Soil Ecology*, vol. 123, 2018, pp. 744–50, doi: 10.1016/j.apsoil.2017.10.016.

Rashid, Muhammad Imtiaz, and Khurram Shahzad. "Food Waste Recycling for Compost Production and Its Economic and Environmental Assessment as Circular Economy Indicators of Solid

Waste Management.” *Journal of Cleaner Production*, vol. 317, 2021, pp 1-11, doi:10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.128467.

Reimann, Andres. “Science Fiction Debate: Why Have We Stopped Imagining the Future?” *ERR*, 25 May 2024, news.err.ee/1609348986/science-fiction-debate-why-have-we-stopped-imagining-futures/.

Richter, Katharina. “Struggling for Another Life: The Ontology of Degrowth.” *Transtext(e)s Transcultures 跨文本跨文化. Journal of Global Cultural Studies*, no. 14, 2019, doi: 10.4000/transtexts.1242.

Rogan, Alcena Madeline Davis. “Utopian Studies.” *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Mark Bould et al., Routledge, 2009, pp. 308–16.

Roldán-Romero, Vanesa. “Transhumanism and the Anthropocene in Becky Chambers’ A Closed and Common Orbit.” *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, vol. 26, 2022, pp. 77–104.

Savini, Federico. “Futures of the Social Metabolism: Degrowth, Circular Economy and the Value of Waste.” *Futures*, vol. 150, 2023, pp. 1-11, doi: 10.1016/j.futures.2023.103180.

Schröder, Patrick, et al. “Degrowth within—Aligning Circular Economy and Strong Sustainability Narratives.” *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, vol. 146, 2019, pp. 190–91, doi: 10.1016/j.resconrec.2019.03.038.

Shimane, Katsumi. “Social Bonds with the Dead: How Funerals Transformed in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries.” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, vol. 373, 2018, pp. 1-7, doi: 10.1098/rstb.2017.0274.

Singh, Neera M. “Environmental Justice, Degrowth and Post-Capitalist Futures.” *Ecological Economics*, vol. 163, 2019, pp. 138–42, doi: 10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.05.014.

Solér, Cecilia. *Stress, Affluence and Sustainable Consumption*. Routledge, 2017, doi: 10.4324/9781315174792.

Steffen, Will, et al. "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences*, no. 369, 2011, pp. 842–67, doi: 10.1098/rsta.2010.0327.

Tally Jr., Robert T. "The-End-of-the-World as World System." *Other Globes: Past and Peripheral Imaginations of Globalization*, edited by Simon Ferdinand et al., Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019, pp. 267–84, doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-14980-2_14.

Trebilcock, Michael J., and Matthew Sudak. "The Political Economy of Emigration and Immigration." *New York University Law Review*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2006, p. 234.

Trentmann, Frank, editor. "Introduction." *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, Berg Publishers, 2006, pp. 1–30.

United Nations. "Experts Explore Potential of Global Transition to Circular Economy." *United Nations*, www.un.org/en/desa/experts-explore-potential-global-transition-circular-economy/.

Vence, Xavier, et al. "Economía circular, sustentabilidade e decrecemento." *Revista Galega de Economía*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2024, pp. 1–6, doi: 10.15304/rge.33.2.10036.

Technical Narrators and the Possibilities of Cognitive Assemblages in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*

Narradores tecnológicos y las posibilidades del ensamblaje cognitivo en *Klara and the Sun* de Kazuo Ishiguro

MARÍA TORRES-ROMERO

Institution address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Campus de Teatinos, Bulevar Louis Pasteur, 27. 29010 Málaga, Spain.

E-mail: mariatorresr@uma.es

ORCID: 0000-0003-0532-8139

Received: 09/03/2025. Accepted: 16/10/2025.

How to cite this article: Torres-Romero, María. "Technical Narrators and the Possibilities of Cognitive Assemblages in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp. 243–279.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/3g6pec58>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Abstract: This research aims to add to the critical discussions of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Klara and the Sun* by bridging the disciplines of narratology and cognitive science. First, the article traces the presumed voicing of Klara's robotic cognitive processes, connecting her machine vision to the idea of a non-anthropocentric self and the fictional possibilities of nonhuman un/consciousness. Secondly, it looks at the cognitive-affective interdependencies in the assemblage that artificial intelligences create with the humans in the novel. Drawing on N. Katherine Hayles's idea of cognitive assemblages and Marco Caracciolo's theorisation of *strange* narrators, this research considers how Ishiguro's novel invites readers to navigate interpretive tensions when engaging with nonhuman perspectives, while exploring whether the text participates in a paradigm shift from a human-centred cognitive subject towards a relational configuration that bridges the ontological divide between human and nonhuman "minds."

Keywords: Cognitive literary studies; first-person narrator; cognitive assemblage; affect; Kazuo Ishiguro.

Summary: Introduction. Cognition beyond the Human: Assemblages, Affects, and Narratology. Assembling a Technical Self in *Klara and the Sun*. Conclusion.

Resumen: Esta investigación, que pretende tender un puente entre las disciplinas de los estudios de narratología y las ciencias cognitivas, tiene como objetivo contribuir a los debates críticos sobre la novela *Klara and the Sun* de Kazuo Ishiguro. En primer lugar, el artículo se centra en el análisis de la voz narrativa y en las capacidades cognitivas de la robot Klara, conectando su visión artificial

con la idea de un ser no-antropocéntrico, así como en las posibilidades ficcionales de la (in)consciencia no-humana. En segundo lugar, este estudio examina las interdependencias cognitivo-afectivas en el ensamblaje que las inteligencias artificiales crean con los humanos en la novela. Utilizando la idea de “ensamblaje cognitivo” de N. Katherine Hayles y la teorización de Marco Caracciolo sobre “narradores extraños”, esta investigación considera cómo la novela de Ishiguro invita a los lectores a navegar tensiones interpretativas al adentrarse en perspectivas no-humanas, mientras explora cómo esta participa del cambio de paradigma desde un sujeto cognitivo centrado en el ser humano hacia una configuración relacional que supera la tradicional división ontológica entre “mentes” humanas y no-humanas.

Palabras clave: Estudios literarios cognitivos; narrador en primera persona; ensamblaje cognitivo; afecto; Kazuo Ishiguro

Sumario: Introducción. Cognición más allá de lo humano: ensamblajes, afectos y narratología. Ensamblando un ser tecnológico en *Klara and Sun*. Conclusión.

INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Klara and the Sun*, published in 2021, is an instance of an acclaimed text by the Nobel laureate which features a remote-to-reality setting, much in the same way as he did in previous works such as *Never Let Me Go* or *The Buried Giant*. Drawing upon the inherent structure and narrative techniques of speculative fiction and echoing in some ways what he achieved in *Never Let Me Go*, this novel covers a story narrated by a robotic Artificial Intelligence named Klara, which, much like Kathy H., “combines astute observation with deep naivete about the world” (Hayles, “Subversion” 267). Staying true to Ishiguro’s “preferred narrative style,” recognisable by his recurrent use of a first-person account with limited knowledge and a sense of outsiderness (Sen 91), *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro) is carefully built upon the artifice of Klara’s retrospective narration. While this technique is also emblematic of Ishiguro’s broader literary oeuvre, the novel adopts a singular resonance due to the nature of Klara’s memory. In contrast to human memory, which is emotionally suffused and prone to distortion, Klara’s recollection of the events is built upon robotic data retrieval, rendering it ostensibly more reliable, even if it too might be in part emotional—a process embedded as part of the very aesthetic fabric of the text. This circumstantial narrative dimension acquires additional complexity through the gradual technical deterioration, or “slow fade” (Ishiguro 329) that Klara begins to experience after her abandonment at the Yard once her “useful” life as a companion to Josie Arthur, an ailing child, has been completed. Although Klara repeatedly reasserts her sense of orientation and accuracy, the

narration gestures towards a potential instability that derives, not from distortion typical of human memory, but from indeterminacies of limited artificial recollection mediated by algorithmic processes, which invites reflection on the reliability of Klara's accounts in alternative ways (Xiao 357).

With a subtly described technologically advanced future as background, *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro) unfolds through a first-person narration that conveys what Marco Caracciolo terms a "strange" perspective or worldview (28). Providing an exploration of the algorithmic cognition of a humanoid Artificial Intelligence attempting to make sense of the world, the novel thus turns a central figure of genre fiction, namely "the innocent android" (Power), into a fully-fledged, complex, and cognitively nuanced character. Ishiguro's novel engages in this sense with the longstanding epistemological question—captured by Thomas Nagel in his renowned "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"—regarding the (im)possibility, and even (im)practicality, of truly accessing the subjective textures of nonhuman experiences, a concern that sits at the intersection of narrative theory and cognitive science.

The phenomenological enquiry into Klara's nonhuman experience can be situated within a "standardised" mode of narrative unreliability, which invites readers to critically examine the constraints of an anthropomorphic narrator's "mind" and to juxtapose it to their own interpretive frameworks (Caracciolo 29). This dynamic engenders a sense of personal involvement and intimacy and positions the novel as an example of what Robert L. McLaughlin identifies as "post-postmodernist" fiction (212)—a literary mode that marks a shift away from the metafictional detachment of certain canonical postmodernist works (Timmer 360).¹ Consequently, the reader is situated in an intimate, yet

¹ Robert L. McLaughlin characterises post-postmodernist fiction as departing from the overtly self-referential and ontologically disruptive strategies of postmodernism, shifting instead toward narratives that preserve the suspension of disbelief while interrogating the mediated and constructed nature of reality (218–19). Post-postmodern narrators, unlike their postmodern counterparts, tend to be "media savvy" yet refrain from dismantling their own narrative frames, directing attention toward the mutable, contingent nature of what their characters perceive as real (McLaughlin 218). This evolution in narrative practice corresponds to what Marco Caracciolo identifies as a "more standard variety" of narrative unreliability in post-1990 fiction (29): less invested in metafictional play than in cultivating an intimate, character-centred illusion that fosters psychological engagement, affective identification, and, at times, quasi-therapeutic modes of reading.

cognitively dissonant space, as confronting the robotic, nonhuman experiences of Klara elicits both empathy and critical distance. Trying to understand the varied ways in which literature navigates those cognitive gaps and offers insights into other ways “of being,” scholars in cognitive narratology generally explore how literary texts might simultaneously circumscribe and enable cognitive exploration, especially in the case of texts featuring nonhuman cognisers as main focalisers or as narrators.

Expectedly, and similar to other robot narratives, *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro) has awakened extensive critical interest among scholars who, attracted by the possibilities presented by Klara’s inner and partial robotic point of view, have analysed the novel as a prime example of a text that works to dissolve the certainty of the anthropocentric (cognitive) subject. This article aims to add to this strand of scholarly research and to the critical discussions where the narratological aspect of Klara’s autodiegetic accounts are examined, situating its analysis alongside recent research such as Guanghui Shang’s work on mind-reading, Tyne D. Sumner’s exploration of machine vision, face recognition, and affect, and N. Katherine Hayles’s analysis of metaphoric vision and the human aura (“Subversion”). At the same time, it attempts to extend these discussions by considering how the novel represents the systemic effects of technological innovation, particularly observing the ways in which such developments reconfigure the lives of the human characters in the speculative setting envisioned by Ishiguro.

In my reading of the text, grounded in the recognition that we can never be bats, I aim to achieve two things. First, it is my aim to trace the narrative representation of Klara’s cognitive abilities, considering how her perceptive faculties and machine learning abilities give rise to a form of subjectivity that is decentred from humanist frameworks. Although Klara’s ontological status as an Artificial Friend (AF) precludes claims about consciousness in reality, Ishiguro carefully constructs a fictional rendering of artificial subjectivity that simulates a sense of what Antonio Damasio has called “autobiographical self” (*Self* 203–07).² This

² The prospect of artificial consciousness remains a highly contested theoretical issue across contemporary artificial intelligence research, philosophy of mind, and cognitive and neuroscience. Recent scholarship emphasises both conceptual and empirical obstacles, with neuroscientific analyses (Aru et al.) and theoretical reviews (Chella) highlighting the field’s unresolved challenges. State-of-the-art assessments by David J. Chalmers and Butlin et al. conclude that current large language models, including OpenAI’s ChatGPT, lack the key properties (such as embodiment, recurrent processing,

narratively sustained selfhood offers the structural and affective coherence necessary for a first-person narration, allowing readers to engage with the robotic perspective as affectively and intelligible resonant. In doing so, the novel expands the imaginative space for representing the fictional possibilities of nonhuman cognition. Secondly, I attempt to examine the social and political affective interferences that shape the “cognitive assemblage” (Hayles, *Unthought* 2) that artificial and biological cognitions jointly create. Thus, this research aims to illustrate how Ishiguro’s novel can be read as an instance of a contemporary text that reconfigures the anthropocentric model of agency, caring, and control. By narratively enacting a hybrid cognitive ecology, *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro) further gestures towards the capacity of literature to bridge and renegotiate the ontological divide between human and nonhuman “minds.”

1. COGNITION BEYOND THE HUMAN: ASSEMBLAGES, AFFECTS, AND NARRATOLOGY

The once accepted idea that cognition, formerly “modelled via cognitive processes like attention, perception and memory” (Sampson, “Nonconscious Affect” 295), was constituted in its totality by higher-order consciousness and rational thinking has been gradually contested in what can be seen as a twofold critique. First, as observed by Tony D. Sampson, it has been supplanted by a new kind of neurological relation, one that sees consciousness as just the perceptible tip of an underlying, and more intricate set of cognitive processes embedded within the somatic dimension of human cognitive architecture (“Nonconscious Affect” 295, 297).³ Second, an expanded view of cognition has been especially

self-representation, and unified agency) identified by leading consciousness theories as prerequisites for conscious experience.

³ Cognitive sciences have undergone a fundamental reorientation as they have shifted away from models privileging higher consciousness and abstract, disembodied reasoning, towards the 4E framework (embodied, embedded, enactive, extended), which locates cognition in dynamic brain-body-world interactions (Carney 1–2). Rejecting the representationalist view of cognition as symbolic information processing (Fodor and Pylyshyn), 4E theorists argue that internal representations are inseparable from bodily actions and motor programmes. This reframing of cognition aligns with other trends that de-centre the human-exclusive, brain-specific model of mind, such as research into what has been called “minimal cognition” (Lyon) or “distributed cognition” (Hutchins).

propelled by advances in artificial intelligence, animal cognition, and cognitive biology, which have dramatically motivated a reorientation in the research focus towards a broader spectrum of cognitive capacities in the nonhuman world—ranging from the species-specific modalities of nonhuman animal cognition (Birch et al. 789) to the sensory attunement and signalling mechanisms of plants (Segundo-Ortin and Calvo 14).

The pressing urgency to understand cognition beyond the conscious rational mind, alongside the growing appreciation that humans might not be “that” special (Rossini 153) in cognitive terms, are two of the scholarly preoccupations that have infiltrated major debates in the humanities and social sciences’ agendas. N. Katherine Hayles’s *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*, which very notably stands as a crucial contribution to this shift, aims to reveal the transformative potential of an inclusive understanding of cognition by focusing on human interactions with complex technical systems. Her revision of cognition entails the proposal that, below the threshold of awareness, other neurological brain processes operate in humans’ cognition to perform functions essential to consciousness, acting, for instance, as a filter to avoid its overwhelmedness or even its collapse from sensorial stimuli (Hayles, *Unthought* 50). These foundational cognitive processes are what she calls, drawing on the work of neurobiologist Antonio Damasio, “the cognitive nonconscious” (Hayles, *Unthought* 11).

Besides building the foundation for human higher consciousness to emerge, which gives rise to the “autobiographical self” essential to make sense of the verbal narratives that play in our heads (Damasio, *Self* 203–07), nonconscious cognition is, according to Hayles, also pervasive in complex technical systems, such as computational media. This form of technology, described as “cognitive” because of its strong evolutionary potential, exhibits what Richard Grusin first called “technological unconscious” (72). Self-driving cars, automated trading algorithms, or autonomous drones and other surveillance technologies are examples of cognitive technologies that demonstrate nonconscious cognitive capabilities, as they can “process information faster than consciousness, discern patterns and draw inferences” (Hayles, *Unthought* 11).⁴ The

⁴ Hayles conceptualises nonconscious cognition as a dynamic process by which an organism, or a technical system, discerns and interprets patterns within its context prior to, and independent from, consciousness. In humans, she defines it as “a level of neuronal processing inaccessible to the modes of awareness but nevertheless performing functions

emergence of these technical cognitions therefore signifies the “exteriorization of cognitive abilities, once resident only in biological organisms, into the world” (Hayles, *Unthought* 11), and their design supports human conscious processes, which range from everyday activities like driving to serious political and economic strategies like making war.

Considering the interplay between consciousness/unconsciousness (the modes of awareness) and the cognitive nonconscious, Hayles proposes her updated and more encompassing definition of cognition as “a process that interprets information within contexts that connect it with meaning” (*Unthought* 22). As she explains, this formulation treats cognition not as a static attribute, like intelligence is sometimes considered to be, but as “a dynamic unfolding within an environment” that requires contextual embeddedness, embodiment, and interpretive choice among alternatives—whether in a tree orienting its leaves towards the sun, a technical system executing operations, or a human brain (Hayles, *Unthought* 25). The emphasis on meaning-making, process, and context explicitly avoids the restriction of cognition to human mental life dominating conventional accounts, which describe cognition as “the use of conscious mental processes” (*Cambridge Dictionary*), “a function of consciousness” (James 13), or as “knowledge and understanding . . . developed in the mind” (*Oxford Learner’s Dictionary*). Contrary to these consciousness-specific and anthropocentric takes, Hayles’s definition broadens cognition by emphasising that situated meaning-making processes are operative in both biological and technical systems.

Acknowledging the cognitive agency of other biological and technical nonhumans is merely the starting point. The multilayered cognitive interactions and interpenetrations between different human and nonhuman “cognizers” (Hayles, *Unthought* 30) in complex networks have been

essential to consciousness” (Hayles, *Unthought* 9), supported by neuroscientific findings such as the integration of somatic markers into coherent body representations (Damasio, *The Feeling*), the synthesis of sensory inputs across time and space (Eagleman), rapid information processing beyond conscious capacity (Dehaene), detection of complex patterns beyond conscious discernment (Kouider and Dehaene), and inference-making that guides behaviour and prioritisation (Lewicki et al.). Crucially, however, Hayles extends this notion beyond the human to encompass all living organisms and computational media, emphasising that any system (whether biological or technical) that can process information, respond adaptively to environmental cues, and engage in pattern recognition operates within the domain of nonconscious cognition.

theorised into what Hayles has termed a “cognitive assemblage” (*Unthought* 115). Invoking Bruno Latour as well as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s systemic theory and practice of assemblages, Hayles uses the term “cognitive assemblage” to connote how agency and power in technologically developed societies become distributed in varied and complex ways. This point is particularly significant since seeing cognitive interactions as assemblages shifts the focus from isolated human individuals to the distributed agency that emerges from the interplay between human and technical cognitions. Such assemblages foreground ethical considerations by acknowledging not only that technical mediators have agential powers but also by signalling how responsibilities become decentralised and supersede the sole focus on individual actors (Hayles, *Unthought* 119).

As they gain or lose parts and undergo volumetric transformations, cognitive assemblages have “cumulative (and expanding) effects that significantly affect human social behaviours” (Hayles, *Unthought* 35), morphing “the context and conditions” where they operate, and connoting how any social formation is always a collection of fluid material and immaterial exchanges with consequential effects (Hayles, *Unthought* 120). It is here that affective forces within cognitive assemblages, as used first by Spinoza and then by Deleuze and Guattari to refer to the ability of bodies to form assemblages with other bodies (Protevi 68), reach beyond human responses “to the postulated responses of technical artifacts” (Hayles, *Unthought* 178). Significantly, the paradigm of the cognitive nonconscious and cognitive assemblages also maps “a more general and influential turn to affect” (Sampson, “Nonconscious Affect” 296), where nonconscious cognition, acting as a mediator between bodily responses, or somatic markers (Damasio, *The Feeling* 187), and the modes of awareness, is strongly linked to affective experiences. Within this theoretical context, assemblages have the ability to show how these affects circulate from the “molecular to the molar”—to use Deleuze and Guattari’s analogy (213)—creating dynamic systems made of technical and human cognitions, as well as material processes, and how the diverse individual information and affective flows and exchanges are simultaneously infused and deeply intertwined with “social-technological-cultural-economic practices” (Hayles, *Unthought* 178).

In light of this, a second fundamental question arises in this research: How does literature, especially contemporary fiction, contribute to the understanding of the potentials of nonhuman cognition and of the specific

social, political, and historical dynamics of cognitive assemblages? One of the most widely employed narrative strategies that aligns with posthumanist frameworks involves granting other-than-human entities an imaginary subjective life and a distinctive narrative voice. Nonhuman narratives, which broadly refer to “the representation of [fictional] events with nonhuman entities” (B. Shang 59), have been considered an essential part of the so-called “nonhuman turn” in the social sciences of the twenty-first century (Colombino and Childs 355). Within such narratives, animate or inanimate nonhuman entities, which can be as varied as “an animal, a mythical entity, an inanimate object, a machine, a corpse, [or] a sperm” (Alber et al. 2), are not relegated as part of the setting but actively participate in the narrative, functioning either as characters or as the tellers of the story (B. Shang 63).

The phenomenon of nonhuman storytelling, from ancient Greek myths to contemporary science fiction texts, underscores the sustained interest of fiction writers in delving into perspectives that diverge from human cognitive and phenomenological experiences, which has prompted narratology studies to keep up with diverse conceptual frameworks to critically and productively read these texts beyond biased, cognitive anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. As Hayles points out, however, these narrations—since they emerge from humans’ conscious/unconscious states—do not reflect the actual cognitive life or the empirical reality of other nonhuman modes of awareness, but rather represent their “restaging within the theater of consciousness” (*Unthought* 211). Novels such as Matt Haig’s *The Humans*, narrated by a nonhuman being from an alien species sent to Earth, or Sue Burke’s *Semiosis*, partly recounted from the perspective of a nonhuman bamboo plant, move beyond the narrative confines of realism by imagining through a first-person perspective the cognitive experiences of nonhumans that, in one way or another, struggle to come to terms with the human-centred context that surrounds them.

Given that these fictional works offer a first-person account that breaks with the mimetic contract characteristic of realist fiction, the interpretive strategies demanded by them necessarily become more nuanced, summoning an experiential negotiation between readers and texts. In this context, Marco Caracciolo’s analytical framework developed in his *Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction* provides a rigorous lens through which to examine the narrative tension elicited by nonhuman first-person narrators. According to him, the complexity of some of these novels lies in the distinctive interpretive strategies they elicit. Autodiegetic

narrations, he writes, call for strategies that are “not different—at least not *completely* different—from those we use to make sense of real people’s life stories” (Caracciolo xiv). In engaging with these texts, readers are encouraged to “build a mental model of the narrator’s fictional, but still narratively woven, self” (xiv), a process that underpins what Caracciolo calls “character-centred illusion,” where readers experience the sensation of accessing a character’s inner mental life as if engaging with a conscious being, despite the character’s fictional status (37).

At times, and more acutely when the narrative is conveyed through a nonhuman voice, readers experience “feelings of strangeness” that, according to Caracciolo, compel a complex pattern of oscillation between a perception of familiar continuity, as the narrator “speaks in a human voice [evoking] images of everyday interaction, conversation, even intimacy,” and a marked sense of deviation, which occurs when “what readers hear from the character is at odds—sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically—with what they would wish or expect to hear” (Caracciolo xv).⁵ This narrative tension, or “world disruption” (Herman, *Basic Elements* 133), emerges when readers are given access to the mental life of a first-person narrator whose cognitive framework differs in some aspect(s) from their own folk-psychological assumptions—the interpretive framework through which individuals make sense of other’s minds and behaviours—creating a sense of “dissonance” that calls for two conflicting reception strategies (Caracciolo 35). On the one hand, readers are invited to “try on” the narrator’s perspective “through narrative empathy,” while, on the other hand, they resist that perspective because of the cognitive strangeness it elicits (Caracciolo 35). In such narrative circumstances, Caracciolo adapts Viktor Shklovsky’s well-known term of

⁵ Unlike many narratological approaches that locate the source of interpretive challenge primarily in textual features, Marco Caracciolo situates “feelings of strangeness” at the centre of his framework, explicitly treating them as reader-centred phenomena. These feelings, he argues, arise when readers encounter psychologically challenging first-person narrators and attempt to reconstruct their “deviant webs of selfhood” (Caracciolo xv). Rather than defining these feelings through specific shared traits, Caracciolo identifies an underlying *psychological structure* that is simultaneously situational, phenomenological, and cognitive. It is situational in that it emerges from readers’ encounters that resemble everyday intersubjectivity, yet deviate from it in significant ways; phenomenological because it generates a lived tension between the reader’s own self and the self-attributed to the narrator; and cognitive because it entails a “paradoxical interplay of empathetic closeness to the narrator and distanced incomprehension, or rejection, of his or her attitudes” (Caracciolo xvi).

“defamiliarization,” reconfiguring it as an experiential and reader-centred effect that emerges from this psychological and experiential dynamic. In this reformulation, defamiliarization generates a “gray area” where readers vacillate between resisting the narrator’s worldview, through a strategy Tamar Szabo Gendler calls “imaginative resistance” (55), and tentatively adopting it in acts of “empathetic perspective taking” (Caracciolo 48–49). Ultimately, and more broadly, this defamiliarization so characteristic of nonhuman first-person narratives is inscribed in a dialectical tension between the maintenance of the character-centred illusion and the recognition of the character’s or narrator’s strangeness (Caracciolo 49). As such, literary figurations of nonhuman cognition function not just as explorations of alternative, nonhuman lifeworlds, but also as critical renderings that highlight the “the overlap, and sometimes the clash” between those imaginary worlds and human experiences (Caracciolo 141).

2. ASSEMBLING A TECHNICAL SELF IN *KLARA AND THE SUN*

Transcending the mimetic presuppositions of realist narratives and embracing the negotiation between human readers and the nonhuman experientiality conveyed in the narrative text (Herman and Vervaet 112), *Klara and the Sun* is Ishiguro’s literary experiment of a story engendered by algorithmic code and electronic data rather than by human phenomenology. Considering this idea, in what follows, I propose an examination of Ishiguro’s novel as a text that, through the speculative representation of a first-person technical cognition, exploits the tension between imaginative resistance and empathetic perspective taking: first, readers are simultaneously invited to access Klara’s robotic mind and her algorithmic way of experiencing the world while they confront the cognitive strangeness embedded in her programming. Klara’s nonhuman perspective guides the reader’s attention towards the artifice of her subjective self, exposing a fictional technical awareness that diverges from the human anthropocentric tendency—signalled by Hayles (*Unthought* 43)—to organise cognitive experience around a reified sense of self prone to “imperialistic” inclinations. Second, the human-machine relationship between Klara and Josie, which I will approach here as an example of a cognitive assemblage, illustrates the evolutionary processes through which nonhuman cognition and human experientiality enter into a relation of mutual dependence. This relationship simultaneously exposes both to forms of reciprocal vulnerability: humans, increasingly dependent on

technological systems, are compelled to relinquish certain aspects of control, while AI technologies such as Klara, far from assuming that control, remain contingent upon human acceptance and are susceptible to obsolescence or rejection.

2.1 An Artificial Friend with a Nonhuman Self

The opening section of *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro) is the first and most straightforward indicator that readers will be bound by partial views, as Klara herself begins her narration stationed at the remote corner of a store. With limited access to both the sun's pattern as source of energy and the chance to be chosen by a lifted⁶ child to become their companion, Klara, as well as her fellow Artificial Friends (AFs), long for the moment of being displayed at the shop window. However, Klara's interest in being moved is mainly motivated by her inherent desire to be able to "see more of the outside—and to see it in all its detail" (Ishiguro 9). After a few pages, readers learn that Klara's fictional *umwelt*—the unique perceptual way in which she experiences the world—is mostly determined by her advanced machine vision and her "extraordinary observational ability" (Ishiguro 51). As a robot designed to take care and give company to human children, Klara's observations are mainly intended for the gathering and parsing of visual information, which is, more particularly, targeted towards the recognition of human facial and bodily emotional states. Notably, Ishiguro includes as part of Klara's nonhuman storytelling the manner in which her constant decoding of visual input takes place as a result of her design following a computational model of the mind. In this sense, the whole description of the mechanics of computational image-processing are included in her self-narration. This formal technique frames Klara's cognitive processes as "non-standard" when measured against anthropocentric expectations of consciousness and conventional literary

⁶ Kazuo Ishiguro uses the term "lifted" to describe the genetic enhancement procedure that some children in the novel undergo to increase their cognitive abilities and improve their future educational and social prospects. The procedure itself is never explicitly detailed, leaving readers uncertain about its precise nature. What is clear, however, is that it enhances certain human cognitive capacities and has had a profound impact on society—for example, children no longer attend traditional schools but are instead educated at home. At the same time, the "lifting" process is depicted as controversial and risky, as it can result in serious health complications or even death.

depictions of interiority, contributing in this way to the construction of cognitive difference.

Klara becomes then a “narrator-presenter” (Hallet 150), demonstrating a metacognitive awareness of the perceptual mechanisms underpinning her computational visual processing—an awareness that contrasts with the general human unawareness of the cognitive operations underlying their own image processing. The explicit incorporation of how these visual elements are perceived contribute to create a “multimodal mindstyle” (Ghosal 40) that governs the representation of Klara’s cognitive strangeness. To transpose her deciphering and cataloguing of the visual stimuli, Ishiguro has devised a simple yet potent defamiliarizing narrative technique. When Klara encounters a complex visual scene, her vision adapts to a rudimentary breaking down of the image components, transforming her visual perceptions into boxes that give her cues about physical dimensions, facial expressions, and gestural hints. Compelled to renounce the accustomed three-dimensional way of confronting these situations, readers unequivocally become aware of the strangeness in Klara’s perspective and are directed to abandon “automatized heuristics . . . to find new pathways for thinking and perceiving” the fragmented visual description (Caracciolo 48–49). A prime example of this defamiliarizing effect is seen at the beginning of the novel:

But my attention was drawn to the three center boxes, at that moment containing aspects of Manager in the act of turning towards us. In one box she was visible only from her waist to the upper part of her neck, while the box immediately beside it was almost entirely taken up by her eyes. The eye closest to us was much larger than the other, but both were filled with kindness and sadness. And yet a third box showed a part of her jaw and most of her mouth, and I detected there anger and frustration. Then she had turned fully and was coming towards us, and the store became once more a single picture. (Ishiguro 31)

Klara’s fractal-geometrical optics readjusts the boundaries of conventional realism producing what Caracciolo terms “cognitive dissonance” (35). In this case, dissonance is summoned because Klara’s visual description calls for two “dissonant” reception strategies: readers, on the one hand, experience cognitive strangeness and consequently resist Klara’s perspective because of the “failure of their folk-psychological capacities”—that is, their difficulty in making sense of her visual experiences through

their usual interpretive tools that correspond to human patterns (Caracciolo 35); on the other hand, readers are invited to temporarily experience Klara's perspective through narrative empathy, as she recounts a scene recognisable within human experiential domains. In this oscillation, which is what Caracciolo calls "defamiliarization," readers enter a "gray area" where they experience a "challenge of their established (and in this sense 'automatic') response patterns" (48).

This narrative strategy is significant for both content and form. First, by granting a detailed description of how machine vision synthesises data, readers are compelled to distance themselves from their humanist comfort zone (Bernaerts et al. 69) and required to lean on the fact that Klara's visual engagement with the world diverges from humans' sensorial experiences. Her perceptual apparatus is designed for the targeted parsing and gathering of specific cues, particularly patterns in human emotional expression, tasks that human vision is certainly capable of performing, yet is neither evolutionarily specialised nor consciously attuned in the same deliberate way. In this respect, Ishiguro imagines a nonhuman subjective phenomenology that differs from humans' everyday embodied experiences with visual input. Second, readers are prone to believe that Klara's efforts to blend and assemble the contents from the different boxes showcases how she is not only cataloguing information but also trying to grant some interpretive meaning, which suggests a sort of "contemplative mind at work" (Sumner 8). One could even consider Klara's machine vision narration as more than a stylistic choice; it can also be interpreted as acting metaphorically, as this fragmented perceptual mode, while limited, ultimately emulates the inherently multifaceted nature of emotional interiority, both in humans and, as the novel suggests, in nonhuman entities.

Even if Klara's visual processing might signal towards an advanced cognition where computational interpretation records reality "as it is," her capacity to identify and interpret human emotional displays proves to be as subjective, and at times even more distorted than that of a human observer. As Hayles points out, current cognitive technologies similar to the fictional Klara "interpret ambiguous or conflicting information to arrive at conclusions that rarely if ever are completely certain" (*Unthought* 24). These automated technical devices are embedded in recursive loops that connect a variety of sensors with lower and higher-level interpretive systems, which then synthesise complex information to draw inferences or to perform actions in the world (Sarker 2). In this sense, Klara's synthetic

interpretation of human emotions differs fundamentally from humans', as it is dependent on coded parameters, or labelled datasets, that are reinforced through sensory observation, generalised in patterns, and used to make predictions (Sarker 1).

In the case of the "emotional-machine" Klara embodies (Chen and Liang 189), once these emotional correlative datasets have been defined, such as "when a person cries, that person is sad," the Artificial Friend has major difficulties interpreting more nuanced expressions of human emotional reactions. A particularly representative moment takes place when, still at the store, Klara struggles to comprehend why some passersby, which she classifies in a sort of categorical abstraction as "Coffee Cup Lady and Raincoat Man" (Ishiguro 26), display signs of happiness while they also seem upset. Only through the Manager's guidance can she understand that "[s]ometimes . . . people feel a pain alongside their happiness" (Ishiguro 25), something that brings awareness towards the utter complexity of the task of emotional data processing and cataloguing she has been assigned with. However, this challenge only awakens more curiosity in the Artificial Friend, who then tries to imagine and recreate how these conflicting emotional responses would feel, demonstrating not only her profound interest in understanding the complexity of human affect, but also her technical desire to amplify her own emotional repertoire. Klara's observational capacities are then not just her primary, and fundamental access to the world, but they also allow her to create her own "emotional interiority," which predictably creates a dynamic of "visual-thinking" (Shaw) in which her visual interpretations of her surroundings transform into a growing awareness of her own subjectivity. As she is purchased and taken to live with fourteen-year-old Josie Arthur, her mother Chrissie Arthur, and Melania Housekeeper, Klara's cognitive complexity deepens, but still, she sees her own robotic capacity for experiencing complex emotions as a skill learnt through observation—knowledge that "become[s] available" to her (Ishiguro 98)—rather than something more intimately and less self-consciously experienced.

Klara's struggle to identify the level of intricacy of her own emotional awareness becomes apparent in the section containing the trip to Morgan's Falls. During this trip, where Chrissie and Klara embark without Josie, Ishiguro subtly opens up another layer of Klara's fictional cognitive life: her own kind of technical unconsciousness. This effect is achieved through a heightened deployment of cognitive strangeness, where Ishiguro

deliberately reorients the reader's attention from the character-centred illusion back to the computational nature underlying Klara's fictional subjective experience. Her initially strange, machinic perspective becomes gradually more accessible over the course of the novel, presenting empathetic perspective taking as a nuanced phenomenon susceptible to gradations—which Jens Eder conceptualises through the metaphor of “being close to characters” (68). This progression relies mostly on readers' imaginative simulation of the emotional dimension of Klara's perspective, positioning her as an affective, emotional narrator. As a result, readers engage in a process of empathetic “identification” with her narrative voice (Gaut), which alleviates some of the initial cognitive tensions underlying their imaginative resistance provoked by early defamiliarizing sections, such as the depiction of Klara's box-like visual mechanics.⁷

Through this empathetic perspective taking, readers lean towards a character-centred illusion whereby continuous exposure to Klara's distinct naïve vocabulary, her child-like syntax, and the unconventional explanations of her inner mechanics renders her narrative perspective less “strange,” allowing these features so characteristic of her narration to be understood as markers of Klara's fictional cognitive interiority. In this process, readers are—using Caracciolo's words—“seduced by [Klara's] ways of thinking” (45–46), responding positively to what social psychologists call “mere exposure effect” (Caracciolo 46) or the “familiarity principle” (Zajonc). Nevertheless, the text appears to deliberately disrupt this comfort by strategically reintroducing cognitive strangeness through the deployment of symbolic imagery—most notably through the figures of the bull and the sheep—which transitions the reader towards a deeper exploration of Klara's nonhuman “psyche.” Ishiguro's symbolic insertion invites a renewed interpretive distance both from the narrative itself and from the character-centred illusion constructed through

⁷ Building on Berys Gaut's account of “identification” with characters, Caracciolo further elaborates five distinct aspects of another person's (or character's) perspective that readers may imaginatively simulate: (1) somatic, involving bodily awareness and movement; (2) perceptual, relating to sensory experiences; (3) emotional, encompassing feelings akin to those of the character; (4) epistemic, concerning beliefs and knowledge about the world; and (5) axiological, involving the character's motivations and values. This framework highlights that empathy in narrative engagement extends from relatively basic somatic and emotional responses to more complex cognitive processes that presuppose familiarity with language, concepts, and cultural contexts (Caracciolo 39–40).

Klara's perspective. This narrative technique underscores, through a cyclically increasing and decreasing of readers' distance from the narrator, that although Klara's accounts are anthropomorphic, she remains fundamentally different from conventional human cognitive models.

Literary experimentation with Klara's nonhuman unconscious unfolds upon their arrival at Morgan's Falls, where the imagery of the bull first appears. Seen through Klara's eyes, this animal evokes an uncanny sensation:

I'd never before seen anything that gave, all at once, so many signals of anger and the wish to destroy. Its face, its horns, its cold eyes watching me all brought fear into my mind, but I felt something more, something stranger and deeper. At that moment it felt to me some great error had been made that the creature should be allowed to stand in the Sun's pattern at all, that this bull belonged somewhere deep in the ground far within the mud and darkness, and its presence on the grass could only have awful consequences. (Ishiguro 113)

The presence of the bull, on the surface signalling Klara's fear and astonishment, suggests, however, a deeper, more figurative significance that extends beyond the literal content of her narration. Functioning as a formal device, the bull momentarily interrupts the character-centred illusion of unmediated access to Klara's inner world. The sudden introduction of this symbolic imagery compels a pause, a moment of strangeness where readers recognise that Klara is not merely reporting an encounter but perceiving and experiencing it in a way that diverges from readers' habitual expectations of cognitive and emotional engagement with reality. It is at this juncture that the text foregrounds its own artifice, reminding us that Klara's perspective is not transparently available, but an "illusion" mediated through textual fabrication. Precisely at this point, cognitive estrangement is reintroduced: readers must take interpretive distance, acknowledging the fictionality of Klara's "mind" in order to apprehend the symbolic resonance of the bull. This dynamic aligns with Caracciolo's theorisation of how identification with "strange" narrators is continually counterbalanced by imaginative resistance, producing a psychological dissonance that stimulates interpretation (224). In Ishiguro's novel, then, cognitive estrangement does not simply unsettle but productively defies readers' folk-psychological competencies (Caracciolo 56), guiding them to confront the partial limitations of Klara's

robotic perception while engaging with the figurative dimensions that exceed it.

Paradoxically, the interpretation of this symbolic insertion nevertheless depends on the mechanism of empathetic perspective taking. In order to ascribe meaning to the bull, readers must imaginatively inhabit Klara's position and speculate about what she, as an emotional robotic entity, might be feeling. In this way, the symbolic figure simultaneously fractures and sustains immersion, as it foregrounds the artifice of the narration while also soliciting affective identification. Ishiguro thereby stages an interpretive oscillation that impossibly blends "similarity and otherness" (Bernaerts et al. 72), in which readers must negotiate the tension between empathy and distance, illusion and awareness of fictionality, an oscillation that ultimately conditions the possibility of attributing meaning to Klara's perceptions. The "strangeness" of the bull's description prompts readers to see it as an unconscious response to Klara's first internal conflict, as she feels heavily divided between a newfound sensation of pleasure from being the sole focus of Chrissie's attention for the first time, and a simultaneous sense of guilt for having left Josie behind. This emotional struggle further intensifies when Chrissie tests Klara's capacity to impersonate Josie—an emotionally and ethically disorienting demand that destabilises the AF and that gives rise to divergent "stranger and deeper" feelings in her (Ishiguro 113).

Read in this light, the symbolic presence of the bull emerges as an externalised projection of Klara's repressed longing for love and belonging within the family, a desire incompatible with her primary function as an Artificial Friend and therefore displaced into what may be termed her "technical unconscious." Evocative of Carl Jung's psychoanalytic "shadow" (Perry and Tower 1), the bull represents precisely those impulses that Klara vaguely perceives yet cannot reconcile with the normative duties of her machinic "ego ideal," hence her assertion that "the bull belonged somewhere deep in the ground" (Ishiguro 113). This affective disruption, which is exuded through her distinctive cognitive-emotional architecture, demonstrates a machinic analogue to unconscious repression, where discomfort manifests precisely through symbolic perception. Readers are prone to believing that Klara's anxiety subsides once they leave Morgan's Falls, when the ominous image of the bull is replaced by the image of a group of sheep grazing. This visual scene "filled [Klara] with kindness—the exact opposite to the bull" (Ishiguro

121), a symbolic shift that indicates how, after her earning of a closer position to Chrissie, this emotional friction has been eased.

Klara's reliance on her particular visual-metaphoric engagement with reality is also determinant for her gradual transformation into a sort of "AI martyr" (Straus 187). Drawing on both her solar-powered design and her observation of the sun's apparent effect on a convalescent "Beggar Man and his dog" (Ishiguro 185), Klara develops a form of ordinary morality or faith (Straus 185), concluding that the sun's "special nourishment" (Ishiguro 3) holds healing powers that can be applied to humans.⁸ This reasoning prompts her to presume that Josie's health will be restored if she similarly receives this help. This straightforward formula is a reflection of her machinic capacity for problem-solving, which relies on her ability to draw causal inferences from data and extrapolate generalised solutions through these correlations. Damasio's research has precisely called attention to how systematic decision-making and efficient problem-solving are not only dependent on conscious cognition, but these capacities are heavily rooted in and shaped by other bodily-nonconscious cognitive processes tied to emotions—which in humans are strongly linked to somatic markers arising from physiological changes in the body (*The Feeling* 217). A key aspect of this fictional scenario lies in Klara's incapacity to engage in what Sampson calls "corporeal thinking" ("Nonconscious Affect" 298), which refers to the embodied and embedded mode of cognition that utterly defines human decision-making. This cognitive limitation leaves Klara "overly swayed by the promise of immediate reward or a simple solution to a complicated problem" (Denburg and Hedcock 79), which manifests more explicitly in her conviction that a human ailment such as the one that Josie experiences will disappear through exposure to the sun. Her commitment to this belief propels her into an act of quasi-religious devotion: determined to save

⁸Faith constitutes a crucial thematic thread in *Klara and the Sun*. For Klara, the sun assumes the status of a healing force, embodying a quasi-religious object of devotion. In contrast, human characters increasingly direct their faith towards technology: the creation of Artificial Friends cultivates the belief that these beings can access knowledge or capabilities beyond human understanding. Still, this idea comes to the fore more strongly through the character of the pseudoscientist Mr Capaldi, who functions as the principal advocate of faith in technology within the novel. He encourages Chrissie to maintain confidence in the potential of Artificial Friends, portraying them as more than mere replicas and suggesting that they can provide comfort and continuity in the event of Josie's death.

Josie, Klara decides to traverse an open field to make a direct plea to the sun on Josie's behalf.

Remarkably, Klara's reciprocal bargain with the sun, which reimagines the process of receiving solar energy through the principles of sacrifice and compromise, is made on the basis of her commitment to give something in return:

I know how much the Sun dislikes Pollution. How much it saddens and angers you. Well, I've seen and identified the machine that creates it. Supposing I were able somehow to find this machine and destroy it. To put an end to its Pollution. Would you then consider, in return, giving your special help to Josie? (Ishiguro 186)

Klara's nonhuman stance offers a crucial lens through which to understand her appeal to the sun. Unlike most human characters in the novel, whose "rational ego-consciousness" is the centre of gravity that structurally dominates external social, cultural, and economic systems (Raud 114), Klara engages with the world, and the sun, from a position that resists dominant Western logics. As such, Klara's plea to the sun emerges as something more than robotic problem-solving: it may be understood, on the one hand, as a form of religious offering or sacrifice, and as an act of devotion that frames her appeal as a ritualised or ceremonial gesture of recognition of the sun's powers; on the other, this position resonates with certain Indigenous philosophies that emphasise "relationality, reciprocal generosity and respectful care" (Bignall and Rigney 162). While the diversity of Indigenous traditions resist homogenisation, many share a commitment to "being-more-than-human" and to posthumanist forms of knowledge grounded in the "natural laws of interdependence" (Bignall and Rigney 162). More concretely, her sacrificial appeal recalls Robin W. Kimmerer's philosophy and practice based on "reciprocal, mutualistic relationships with the earth" (317), insofar as it exposes a sense of engagement that moves from exploitative models and utilitarian logics (Lochery 5) into forms of symbiotic co-participation. In this sense, Klara's robotic cognition not only defamiliarizes Western modes of knowing but actively reorients them, inviting readers to face an "expansion of the domain of subjectivity" (Herman, *Narratology* 43) and to glimpse alternative ways of "being" and relating. Her nonhuman narrative accounts, as well as her reciprocal relation to the sun, "destabilize anthropocentric ideologies" (Bernaerts et al. 74–75), and, as such, they

demonstrate that what initially appeared to be a partial limitation has revealed itself to be a unique lens through which to observe other truths that might elude dominant Western worldviews.

2.2 Transformative Companionship and Affective Interdependencies

Klara's relational mode of engagement with the world, marked by her attentiveness to care, is especially relevant if we consider not only her own cognitive nature but also how she forms relations with the humans around her, particularly Josie. *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro) intricately weaves the relationships between technical and human cognitions, to the point that they have come to deeply depend on one another, evolving together in the cognitive ecology of this future speculative setting. However, although humans may have created these technologically mediated social systems, they appear to have lost control of how they operate, mutate, and evolve, giving way to unintended forms of co-dependency that reach beyond humans' primary intentions, an outcome that Hayles identifies as particularly substantial in the context of technologically developed societies (*Unthought* 172). Even though Ishiguro does not offer a detailed background about the precise workings of this speculative social order, it transpires through the narrative that artificial intelligence and significant advances in biotechnology shape its structural underpinnings, influencing the conditions in which human-technical dependencies unfold.

This is particularly evident in the complex assemblage Klara and Josie create, which represents an imaginary futuristic pattern of human-machine interdependency that transcends mere functionality. Josie's genetic editing procedure—an allusion to CRISPR-Cas9 genome editing technology, which enables scientists' manipulation of DNA (Ishiguro and Knight)—functions as a symbol of humanity's technological advancement and transhumanist desire for superiority and control. Paradoxically, however, this intervention renders her, and by extension these generations of lifted children, more dependent on Klara's artificial companionship. The AFs robotic presence proves to extend beyond the fulfilment of a utilitarian impulse, and way beyond technological emancipation: they become essential agents embedded in the socio-affective fabric of this posthuman society. In this sense, Klara and Josie can be considered mirror images of technological breakthroughs. While one is an accomplishment of artificial intelligence, the other is a result of genetic modification. Still, both are

cognitively reliant on each other to fill in the consequential gaps that these biotechnological advancements have brought.

Their relationship, and the cognitive assemblage they constitute, illustrate the entangled existence of human and technological conditions, demonstrating how informational and affectual exchanges, open to the robotic nonhuman in this context, connect and mediate a sense of vulnerability and mutual care between Josie and Klara (Dodds 182). Such entanglements resonate with theoretical approaches to care that pay attention to the ethical significance of the nonhuman within webs of relationality. María Puig de la Bellacasa understands care as an “affective force” that is always happening in between (162), which she associates with “love, the recognition that something is important, as well as responsibility and somehow “concern” for another’s well-being” (Puig de la Bellacasa 162). Crucially, her conceptualisation frames care as an “a-subjective notion” that demands an ethical imagination capable of recognising “the many ways in which nonhuman agencies are taking care of many human and *nonhuman* needs” (Puig de la Bellacasa 161).

This perspective illuminates how Klara and Josie’s interactions establish a reciprocal and ethically charged form of care that transcends conventional human-technology conceptualisations. An indicative example of their relationship occurs when, despite enjoying a rare conversation with Chrissie, Josie interrupts the moment to prioritise Klara: “Mom, that’s just great. But do you mind if Klara and I go up to my room for a minute? Klara just loves to watch the sunset and if we don’t go now we’ll miss it” (Ishiguro 62). Josie’s gesture of concern for Klara’s visual pleasure is also mirrored at the end of the novel, when Klara has been retired to the Utility Room, before she is finally sent to the Yard, and cannot access the small window to look outside. Josie then creates a space for Klara to reach and enjoy the views, saying: “you should have told me before . . . I know how much you love looking out” (Ishiguro 326). These moments are indicative of how Josie and Klara’s relationship is not simply based on one-sided dependencies, or “only [on] a bilateral relation between user and companion” (Van Oost and Reed 16). They suggest what Ellen van Oost and Darren Reed have called “*distributed emotional agency*” (16), or interactions that transcend the conventional hierarchies separating human and nonhuman experiences, attesting how theirs is an emotional bond forged in mutual recognition and affective companionship (Innola 70).

The relationship between Klara and Josie, nevertheless, is not based on equal proportions of affective exchanges. In this assemblage, Klara's cognitive existence runs through intensive and pervasive interconnections with Josie, and in that sense, she seems to comply with Hayles's prediction that these technical systems, if ever conscious, would "see humans [as] part of *their* extended cognitive system" (*Unthought* 216). Klara's belief in their mutual dependency fuels her profound desire to become not just her owner's companion and friend, but also to assume the position of Josie's primary caregiver and to seek solutions to solve her health issues, even at the expense of her own technical and operational integrity.⁹ The affective attachment that Klara professes for Josie manifests as a literal sacrifice of a part of her own robotic body in order to destroy "the hideous Cootings Machine" (Ishiguro 32) and keep her promise to the sun.¹⁰ However, this act of sacrifice appears ineffective since Josie's condition deteriorates, which prompts Klara to confront the limitations of her initial assumptions about reciprocity and the nature of her exchanges with the sun.

Klara comes to realise that something beyond a purely transactional exchange is required, and she conjectures that only something as potent as the genuine love that Josie and Rick—her "unlifted" best friend and apparently prospective boyfriend—have shared since childhood would appeal to the sun's compassion. This second plea for Josie is made upon the premise of this more profound emotional bond, rather than on benefiting or material exchanges, a plea that even calls out an effort for favouritism:

⁹ Klara's role as primary carer resonates with other robot-as-carer narratives, such as Andromeda Romano-Lax's *Plum Rains*, Carole Stivers's *The Mother Code*, or Jake Schreier's film *Robot & Frank*, which explore affective bonds between humans and artificial agents. However, Klara's attachment to Josie is distinguished by its culmination in a literal sacrifice of a part of her robotic body, a gesture that extends beyond symbolic or functional care.

¹⁰ The "Cootings Machine" is the term Klara uses to describe a construction vehicle she observes during roadworks. The machine emits large clouds of smoke that obscure the sun's rays, leading Klara to perceive it as a threat to the sun's power. The name "Cootings" is visible on the machine's side, prompting Klara to adopt it as its identifier. In her quest to fulfil her promise to the sun and aid Josie, Klara believes that destroying the Cootings Machine will restore the sun's favour. However, when she discovers another, larger machine replacing it, this not only renders her effort futile but also illustrates the limits of her comprehension of the world and the complexity of cause-and-effect relationships in her environment.

I know favoritism isn't desirable. But if the Sun is making exceptions, surely the most deserving are young people who will love one another all their lives. Perhaps the Sun may ask, "How can we be sure? What can children know about genuine love?" But I've been observing them carefully, and I'm certain it's true. They grew up together, and they've each become a part of the other. Rick told me this himself only today. I know I failed in the city, but please show your kindness once more and give your special help to Josie. (Ishiguro 305)

The passage brings out how Klara's cognitive and emotional maturity culminates in the recognition that the unique love shared between Josie and Rick—an emotional connection she is able to interpret and treasure—is sufficiently potent to motivate the sun to intervene on Josie's behalf. Yet, this second appeal also demonstrates that Klara's understanding of love does not remain limited to her observations of human relationships from the outside. She herself becomes deeply embedded in this affective domain through her acts of care for Josie, revealing her own capacity to engage with the "affective energy of love" (Toye 94). This suggests that, even if her responses are partially guided by her programming as a robotic companion, Klara's practices of care situate her within wider affectively charged assemblages, where both human and nonhuman generate and maintain complex "webs of relationality" (Puig de la Bellacasa 166). In this view, *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro) offers an expanded conception of love and affective engagement, one that operates across entities as a relational force that manifests in multiple and often contradictory forms, where care, whether human or nonhuman, emerges as one of its most enduring expressions.¹¹

¹¹ Affection, love, and care in *Klara and the Sun* manifest in ways that are often contradictory, exposing its ambivalent and multi-layered nature. For instance, Rick's profound attachment to Josie is complicated by jealousy and possessiveness: although he appears deeply committed to her, he also desires to preserve her unchanged and insists that she conform to their shared plan. A similar tension characterises the maternal devotion of Josie's mother, Chrissie, whose attachment is especially ambivalent: her love motivates Josie's genetic lifting but is also entangled with a desire to secure her daughter's social advantage, despite the procedure's life-threatening risks. This stands in sharp contrast to Rick's mother, Helen, who rejects the lifting procedure out of concern for her son's well-being, even at the cost of his diminished social prospects. Even Klara embodies this paradoxical dynamic, as her devotion to Josie is shadowed by an

The generous, open, and benevolent form of affect that Klara manifests for Josie, which ultimately culminates in her readiness for self-sacrifice, starkly contrasts with the complicated and contrived attachments observed among the human characters, especially between Josie and her mother, Chrissie. Their daunting relationship, laden with friction and unspoken dissidences, is marked by other types of affective intensities, ones that translate as nervous control and selfish overprotection. Chrissie's affection for Josie, for example, is permeated by a desire to place her in a socially accepted and prestigious situation, which is what motivates her resolution to have Josie undergo the genetic editing procedure referred to as "lifting," despite the risk of the side effect of terminal illness or death, and, more importantly, despite the traumatic loss of her older daughter, Sal, to the same biotechnological process. Furthermore, the combination of the selfish fear of solitude and the desperation to avoid the sense of grief she experienced before instigates Josie's mother to devise her daughter's substitution plan, which involves Klara's inhabiting of Josie's replica. Following the assumption that Klara does not possess a genuine sense of self, and that Josie's individuality is in fact something that can be reduced to a set of data points that can be decoded and reproduced, both human and nonhuman are conceived as entities "subject to entirely transactional controls," transforming into something interchangeable and reified within the system of value of the techno-capitalism in the novel (Straus 200).

This narrative of one-for-one substitution, which assumes that one "thinking mind can replace and substitute another" (Holmes 136), contrasts sharply with Klara's unique symbiotic and collaborative approach that draws instead on a "collective thinking through the nature of sacrifice" (Holmes 136). Sustaining the complicated tension between control and vulnerability, the novel is framed in the crossroads between these two competing visions of human-technical relations: one governed by principles of vulnerability and affective reciprocity, and the other governed by the illusion of computational cognitive replication. The tension is particularly palpable in Chrissie's complete dependency on technology, not only to ensure Josie's wellbeing and survival but also to prolong her own feigned fantasy of happiness, which indicates how agency and power relations, in this technologically mediated social context, are shifting their configurations. As such, human autonomy has become

underlying yearning to assume a daughter-like role in the Arthurs family, revealing an intermingling of care and self-oriented longing.

increasingly entangled, and contingent upon, nonhuman systems of technical support. In mirroring the current, highly technological societal structures of the Global North, the speculative America devised by Ishiguro reflects what Hayles observes in *Unthought*: that the notion of “control”—as a synonym for power here—has slipped from individual human hands to become something diffused across different, both technical and human, cognitions in broader distributed systems (117).

In this context, Josie’s substitution plan—unveiled midway through the novel—functions as a central organising device. It testifies to the latent ethical tensions between the susceptibility of the human fantasy of unmitigated control through technology and the material reality of a world in which human-technological interdependencies have fragmented and diffused control across both human and nonhuman cognitive actors. In Ishiguro’s speculative scenario, where human characters such as Chrissie are heavily dependent on technological systems—as exemplified when she “asks” Klara to “be” her daughter—the text foregrounds a reflection about the multifaceted tensions embedded in cognitive assemblages. Examples such as this one underscore the non-neutrality of these configurations, which, far from being exclusively functional, are inherently political enmeshments structured around questions of power, agential capacities, and ontological recognition (Hayles, *Unthought* 178). Yet, Klara resists the ideology of substitution by prioritising Josie’s life over her own desire for familial belonging (Holmes 143), which establishes the conditions for a relational ethics that refuses the “me versus you” rationale (Gergen xiv).¹² Though she is offered the possibility of becoming Josie, which would grant her love and recognition, Klara avoids this path, undertaking a second plea to the sun on her friend’s behalf. In doing so, Klara enacts a subjectivity predicated on being and thinking *with* others rather than

¹² Kenneth J. Gergen’s relational philosophy, as formulated in *Relational Being*, offers a conceptual framework that extends beyond the simple “me versus you” dichotomy. For Gergen, the self is not a pre-existing, autonomous entity but is constituted through ongoing relationships; ethical responsibility emerges from the interconnectedness of selves rather than from isolated individual decisions. This perspective is analytically productive for understanding Klara’s approach to substitution: by prioritising Josie’s life over her own desire for familial belonging, Klara enacts a form of relational being in which ethical obligations are inseparable from the networks of care and mutual constitution in which she participates. Gergen’s philosophy provides a lens to interpret her actions as more than moral choices; they can be read as expressions of an intersubjective ethical orientation.

assuming the logic of thinking *for* others, affirming the distinction between human and Artificial Friend while sustaining a relational ethic grounded in care and responsibility.

Ethical and affective concerns in *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro) coalesce to connect individual human-technical assemblages with the “ecosocial matrix” (Protevi 50) of the novel’s broader landscape. This creates a sense of connection in which assemblages are not restricted to humans and computational media’s one-to-one interactions, but they also expand into the inclusion of multilayered and infrastructural technological mediation (Hayles and Sampson 75). Described subtly, attentive readers can discern narrative connections between what happens in the domestic setting of Josie’s home and the socio-political dynamics of the novel. The theme of substitution can be recognised as the guiding thread of both the personal and the socio-economic realities of characters, bringing out more evidently how “[t]he global, the national and the local are all effects of more or less dense connections” (Müller 35). This suggests that phenomena at any level—economic, social, or political—emerge from overlapping and interdependent interactions across multiple scales, so that local or domestic events impact and are influenced by national policies, which in turn shape and are transformed by global dynamics. A product of these thick interconnections is reflected through the situation of Mr Arthur, Josie’s father, an engineer who has been “substituted” in his job at a clean energy plant by what we assume to be an AI (Ishiguro 112). As the novel progresses, it is finally disclosed how his was not an isolated case but rather a fact that many professionals who had previously earned good salaries “solving difficult technical problems have now been replaced by algorithmic systems” that carry out their tasks more efficiently (Hayles, “Subversion” 269).

The reality of the substitutions and the emergence of technical cognitions that have rendered humans “obsolete” have also given way to the creation of a new social order, one where some of these substituted individuals have been “pushed” to reframe their lives in ways that allow them to continue their previous social prestige. This is the case of Mr Arthur, who now lives in an enclosed community of “all white people and all from the ranks of the former professional elites . . . [who] came the same road as [he] did” (Ishiguro 257–58). The pending vulnerability and fear of losing the uniformity and uncontested nature of their previous privilege have also led them to “arm [themselves] quite extensively against other types,” which Ishiguro affirms is turning towards “the fascistic side”

(275). This technological apartheid has resulted in the reinforcement and sharpening of systemic inequalities, guiding the social and political landscape of the novel towards polarity and precarity, rather than the opposite as many transhumanist thinkers optimistically promise. Instead of forging connection, cognitive technologies as well as biotechnological genetic developments have intensified divisions, reshaping affective and ethical relationships from the micro to the macro levels of society. The speculative world created by Ishiguro can thus be read as a call to action on the part of readers. Representing an extended form of our current “techno-capitalism” (Sampson, “Affect” 2), the novel encourages us to adopt more inclusive and considerate perspectives where both humans and nonhuman cognitive and affective experiences—as well as the assemblages they constitute—are recognised and, most importantly, taken seriously.

CONCLUSION

The critical analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* has substantiated the multiple possibilities of rethinking the idea of cognition beyond the physical boundaries of the human brain. The novel, challenging the humanist endeavour to place human subjectivity at the centre, productively imagines the “leaps triggered by the extension of consciousness and agency” into the fictional humanoid Klara (Colombino and Childs 360). This research has mainly focused on two central narrative aspects that relocate cognition within a broader, more encompassing landscape. First, it has observed how Klara’s autodiegetic accounts work as a persuasive experiment that destabilises human-centred cognitive ideologies. Achieving a cyclical oscillation between empathetic perspective taking and cognitive dissonance, Klara, considered here an example of a narrator that elicits “feelings of strangeness” (Caracciolo xv) through her partial, machinic perspective, compels readers to abandon their customary point of view and usual cognitive engagement with reality to develop instead a sense of empathy and cognitive estrangement attuned to her artificial nonhuman reality. In this view, the novel opens the door to the recognition of both continuity and differentiation, as suggested by narratologists Bernaerts et al. (74–75), between human and nonhuman cognitive forms of thought and experience.

Further, the novel offers a speculative exploration of agency, care, and control as processes diffused and distributed among different cognisers,

both human and nonhuman. *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro) depicts human-machine interactions based on informational and affectual exchanges across different types of cognitive entities. On a micro level, affective forces like love or care circulate between Josie and Klara, each influencing the other in deep and intimate ways. Yet, beneath this linkage, there are darker undertones that also connect their bond to the substitutive, perfectionist, and competitive impulse that, at a socio-political dimension, shapes the novel's speculative world order. As the frictions and interpenetrations of human and technology intensify in the novel, control and agency become increasingly distributed across cognitive assemblages, highlighting how human-machine interactions, at every level, carry ethical implications that demand careful attention. The text speculatively suggests that such assemblages supersede the capacity of individual human control, while they concurrently interconnect human and nonhuman entities in a shared sense of vulnerability and cognitive co-participation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is part of the project I+D+i PID2022-137881NB-I00 Re-Orienting Assemblage Theory in Anglophone Literature and Culture (RELY), funded by MICIU/ AEI and by ERDF/EU. The Author is grateful for the support of the Spanish Ministry of Universities with a predoctoral FPU contract attached to the mentioned research project FPU21/00224.

REFERENCES

Alber, Jan, et al. *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*. Ohio State UP, 2013.

Aru, Jaan, et al. "The Feasibility of Artificial Consciousness through the Lens of Neuroscience." *Trends in Neurosciences*, vol. 46, no. 12, 2023, pp. 1008–17, doi: 10.1016/j.tins.2023.09.009.

Bernaerts, Lars, et al. "The Storied Lives of Nonhuman Narrators." *Narrative*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2014, pp. 68–93, doi: 10.1353/nar.2014.0002.

Bignall, Simone and Daryle Rigney. "Indigeneity, Posthumanism and Nomad Thought: Transforming Colonial Ecologies." *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze*, edited by Rosi

Braidotti and Simone Bignall, Rowman and Littlefield International, 2019, pp. 159–83.

Birch, Jonathan, et al. “Dimensions of Animal Consciousness.” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 24, no. 10, 2020, pp. 789–801, doi:10.1016/j.tics.2020.07.007.

Burke, Sue. *Semiosis*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2018.

Butlin, Patrick, et al. “Consciousness in Artificial Intelligence: Insights from the Science of Consciousness.” *arXiv*, version 3, 2023, arXiv:2308.08708v3 [cs.AI], doi:10.48550/arXiv.2308.08708.

“Cognition.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cognition/.

“Cognition.” *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*, www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/cognition/.

Caracciolo, Marco. *Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction: Explorations in Readers’ Engagement with Characters*. Nebraska UP, 2016, doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1gr7dkd.

Carney, James. “Thinking *Avant la Lettre*: A Review of 4E Cognition.” *Evolutions: Studies in Imaginative Culture*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2020, pp. 1–15, doi: 10.26613/esic/4.1.172.

Chalmers, David J. “Could a Large Language Model Be Conscious?” *arXiv*, version 3, 4 Mar. 2023, arXiv:2303.07103v3 [cs.AI], doi:10.48550/arXiv.2303.07103.

Chella, Antonio. “Artificial Consciousness: The Missing Ingredient for Ethical AI?” *Frontiers in Robotics and AI*, vol. 10, 2023, article 1270460, pp. 1–5. doi:10.3389/frobt.2023.1270460.

Chen, Jinming, and Xiaohui Liang. “AI as Other: Reconfiguring Human in *Machines Like Me* and *Klara and the Sun*.” *IRA-International Journal of Education & Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2024, pp. 178–95, doi: 10.21013/jems.v20.n3.p2.

Colombino, Laura, and Peter Childs. "Narrating the (Non)Human: Ecologies, Consciousness and Myth." *Textual Practice*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2022, pp. 355–64, doi: 10.1080/0950236X.2022.2030097.

Damasio, Antonio. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. Mariner Books, 2000.

Damasio, Antonio. *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*. Vintage Books, 2012.

Dehaene, Stanislas. *Consciousness and the Brain: Deciphering How the Brain Codes Our Thoughts*. Penguin, 2014.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, 1980. Minnesota UP, 1987.

Denburg, Natalie L., and William M. Hock. "Age-Associated Executive Dysfunction, the Prefrontal Cortex, and Complex Decision Making." *Aging and Decision Making: Empirical and Applied Perspectives*, edited by Thomas M. Hess et al., Elsevier Academic Press, 2015, pp. 79–101, doi:10.1016/B978-0-12-417148-0.00005-4.

Dodds, Susan. "Dependence, Care, and Vulnerability." *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Catriona Mackenzie et al., Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 181–203, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199316649.003.0008.

Eagleman, David. *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain*. Random House, 2012.

Eder, Jens. "Ways of Being Close to Characters." *Film Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2006, pp. 68–80, doi: 10.7227/FS.8.8.

Fodor, Jerry A., and Zenon W. Pylyshyn. "Connectionism and Cognitive Architecture: A Critical Analysis." *Cognition*, vol. 28, no. 1–2, 1988, pp. 3–71, doi: 10.1016/0010-0277(88)90031-5.

Gaut, Berys. "Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film." *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, edited by Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, Johns Hopkins UP, 1999, pp. 200–16.

Gendler, Tamar Szabo. "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance." *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 97, no. 2, 2000, pp. 55–81, doi: 10.2307/2678446.

Gergen, Kenneth J. *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*. Oxford UP, 2011, doi: 10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199846269.001.0001.

Ghosal, Torsa. *Out of Mind: Mode, Mediation, and Cognition in Twenty-First-Century Narrative*. Ohio State UP, 2021.

Grusin, Richard. *Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Haig, Matt. *The Humans*. Simon & Schuster, 2013.

Hallet, Wolfgang. "The Multimodal Novel: The Integration of Modes and Media in Novelistic Narration." *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research*, edited by Sandra Heinen and Roy Sommer, De Gruyter, 2009, pp. 129–53, doi: 10.1515/9783110222432.129.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*. Chicago UP, 2017.

Hayles, N. "Subversion of the Human Aura: A Crisis in Representation." *American Literature*, vol. 95, no. 2, 2023, pp. 255–79, doi: 10.1215/00029831-10575063.

Hayles, N. Katherine. and Tony D. Sampson. "Unthought Meets the Assemblage Brain." *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2018, pp. 60–84, doi:10.22387/CAP2018.14.

Herman, David. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, doi: 10.1002/9781444305920.

Herman, David. *Narratology Beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life*. Oxford UP, 2018, doi: 10.1093/oso/9780190850401.001.0001.

Herman, Luc, and Bart Vervaeck. "Narrative Interest as Cultural Negotiation." *Narrative*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2009, pp. 111–29, www.jstor.org/stable/30219293/.

Holmes, Chris. *Kazuo Ishiguro Against World Literature*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2024.

Hutchins, Edwin. *Cognition in the Wild*. MIT Press, 1996.

Innola, Tuuli. "Refraining Co-Becomings: The Affective Pulse of Companionships." *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2024, pp. 70–85. doi:10.1080/08038740.2024.2367750.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Buried Giant*. Faber & Faber, 2015.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Klara and the Sun*. Faber & Faber, 2021.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. Faber & Faber, 2005.

Ishiguro, Kazuo and Will Knight. "Klara and the Sun Imagines a Social Schism Driven by AI: The Nobel Prize Winning Novelist Kazuo Ishiguro Talks to WIRED about AI, CRISPR, and His Hopes for Humanity." *WIRED*, 2021, www.wired.com/story/kazuo-ishiguro-interview/.

James, William. *The Meaning of Truth*. 1909. Prometheus Books, 1997.

Kimmerer, Robin W. "Searching for Synergy: Integrating Traditional and Scientific Ecological Knowledge in Environmental Science Education." *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, vol. 2, 2012, pp. 317–23, doi:10.1007/s13412-012-0091-y.

Kouider, Sid, and Stanislas Dehaene. "Levels of Processing during Nonconscious Perception: A Critical Review of Visual Masking."

Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences, vol. 362, 2007, pp. 857–75.

Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

Lewicki, Paweł, et al. “Nonconscious Acquisition of Information.” *American Psychologist*, vol. 47, no. 6, 1992, pp. 796–801, doi: 10.1037/0003-066x.47.6.796.

Lochery, Emma. “Situating Extraction in Capitalism: Blueprints, Frontier Projects, and Life-Making.” *The Extractive Industries and Society*, vol. 11, 2022, pp. 1–10, doi:10.1016/j.exis.2022.101137.

Lyon, Pamela. “Of What Is ‘Minimal Cognition’ the Half-Baked Version?” *Adaptive Behavior*, vol. 28, no. 6, 2019, pp. 407–24, doi:10.1177/1059712319871360.

McLaughlin, Robert L. “Post-Postmodernism.” *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, edited by Joe Bray et al., Routledge, 2012, pp. 212–23.

Müller, Martin. “Assemblages and Actor-Networks: Rethinking Socio-Material Power, Politics, and Space.” *Geography Compass*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2015, pp. 27–41, doi: 10.1111/gec3.12192.

Nagel, Thomas. “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *Philosophical Review*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1974, pp. 435–50, doi:10.2307/2183914.

Perry, Christopher and Rupert Tower. *Jung’s Shadow Concept. The Hidden Light and Darkness within Ourselves*. Routledge, 2023.

Power, Kevin. “Klara and the Sun: Kazuo Ishiguro Stays True to his Vision in Story Told in Glimpses.” *Irish Independent*, 24 Feb. 2021, surl.lt/tbbqqa/.

Protevi, John. *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic*. Minnesota UP, 2009, www-jstor-org.ponton.uva.es/stable/10.5749/j.ctttswhd/.

Puig de la Bellacasa, María. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minnesota UP, 2017, www-jstor.org.ponton.uva.es/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1mmfspt/.

Raud, Rein. *Being in Flux: A Post-Anthropocentric Ontology of the Self*. Polity, 2021.

Robot & Frank. Directed by Jake Schreier, Park Pictures, 2012.

Romano-Lax, Andromeda. *Plum Rains*. Soho Press, 2018.

Rossini, Manuela. "Bodies." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, edited by Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini, Cambridge UP, 2017, pp. 153–69.

Sampson, Tony D. "Affect, Cognition and the Neurosciences." *Athenea Digital*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1–16.

Sampson, Tony D. "Nonconscious Affect. Cognitive, Embodied, or Nonbifurcated Experience?" *The Affect Theory Reader 2*, edited by Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell, Duke UP, 2023, pp. 295–314, doi: 10.1215/9781478027201-014.

Sarker, Iqbal H. "Machine Learning: Algorithms, Real-World Applications, and Research Directions." *SN Computer Science*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2021, pp. 1–21, doi:10.1007/s42979-021-00592-x.

Segundo-Ortin, Miguel, and Paco Calvo. "Consciousness and Cognition in Plants." *WIREs Cognitive Science*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1–23, doi:10.1002/wcs.1578.

Sen, Anushka. "Possible and Possibilities: The Aesthetics of Speculation in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2021, pp. 91–110.

Shang, Biwu. "Towards a Theory of Nonhuman Narrative." *Neohelicon*, vol. 49, 2022, pp. 59–73, doi:10.1007/s11059-022-00628-y.

Shang, Guanghui. "Robotic Narrative, Mindreading and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*." *Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 40, 2024, pp. 1–17, doi:10.25159/1753-5387/14849.

Shaw, Helen. "In *Klara and the Sun*, Artificial Intelligence Meets Real Sacrifice." *Vulture*, 19 Mar. 2024, www.vulture.com/article/review-klara-and-the-sun-kazuo-ishiguro.html/.

Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as Technique." *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, edited by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, Nebraska UP, 1965, pp. 3–24.

Spinoza, Baruch. *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, translated by Edwin Curley. Princeton University Press. 1994.

Stivers, Carole. *The Mother Code*. Berkley, 2020.

Straus, Nina Pelikan. *The Novel and Neuroscience from Dostoevsky to Ishiguro*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024.

Sumner, Tyne D. "Pixel, Partition, Persona: Machine Vision and Face Recognition in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*." *Open Library of Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2023, doi:10.16995/olh.10257.

Timmer, Nicoline. *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*. Brill, 2010.

Toye, Margaret E. "Love as Affective Energy: Where Feminist Love Studies Meets Feminist Affect Theory." *Feminism and the Power of Love: Interdisciplinary Interventions*, edited by Adriana García-Andrade, et al. Routledge, 2018, pp. 85–105.

Van Oost, Ellen, and Darren Reed. "Towards a Sociological Understanding of Robots as Companions." *Human-Robot Personal Relationships. HRPR 2010. Lecture Notes of the Institute for Computer Sciences, Social Informatics and Telecommunications Engineering*, edited by Maarten H. Lamers and Fons J. Verbeek, vol. 59, Springer, 2011, pp. 11–18, doi:10.1007/978-3-642-19385-9_2.

Xiao, Yiqun. "Emotional Repression in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2023, pp. 354–73, doi:10.7560/TSLL65403

Zajonc, Robert B. "Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1968, pp. 1–27, doi: 10.1037/h0025848.



“The Taut Elastic of Time”: Polytemporality and the Black and Green Atlantic in Colum McCann’s *TransAtlantic* (2013)

“The Taut Elastic of Time”: Politemporalidad y el Black and Green Atlantic en *TransAtlantic* (2013) de Colum McCann

JUAN-JOSÉ MARTÍN-GONZÁLEZ

Institution address: Universidad de Málaga. Avda. Cervantes, 2, 29016, Málaga.

E-mail: jjmg@uma.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-9482-2202

Received: 14/03/2025. Accepted: 23/07/2025.

How to cite this article: Martín-González, Juan-José (2025). ““The Taut Elastic of Time”: Polytemporality and the Black and Green Atlantic in Colum McCann’s *TransAtlantic* (2013).” *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp. 280–304.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/6c2qt303>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Abstract: This article analyses Colum McCann’s *TransAtlantic* (2013) as a polytemporal novel by focusing on the representation of the entangled histories of Irish and African American diasporas. Drawing on philosophical theories of time as well as on cultural studies on the Black and Green Atlantic as a theoretical framework, the study examines how *TransAtlantic* challenges the traditional linearity of historical narratives by presenting past historical events as dynamically connected with present and future orientations. Ultimately, this contribution suggests that *TransAtlantic* not only reimagines transatlantic relations from the point of view of the Irish and Black diasporas but also constructs a broader Pan-Atlantic memory of anticolonial resistance.

Keywords: Colum McCann; *TransAtlantic*; polytemporality; Black and Green Atlantic.

Summary: Introduction. “Overlapping Diasporas”: The Black and Green Atlantic. “The End of the Passing Past”: Polytemporal Models of Time and History. A Polytemporal Analysis of Colum McCann’s *TransAtlantic* (2013). Conclusions.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza *TransAtlantic* (2013) de Colum McCann como una novela politemporal, incidiendo en la representación de las historias entrelazadas de las diásporas afroamericana e irlandesa. Usando como marco teórico diversas teorías filosóficas sobre el tiempo, así como los estudios culturales sobre el concepto de Black and Green Atlantic, el artículo analiza cómo *TransAtlantic* desafía la linealidad tradicional de las narraciones históricas para representar los eventos del pasado como dinámicamente conectados con el presente y el futuro.

En última instancia, este artículo sugiere que *TransAtlantic* no solo reimagina las relaciones transatlánticas desde la perspectiva de las diásporas irlandesa y afroamericana, sino que también construye una memoria pan-atlántica de la resistencia anticolonial.

Palabras clave: Colum McCann; *TransAtlantic*; politemporalidad; Black and Green Atlantic.

Resumen: Introducción. “Diásporas solapadas”: The Black and Green Atlantic. “El fin del pasado transitorio”: Modelos politemporales del tiempo y la historia. Un análisis politemporal de *TransAtlantic* de Colum McCann. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

On March 17, 2011, Barack Obama hosted a reception in the White House to celebrate St Patrick’s Day, an event that was attended by Enda Kenny, newly elected Taoiseach in Ireland at the time. In the address that Obama delivered at this reception, he stressed the parallelisms between the fight for freedom of Irish people and the struggle of African Americans:

In so many ways, the Irish and their descendants have set an example for us as a people . . . It was at a Dublin rally that [Frederick] Douglass met the Irish nationalist Daniel O’Connell . . . Douglass drew inspiration from the Irishman’s courage and intelligence, ultimately modeling his own struggle for justice on O’Connell’s belief that change could be achieved peacefully through rule of law. (Obama)

The former American president was illustrating in his words the correlations between Irish and African American struggles via the personas of two high-profile historical characters: Frederick Douglass, African American abolitionist and author of one of the most famous American slave narratives, and Daniel O’Connell, Irish politician, nicknamed “the Great Liberator,” and fierce campaigner for Catholic rights against British oppression in the nineteenth century.

The cultural cross-pollinations between African American and Irish cultures underscored by Barack Obama in his words are actually at the core of Colum McCann’s novel *TransAtlantic*, which is the object of study in this article. The Irish writer Colum McCann gained international literary recognition with *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), a multiple-narrator novel set in 1970s New York which earned the writer the US National Book Award. McCann’s interest in multiperspectivity is replayed in *TransAtlantic*, a novel that reimagines transatlantic links between Ireland and the US across the centuries by narrating the cultural attachments

between Irish and African Americans. This article aims to analyse McCann's novel as a polytemporal narration of the Black and Green Atlantic, a term that has come to designate the overlapping histories of the Black and Irish diasporas in the Atlantic context. The multiple narrative layers of the text qualify McCann's novel to be read from the viewpoint of philosophical conceptualizations of historical time.

To date, McCann's novel has been critically analysed from the viewpoint of spatial studies (Mianowski), as an example of female intergenerational narration (Mara and Mara), from the perspective of recent postcolonial takes on Irish history and culture (Armstrong; Markey) or in terms of the memory frictions between history and fiction in historical debate (Singer). These contributions do not pay enough attention to the interplay between past, present and future orientations of historical time or the refocusing towards Atlantic contexts that materialize in the novel. This article aims then to analyse *TransAtlantic* (McCann) as a polytemporal novel, identifying the uses and purposes of the interplay between the different timeframes of the narration. Taken in this light, the novel may potentially lend itself to be scrutinized in terms of the dynamic exchange between the histories of Black and Irish diasporas that have been glossed over by criticism of the novel.

To achieve these aims, this contribution firstly puts the novel into contact with maritime scholarship, providing a brief overview of the Black and Green Atlantic in recent cultural criticism. This will assist in contextualizing McCann's novel within Atlantic historiography and cultural studies and the contributions of these fields to the analysis of Black and Irish diasporas. Then, the article builds a theoretical framework based on phenomenology and philosophical theories of time more broadly, delving into different temporal approaches that have conceived historical time as plural, dynamic and multidirectional. This theoretical apparatus may lay open the intricate temporal structure of McCann's narration. Taken together, these contextual and theoretical approaches are subsequently applied to the analysis of *TransAtlantic* to shed light on the polytemporal intersections of the Black and Green Atlantic that McCann's novel pursues.

1. “OVERLAPPING DIASPORAS”: THE BLACK AND GREEN ATLANTIC

The “Oceanic turn” that has characterized much of postcolonial literary criticism in the last decades (DeLoughrey 242–43) was heavily influenced by

the publication of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Gilroy's ground-breaking work mobilised the attention from “nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches” towards “the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis” (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 15). This oceanic refocusing sought to provide a transatlantic view of Black culture, unveiling its hybrid and fractal circulation in the Atlantic waves and unearthing transatlantic slavery as an unacknowledged side of North-Atlantic modernity. Since then, David Armitage has pointed out, “Atlantic history has recently become much more multicolored” (Armitage 479). This development has served as a corrective to the dominance of the white Western perspective on the Atlantic experience.¹

Within this critical countercurrent that has sought to reclaim the voices and experiences of marginalized others in the history of the Atlantic, the Green Atlantic has emerged as an umbrella term to encapsulate the Irish experience of the Atlantic world as well as the transatlantic connections between Ireland, America and the Caribbean. However, this Atlanticist approach, grounded in principles of diaspora, circulation and movement, has only been belatedly accepted within the field of Irish studies. As O'Neill and Lloyd have keenly observed, “the notion that the Irish experience may have been defined as much by movement itself, and by processes of encounter, competition and solidarity, and the circulation of bodies and ideas, is relatively new” (O'Neill and Lloyd xvi).

The last two decades have witnessed significant contributions to these intersections between Atlantic studies and Irish historiography. The work of the Irish historian Kevin Whelan is a landmark within this line of enquiry. His essay “The Green Atlantic: Radical Reciprocities between Ireland and America in the Long Eighteenth century” (Whelan) offers a persuasive approach to the ways in which Irish people engaged in radical politics to articulate their own experience of the Enlightenment. Similarly, Whelan's more recent work “Liberty, Freedom and the Green Atlantic” provides an account of how the rhetorics of eighteenth-century discourses

¹ Together with the Black and Green Atlantic, the term Red Atlantic has also been deployed in maritime scholarship. David Armitage uses this concept in his review of Linebaugh and Rediker's *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Armitage 479) arguably to denote the authors' Marxist approach to Atlantic history. On a different note, Jace Weaver uses the term in *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000–1927* to retrieve the involvement of Native Americans in the Atlantic experience.

of freedom dovetailed with Irish republican politics in the Caribbean context. Such historiographical ventures expand the horizons of Irish studies and highlight what can be gleaned from an Atlanticist perspective.

The oceanic refocusing of Irish studies has created points of contact between Irish culture and migration and other diasporic subjects. It is from this comparative frame that the study of the intersections between the Black and Irish diasporas was engendered, a study that has come to be encapsulated in the term “the Black and Green Atlantic.” Accordingly, there exists now a growing body of critical works about the Atlantic cultural connections between African and Irish diasporic subjects, the most relevant and exhaustive of which are perhaps Peter O’Neill and David Lloyd’s edited book *The Black and Green Atlantic: Cross-Currents of the African and Irish Diasporas* and Kathleen M. Gough’s monograph *Kinship and Performance in the Black and Green Atlantic: Haptic Allegories*.²

And yet, it remains a complex question to engage in literary-cultural comparisons between two diasporic groups whose experiences of forced diaspora and colonization differed substantially. As O’Neill and Lloyd poignantly observe:

The Irish, it has been shown, became white in the United States precisely to the extent that both slaves and free Blacks were denied full citizenship and even humanity . . . why did a people so versed in the techniques and effects of racial oppression—for there is no doubt that British colonialism understood the Irish as racially inferior . . . —not show greater solidarity with their fellow oppressed? (xvi–xvii)

It would be naive and critically partial not to acknowledge that as their historical trajectories coalesced, Irish and African Americans engaged in cooperation and collaboration as much as in fierce ethnic competition and antagonism.

Michael Malouf has expressed his concerns over the aforementioned “critical risks” in deploying the Black-Green Atlantic metaphor. Malouf wonders whether it is possible to use this “spatial-geographical metaphor” without incurring in monocultural perspectives that occlude the diversity of migratory experiences within the Atlantic as well as significant differences and divergences within both Irish and Black diasporas (Malouf

² For one of the earliest examples of scholarship on the Black and Green Atlantic, see Bornstein.

149). Black-Green Atlantic methodologies also risk engaging in inappropriate analogies between the diasporic experiences of the Irish—colonized by the British, sent into indenture during Oliver Cromwell’s rule or forced into exile to escape the Irish Famine—and the capture, enslavement and brutal displacement of African people by European empires. Rather, I suggest that the Black and Green Atlantic should be approached as a site of “overlapping diasporas,” to borrow from Malouf (149) again, to analyse the intersections of the Irish and African diasporas not in terms of the arguable similarity of their experiences but in the shared ways in which both groups embraced the Atlantic as a field of political change and survival.

In her take on the Black and Green Atlantic, Kathleen M. Gough analyses five “historical ‘flashpoints’ of contact and exchange” between Irish and Black subjects, namely: Black abolitionism and Irish anti-colonial struggle in the (mid-nineteenth century), Jim Crow laws and the “Irish Question” (late nineteenth century), the Irish and Harlem Renaissances (early twentieth century), the Civil Rights Movement in the American South and Northern Ireland (mid-twentieth century) and the Celtic Tiger and Ireland’s global position (late twentieth century-early 2000s) (Gough 6–7). These historical “flashpoints,” seen from a bird’s eye view, enable a visualization of a genealogy of Black-Irish encounters across the last centuries. This sustained interaction validates the use of a polytemporal approach to analyse the Black and Green Atlantic, which is the focus of the next section.

2. “THE END OF THE PASSING PAST”: POLYTEMPORAL MODELS OF TIME AND HISTORY

The philosophical notion that history is made up of several strands, layers or temporalities has been a staple in several critical works about historical time in the last decades. Back in 1993 Bruno Latour pointed out that “we have never moved forward or backward. We have always actively sorted out elements belonging to different times” (Latour 76). More recently, in the introduction to her volume *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, Rita Felski has claimed that “history is not one broad river, but a number of distinct and separate streams, each moving at its own pace and tempo” (3). Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty has stated that “the writing of history must always presume a plurality of times coexisting together” (Chakrabarty 109). These accounts of history as polytemporal

and multidirectional are deeply rooted in postmodern concerns about temporality, which have typically dismantled the so-called “grand narrative” of history and have put forward a model of historicity that eschews a linear and monotemporal logic and promotes plurality and a posthistorical awareness instead.

In order to outline a precise definition of the concept of polytemporality, I rely on Victoria Browne’s *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History: A Polytemporal Approach*. In this volume, Browne verbalizes feminists’ recent concerns about the popular, yet apparently questionable, hegemonic model of feminism as structured in “waves.” In Browne’s opinion, this model hinders a complete understanding of “the unfinished possibilities of feminisms from earlier times” and “perpetuates the idea that some feminisms are more “advanced” than others” (1). In order to go beyond this model of feminist history, Browne calls for a nonlinear approach to feminine history grounded in the concept of “polytemporality.” Her polytemporal take on history dismisses the idea of a singular unified temporal framework to support a notion of historical time that “is ‘composite’ and internally complex . . . produced through the intersection of different temporal layers and strands that combine in distinct ways to produce particular experiences and discursive formations of historical time” (Browne 31).

Browne’s conception of polytemporality is deeply inflected by philosophical approaches to time and, specifically, phenomenology, as developed by Husserl and Heidegger in the twentieth century. Actually, in her argumentation Browne sets out from the basic phenomenological claim that historical time should be understood as a form of “lived time” (26). This notion entails that time is not a subject-independent phenomenon but rather a form of perception and a frame through which we perceive reality and articulate experience. In this sense, phenomenological approaches to historical time depart significantly from rationalist theories about the philosophy of time—mostly represented by Aristotle and Kant—that conceive time as an “*intuitive a priori* . . . meaning that the fact that time exists must be accepted *before* we can go on to make deductions about anything else whatever” (Simms 81; original emphasis).

In *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, Edmund Husserl suggests that consciousness of time is circumscribed by two processes: *retention* and *protention* (Husserl 44–50). Theodore R. Schatzki puts it in the following way: “any present experience retains what

was just experienced and intends what is about to be experienced" (195). From this, it can be argued that human beings do not experience present lived time in terms of a series of discrete linear points in a chain, but rather they experience the present by recalling the past and foreseeing the future, i.e. through *retention* and *protention*. These retentional and protentional structures of temporality qualify lived time with a temporal fluidity or, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, a "within-time-ness . . . not reducible to the representation of linear time, a neutral series of abstract instants" ("Narrative Time" 173).³

The crucial idea that can be garnered from Husserl's internal time-consciousness is that lived time can be conceived as *multidirectional* rather than linear. This insight paves the way for arguing, Browne states, that "'present,' 'past,' and 'future' are not successive, isolated moments or 'parts of time,' but rather interrelated modes by which things appear as temporal" (28). Lived time and its retentional-protentional axis determine the subject's temporal experience as grounded in a dynamic interplay of past, present and future. Similarly, if we transfer the phenomenological subject-focused account of lived time to historical time more broadly, it can be argued that history itself is a narrative mediated through a complex transaction of past, present and future temporalities. In short, Dudley Andrew summarizes, "history is the double movement first of understanding . . . heritage by interrogating its traces and second of moving forward from this particular stance to a future that affects a world made up of one's contemporaries and successors" (64). In the context of Western literature, it is worth mentioning the contributions made by Modernist writers to the concept of *lived time*. Authors such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf or William Faulkner rejected the linearity of chronological storytelling in favour of subjective and disjointed representations of time perception.

The notion of lived time also coalesces with the role of memory in time perception. Against the linear and chronological character of historical time, *memory time* is multidirectional, selective and fluid. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur has argued that "all memory is already a distortion inasmuch as it is selective. As a result, one can only counter a partial version with another equally fragile version" (Ricoeur, *Memory* 324). Adopting this notion of lived time which is markedly non-

³ For an earlier philosophical account of the interrelationship between past, present and future, see P.D. Ouspensky's notion of cyclical time in *Tertium Organum* (30).

linear paves the way for validating non-linear models of history that provide subject-focused accounts of historical time. One of such models is the one proposed by Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern*, who persuasively suggests that we consider time as a spiral rather than as a line:

Let us suppose, for example, that we are going to regroup the contemporary elements along a spiral rather than a line: We do have a future and a past, but the future takes the form of a circle expanding in all directions, and the past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled . . . In such a framework, our actions are recognized at last as polytemporal. (75)

As can be inferred, Latour's non-linear historical model avoids conceiving human action as a uniform and irreversible succession of events. This rejection of the linearity of historical time, encapsulated in Latour's notion of the spiral and what he termed "the end of the passing past" (72), does not entail rejecting the reality of the past or the future. Instead, historical time emerges as a co-functioning system that moves neither onward nor backward, but in an eternal loop that combines and sorts out different temporalities.

A more nuanced take on the cyclical/linear dichotomy is the one put forward by Barbara Adam in *Time Watch: The Social Analysis of Time*. Adam does not abandon altogether linearity in her model of historical time. Instead, she points out that "all social processes display aspects of linearity and cyclical . . . we recognize a cyclical structure when we focus on events that repeat themselves and unidirectional linearity when our attention is on the process of the repeating action" (Adam 38). Hence, following Adam's argumentation, linear and cyclical times are mutually co-dependent: unidirectional time is rendered cyclical through processes of ritual and repetition whereas "cyclical processes by definition involve repetition with variation, linearity and progression" (38).

Polytemporal models of time proposed by scholars such as Browne, Latour, and Adam destabilise the foundations of Enlightenment-era speculative philosophies of time and history, particularly Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, first published in 1837. Hegel's framework positions the Western state, particularly the Germanic world, as the pinnacle of historical progress, reinforcing Eurocentric narratives that present modernity as a Western phenomenon (131). As a response to Hegel's Eurocentric grand narrative of history, scholars such as Enrique

Dussel have emphatically challenged the notion that modernity was an exclusively Western phenomenon and have called to incorporate underrated cultures and civilizations as actors worthy of consideration in world history (168). Similarly, the centrality of the modern state, understood by Hegel as “the more specific object of world history in general, in which freedom attains its objectivity” (Hegel 97) has also been brought under critical scrutiny by maritime scholars such as Gilroy (Gilroy, “Route Work” 22). This questioning of the centrality of the nation-state is particularly relevant for African Americans and Irish Catholics, the two cultural groups under analysis in McCann’s *TransAtlantic*, since the configuration of their respective states has been consistently marked by colonial violence, exclusion and marginalization.

3. A POLYTEMPORAL ANALYSIS OF COLUM McCANN’S *TRANSATLANTIC*

The narration of Colum McCann’s *TransAtlantic* is structured in three sections. After a brief prologue set in 2012, the first volume provides a fictionalization of three historically authentic transatlantic voyages: John Alcock and Arthur Brown’s first non-stop transatlantic flight from Canada to Ireland in 1919; Frederick Douglass’s 1845 travel to Ireland as part of his abolitionist struggle; and American diplomat George J. Mitchell’s 1998 travels to Belfast to chair the negotiations during the Northern Ireland peace process that culminated in the Good Friday Agreement. Conversely, the protagonists in the second and third volumes of the novel are entirely fictional and female. These volumes develop the saga of four generations of women whose vital trajectories intersect with the male characters in the first section: Lily, an Irish maid who meets Douglass during his Irish tour as she is about to emigrate to America to escape the Irish Famine; Emily (Lily’s daughter), a Canadian journalist who witnesses Alcock and Brown’s transatlantic flight; Lottie (Emily’s daughter), an Irish woman who lives in Belfast during the Troubles; and Hanna (Lottie’s daughter), who lost her son, Tomas, in a terrorist attack during the Troubles and who closes the novel in a sort of epilogue set in 2012 (and connected with the prologue) which ties in all narrative lines. This complex tapestry composed through multiple narrative threads, narrators and time frames provides the basis for an analysis of the novel from a polytemporal viewpoint.

The gendered symmetry of the narration, in which male historical characters and fictional female protagonists are clearly arranged in

separate sections, brings to consciousness the traditional omission of female voices in historiography as well as the uses of fiction in the writing of history more broadly. McCann himself has claimed in an interview that “we all know that women are so often excluded from the history books. As if guns and testosterone rule the world. In writing about the women, I felt like they were partly correcting a little corner of history” (McCann, “A Conversation” 310).

Nevertheless, the author’s laudable endeavour to retrieve female perspectives in the making of history turns problematic if we realise that the purpose of the fictional female narratives in the second half of the novel is apparently to lend credibility and cohesion to the “real” historical male narratives in the first half. The female narrative lines in the novel seem exemplary of what the author himself has qualified as “smaller, more anonymous moments” which constitute “the glue of history” (McCann, “A Conversation” 309). In the author’s defence, it could be argued that the male and female narratives embody two distinct forms of discourse: the dominant tales of legendary heroes depicted in the first section and the historically suppressed account of Ireland’s struggle for survival, preserved through the collective memory of four generations of women and conveyed in a traditional family saga. What can be undoubtedly attributed to the novel is that the author makes no attempt at retrieving actually historical female figures that have been traditionally omitted in the history of the Atlantic Ocean.⁴ These omissions have been the concern of Kathleen M. Gough, who has exposed the blatant exclusion of female views from the texture of Black-Green Atlantic connections and circum-Atlantic circulations in general. In Gough’s view, “female social actors . . . are like allegorical images in this historical trajectory: they become the place for meaning to occur without becoming meaningful themselves” (9). This allegorical use is analogously what characterizes the female narratives in the novel, which inescapably remain secondary to the male-centred historical frame. In a similar vein, Mara and Mara have analysed McCann’s novel as a remarkable instance of female intergenerational narration but have observed that “the fact that the very personal

⁴ To name just a few: Amelia Earhart, first female aviator to fly solo non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean; Ida B. Wells, African-American journalist and abolitionist who toured Britain in the late nineteenth century as part of her anti-lynching campaign in Post-Reconstruction America; or Mary Prince, born a slave in the Caribbean and brought across the Atlantic to London where she published what is considered the first female slave narrative published in England, *The History of Mary Prince* (1831).

redemption of Lily, Emily, Lottie, and Hannah occurs in the intertwined tales of male individual and collective redemption implies an unfinished collective redemption for these women" (Mara and Mara 23).

The three transatlantic journeys described in the first volume of the narration remain nevertheless emblematic examples of Atlantic history and the historical connections between Ireland and the US. The journeys take place in different time periods but share symbolic connection since, as Mianowski has pointed out, "all three journeys express a desire for peace: promoting emancipation in 1845, joining two worlds after World War I, and constructing the Northern Ireland Peace Process in 1998" (3). The first chapter, which introduces Alcock and Brown's 1919 flight, depicts the increasing connectivity that characterized the north-Atlantic hemisphere in the aftermath of the 1st World War: "The world was made tiny. The League of Nations was being formed in Paris. W. E. B. Du Bois convened the Pan-African Congress with delegates from fifteen countries. Jazz records could be heard in Rome" (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 12). These lines, which depict the incipient globalisation that characterized the early twentieth century, highlight the potential of the transatlantic circulation of ideas in peace-making politics and the construction of transcultural bridges. Additionally, the name of the novel, with its capitalized "A" interspersed in the middle of the title, illustrates the Atlantic Ocean as a paradigmatic locus for the in-betweenness of such circulation, the transits and routes that have been inherent to transatlantic subjectivity. This emphasis on transatlantic connections in the making of Western history underscores "the incompatibility of the Atlantic as a cultural unit with the academic logic of viewing history in nationalist terms" (Klein and Mackenthun 5).

In the study of the Atlantic interactions between Irish and African American cultures in which this novel gets involved, Frederick Douglass features as a ubiquitous figure. The well-known abolitionist and author of the acclaimed *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Douglass) has been repeatedly reclaimed in scholarship about the Black and Green Atlantic and was already acknowledged by Paul Gilroy as a "shining example" of Black Atlantic culture (*The Black Atlantic* 13). McCann's novel provides a fictionalization of Douglass's visit to Ireland, his stay at Richard D. Webb's (his Irish editor) and his ensuing anti-slavery lecture tour in that country in 1845, at the beginning of the Great Famine. The narration chronicles the political implications of Douglass's Irish stay as well as its psychological impact on him:

At the end of his second week he wrote to Anna [Douglass' wife] that he hadn't been called a *nigger* on Irish soil, not once, not yet anyway . . . There was something crystallizing inside him. He felt, for the first time ever maybe, that he could properly inhabit his skin. (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 55)

The transcendence of Douglass's visit to Ireland in 1845, which was significantly noted by himself in his autobiography (297), reveals the extent to which his stay on Irish soil allowed the ex-slave to exercise the principles of democracy and citizenship, the very principles that were denied to African Americans by the slave system. Additionally, as several scholars have pointed out (Sweeney 13; Fenton 195), his tour around the Emerald Isle was instrumental in his development as an activist and thinker, allowing him to ground his anti-slavery philosophy in a wider circum-Atlantic discourse of liberation.

The persona of Frederick Douglass also becomes the red thread by which the memory of the Black and Green Atlantic is articulated as a node of interleaving axes of oppression. The novel makes pointed note of its intersectional approach as the fictional Douglass is shocked to witness the utter misery and poverty of famine-stricken Ireland (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 44). Further on in the narration, as Douglass travels to Cork, he learns from Isabel Jennings, secretary of the Cork Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, about the negligence of British authorities in handling the Famine (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 84). Notwithstanding his strong sympathy for the plight of the Irish poor, as a slave who has endured the horrors of American slavery Douglass cannot but observe the stark differences between American slavery and the colonized Irish: "There was poverty everywhere, yes, but still he would take the poverty of a free man. No whips. No chains. No branding marks" (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 55). The narration tallies then with scholars of the Black and Green Atlantic that avoid inadequate forms of "analogical reasoning" that occur "whenever the Irish experience of famine is compared to other historical sufferings such as slavery" (Malouf 57–58).

The tensions generated around the different experiences of colonization and dispossession undergone by Irish and Africans respectively are brought to the fore in the novel when the fictional Douglass is questioned by a heckler during one of his speeches denouncing American slavery:

A shout came up from the rear of the hall. What about England? Would he not denounce England? Wasn’t England the slave master anyway? Was there not wage slavery? Were there not the chains of financial oppression? Was there not an underground railroad that every Irishman would gladly board to get away from the tyranny of England? (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 64)

The paragraph quoted above, although it makes the author’s advantageous contemporary viewpoint somewhat too overt, remains an interesting observation about the nature of labour, empire and freedom. In this sense, the novel’s reconstruction of Irish-Black encounters brings to mind the insidious ways in which chattel slavery has shaded into other ways of oppression or forced labour and articulates the Black and Green Atlantic as a frame to understand how differently oppressed groups have been enmeshed in “a shared paradigm of exploitation” (Malouf 157).

The novel’s representation of Douglass’s Irish experience gathers momentum as McCann reimagines the American slave’s encounter with Daniel O’Connell in 1845. Douglass’s historical meeting with the “Great Liberator” has achieved a quasi-mythical status in scholarship on the Black and Green Atlantic, becoming an emblem of Irish-American connections. The novel fictionalizes the legendary instant in which O’Connell introduced Douglass as “the Black O’Connell of the United States.” Although this renaming might illustrate an imposition of Western models of social struggle, it is in tune with Atlantic scholarship about Douglass that has stressed the intellectual legacy of the pro-Catholic politician on Douglass’s abolitionist project (Fenton 85–89).

However, Douglass’s successful stay in Ireland is underscored by an underlying poignant irony: as he was being welcomed and celebrated as an American abolitionist, one million Irish people were forced to leave Ireland and around 1.5 million died of hunger, disease and starvation between 1845 and 1852 during the Great Famine (Ó Murchadha 179–80). The plight of Irish people escaping the Famine is represented in the character of Lily, a young maid at Richard D. Webb’s residence who gets emboldened by Douglass’s transatlantic discourse of freedom to get on board a “coffin ship” and look for a better life in the Americas. *TransAtlantic* adds up this way to the increasing shelf of contemporary

historical fiction that narrates the Irish Famine and its historical aftereffects.⁵

The fictional Douglass becomes a witness to the devastating social effects of the Irish Famine via the character of Lily. In one of the most powerful sections of the novel, Douglass joins members of the Jennings family in a search party to look for Lily and make sure she has a safe journey to America, after the young maid unexpectedly leaves Cork, penniless and with nothing but the clothes on her back. As Lily is found starving and freezing in Cove's pier waiting for the morning boat, Douglass is moved to see Isabel Jennings giving the poor maid some food for the journey:

Douglass felt a chill. He watched as Lily moved her mouth but did not seem to say anything . . . What thoughts trembled there? What fierceness had brought her here? . . . He pulled his collar up and coughed into it. He felt his breath bounce back towards him. *Negro girl. Ran away. Goes by name Artela.* (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 97; original emphasis)

As can be seen at the end of the previous quotation, Douglass cannot help but recall stories of fugitive African American slaves as he witnesses Lily's misery and desperation to escape the famine. Hence, by intertwining the Black and Irish diasporas in terms of their shared histories of humanity and survival instinct, the novel seems to be constructing a Pan-Atlantic memory of imperialism that diverts from nationalist models of cultural history. In this construction, the Atlantic Ocean emerges as a fertile space for emancipation, movement, resistance and political struggle and this validates O'Neill and Lloyd's assertion, following Avtar Brah, that the Black and Green Atlantic can be conceived as a "diaspora space" (xix) engendered by processes of movement and circulation.

Later on in the novel, the focus shifts to Lily's story and we learn about her arrival in America, her marriage, the demise of her son in the Civil War and the birth of her daughter, Emily. Lily's story of migration and assimilation in America becomes the genesis of a long generation of women whose transatlantic saga embodies two centuries of Irish-American connections. Emily becomes a journalist who covers Brown and Alcock's flight. Further on, she embarks on a transatlantic journey with

⁵ Some relatively recent examples of Irish Famine novels include Peter Behrens's *The Law of Dreams* (2007), Mary Pat Kelly's *Galway Bay* (2009), Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2003) or Paul Lynch's *Grace* (2017).

her daughter Lottie to visit Arthur Brown in Swansea in 1929, ten years after his legendary flight. Lottie moves to Belfast, experiences first-hand the violence of the Troubles and, in her nineties, she gets to meet Senator George Mitchell in person during the 1998 negotiations. Finally, the narration closes with Hannah’s 2011 narrative, framed by the debacle of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger economy after the 2008 economic recession. As the story progresses, the narrative structure becomes increasingly more complex and readers become gradually aware of the connections between the male historical characters and the fictional female characters, turning the novel into a polytemporal mosaic that provides thought-provoking meditations on past-present relationships.

One of such meditations is provided by George Mitchell when he is fully enmeshed in the negotiations that ended up in the Good Friday Agreement. While the American Senator is hemmed in by British and Irish authorities as well as by diplomats and observers from all over the European Union, crowds of Irish common folk congregate at the doors of the Parliament Building of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Overwhelmed by stress and tension, Mitchell looks out the window of his office and reflects upon the historical transcendence of the peace negotiations:

A sea-wind. All those ships out there. All those generations that left. Seven hundred years of history. We prefigure our futures by imagining our pasts. To go back and forth. Across the waters. The past, the present, the elusive future. A nation. Everything constantly shifted by the present. The taut elastic of time. (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 145)

Mitchell’s reminiscence of those generations who crossed the Atlantic back and forth, right at the culmination of the historical accord that is going to determine Irish future, epitomizes the polytemporal conception of historical time developed above. As stated by Browne, “our various ways of living time do not conform to a straightforward past-present-future chronology...there is a dynamic interplay and interrelation between past, present and future as modes of temporal orientation” (2). Hence, the Senator’s lived present time is charged with the legacy of the past as well as the political potential of the future. His temporal meditation illustrates what Ricoeur termed the “within-time-ness” of historical time (“Narrative Time” 173): living time operates on a retention-protection logic (Husserl 44–50) in which past, present and future are interrelated, mutually

dependent and “constituted through a complex blend of retention and anticipation, memory and expectation” (Browne 2).

The polytemporal character of the novel gains momentum in the last volume. In Hannah’s 2011 narrative, the story lies imbued with the historical events that intersected with the lives of her female ancestors. The complex historical-literary apparatus constructed by McCann throughout the story is congealed into a single object that has ended up in Hannah’s hands: an unopened letter written by Emily in Canada, brought by Alcock and Brown in their aircraft across the Atlantic, and addressed to “The Jennings Family, 9 Brown Street, Cork City, Ireland” (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 252). This letter stands as an element connecting different times and places and, most importantly, as a symbol of Hannah’s transatlantic matriilineality. As she observes the letter in her hands, Hannah reflects upon its spatio-temporal quality and her lineage: “The tunnels of our lives connect, coming to daylight at the oddest moments, and then plunge us into the dark again. We return to the lives of those who have gone before us, a perplexing Möbius strip until we come home, eventually to ourselves” (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 252).⁶ This reference to August Ferdinand Möbius’s mathematical device serves to illustrate the interrelation of past and present events in lived time. Taken in this light, this scientific allusion is reminiscent both of Bruno Latour’s notion of historical time as a spiral (75) and Barbara Adam’s linear/cyclical thinking (38), as mentioned above. Adopting this cyclical viewpoint about historical time “does not mean that one rejects the existence of a past or a future...it does mean [that] we abandon the linear idea of temporality” (Walters 182). In other words, it implies adopting an anti-teleological stance that explores the unfinished potential of past events to be cyclically revisited as historical time spirals into the future.

The letter also serves to contextualize another significant event in recent Irish history: the decline of the Celtic Tiger economy in the face of the great economic recession which hit world markets in the years following 2008. Hannah is facing bankruptcy and considers the letter and its potential link to Frederick Douglass as an economic possibility to avoid the eviction from her house and land. However, the text is revealed to be

6 A Möbius strip is a non-orientable one-sided surface that can be constructed by taking a rectangular strip and attaching both ends after giving one end a half-twist. Described by the German mathematicians August Ferdinand Möbius and Johann Benedict Listing in the nineteenth century, the most interesting property of this mathematical device is that both sides of the strip can be crossed uninterruptedly (Starostin and Van der Heijden 563).

simply a thankful letter addressed to the Jennings family and written by Emily on behalf of her mother, and proves to have no commercial value after a philatelist claims to be unaware of the mentioned name of Frederick Douglass. It is only David Manyaki, an acquaintance of Hannah, Kenyan scholar and lecturer of history in Dublin, who recognizes the transhistorical worth of the document. Still, the letter remains a powerful polytemporal symbol of the interwoven genealogical and spatiotemporal trajectories that cut across the characters' lives, bringing readers, Alfred Markey has noted, "back through a family history in which ideas and ideals played a determining role, on both sides of the Atlantic, in allowing succeeding individuals achieve growing degrees of liberty" (Markey 147–48).

As the narration draws to an end, Hanna looks back in time and muses on the transatlantic chain of events that conforms her life history. Her meditations illustrate the functioning of memory time, which moves temporally back and forth according to associations of ideas. Hannah's polytemporal recollections find resonance in her maritime surroundings—she lives in a cottage at Strangford Lough next to the Irish Sea—and her frequent drives along the eastern Irish coast:

From a distance I could hear the ship horns, boats moving through Dún Laoghaire. Everyone rushing to get somewhere. The desire for elsewhere. The same port that Frederick Douglass came through all those years ago. The water lapping around me. Travelling the widening splash... George Mitchell's peace. The Queen had bowed her head at the Garden of Remembrance. (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 289)

As can be inferred, McCann invests Hannah's polytemporal meditations with a phenomenological inflection in which her aquatic environment is perceived as saturated with interrelated historical events from the past and the present, illustrating the selective and fragmentary character of memory. This take on historical time based on the subject's perception and memory—which is inherent to the phenomenological basis of polytemporal thinking (Browne 26)—is further extended when Hannah provides an oceanic observation on her cottage and its surrounding lough: "The edges of the lough are never watertight, either to land or the sea. The tides flow in and out. Boats and memory, too" (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 257). The transatlantic events articulating Hannah's matrilineal lineage are narrated as metaphorically flowing into her memory just like the waves

lap onto the shore around her cottage. This figuratively illustrates an oceanic articulation of time based on repetition and circularity, evoking the principles of temporality which accrue to polytemporal models of historical time. Analogously, just like Hannah grapples with her spatio-temporal orientation by renegotiating her transatlantic legacy, the past, present and future of Ireland should necessarily be driven by incorporating the legacy of the Black and Green Atlantic into the national memory of the country.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* as a polytemporal novel, paying attention to its representation of the transatlantic diasporas of Black and Irish people. Utilising a combination of philosophical insights into historical time and maritime scholarship, the article has argued that the novel's representation of the Black and Irish diasporas constructs a polytemporal memory of the Black and Green Atlantic which encapsulates the past, present and future of these cultural groups. Even though their respective historical progressions and processes of racialization have differed significantly, as several maritime scholars have pointed out, the multiple overlapping points of contact, competition and cooperation of Black and Irish people at determinate historical fulcrum points provide a telling representation of multilinear and plural models of historical time gravitating around the notion that "individual groups have their own distinct histories, rhythms, and temporalities quite apart from traditional forms of periodization" (Felski 3).

The heated question of why the Irish became "white" in the Americas (against the process of racialization that they underwent under British colonialism) instead of demonstrating more solidarity towards their fellow African-American dispossessed remains nevertheless unaddressed in McCann's novel. Indeed, the novel focuses mostly on constructive examples of Irish-American points of exchange but shies away from approaching more unsavoury aspects of ethnic competition. As O'Neill and Lloyd have acutely warned, "affinities that appear in cultural work do not always correspond to political and social solidarity" (xix). These tensions have also been observed by Kathleen M. Gough, who has highlighted that the ubiquity of the figure of Frederick Douglass in twenty-first century critical and cultural productions in Ireland has coincided with the recrudescence of racism in the country, manifested in the 2004

Referendum that denied Irish citizenship to migrants’ children born in Ireland (Gough 4). Future creative and critical work on the Black and Green Atlantic might be reoriented towards interrogating these discrepancies between the celebratory overtones of Black-Green encounters in cultural production and the lack of cooperation and solidarity in the socio-political sphere.

Despite the aforementioned ethical concerns, the historical and imagined Irish-American diachronic overlaps represented in *TransAtlantic* still suggest that the Atlantic Ocean has been a rich ground for political liberation and anticolonial struggle. McCann strives to build a polytemporal memory of the Black and Green Atlantic geared towards the delineation of a multilinear Black-Irish genealogy that keeps informing the present. Ian Baucom memorably stated in *Specters of the Atlantic* that “time does not pass, it accumulates, and as it accumulates it deposits an ever greater freight of material within the cargo holds of a present” (325). Similarly, the experiences of Blacks and Irish are both saturated with the effects of colonization, exploitation and dispossession. The histories of Irish people escaping the Famine, suffering the violence of the Troubles or navigating Ireland’s unstable global position after the last breath of Celtic Tiger economy inescapably dovetail with those of African Americans fighting racism, discrimination and segregation on both sides of the Atlantic. A collective memory that is cognizant of these constructive overlaps and their impact on the present may potentially build a more equitable future for Blacks and Irish alike.

FUNDING

The research carried out for this article was funded by two research projects: “Re-orienting Assemblage Theory in Anglophone Literature and Culture” (PID2022-137881NB-I00) and “Aquatic Imaginaries: Re-charting Indoceanic and Atlantic Literary Productions” (PID2022-141118NB-IO0).

REFERENCES

Adam, Barbara. *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time*. Polity Press, 1995.

Andrew, Dudley. “Tracing Ricoeur.” *Diacritics*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2000, pp. 43–69, doi: 10.1353/dia.2000.0010.

Armitage, David. "The Red Atlantic." *Reviews in American History*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2001, pp. 479–86, doi: 10.1353/rah.2001.0060.

Armstrong, Charles I. "George Mitchell's Peace: The Good Friday Agreement in Colum McCann's Novel *TransAtlantic*." *The Legacy of the Good Friday Agreement: Northern Irish Politics, Culture and Art after 1998*, edited by Charles I. Armstrong, et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 57–71, doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-91232-5.

Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Duke UP, 2005, doi: 10.1215/9780822387022.

Behrens, Peter. *The Law of Dreams*. Canongate, 2007.

Bornstein, George. "Afro-Celtic Connections: From Frederick Douglass to *The Commitments*." *Literary Influence and African-American Writers: Collected Essays*, edited by Tracy Mishkin, Routledge, 1996, pp. 171–88.

Browne, Victoria. *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History: A Polytemporal Approach*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, doi: 10.1057/9781137413161.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton UP, 2008.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. "The Oceanic Turn: Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene." *Humanities for the Environment: Integrating Knowledge, Forging New Constellations of Practice*, edited by Joni Adamson and Michael Davis, Routledge, 2016, pp. 242–58, doi: 10.4324/9781315642659.

Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. 1855. Yale UP, 2014.

Dussel, Enrique. "World-System and 'Trans'-Modernity." *Unbecoming Modern: Colonialism, Modernity, Colonial Modernities*, edited by Saurabh Dube and Ishita Banerjee-Dube, Social Science Press, 2006, pp. 165–88.

Felski, Rita. *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*. New York UP, 2000.

Fenton, Laurence. *Frederick Douglass in Ireland: “The Black O’Connell.”* The Collins Press, 2014.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Verso, 1993.

Gilroy, Paul. “Route Work: The Black Atlantic and the Politics of Exile.” *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, edited by Ian Chambers and Lidia Curti, Routledge, 1996, pp. 17–29.

Gough, Kathleen M. *Kinship and Performance in the Black and Green Atlantic: Haptic Allegories*. Routledge, 2014, doi: 10.4324/9780203385548.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. 1837. Cambridge UP, 1975.

Husserl, Edmund. *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*. Translated by James S. Churchill, Indiana UP, 1964.

Kelly, Mary Pat. *Galway Bay*. Grand Central P, 2009.

Klein, Bernhard and Gesa Mackenthun. “Introduction: The Sea is History.” *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean*, edited by Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun, Routledge, 2004, pp. 1–12.

Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by C. Porter, Harvard UP, 1993.

Lynch, Paul. *Grace*. Little, Brown and Company, 2017.

Malouf, Michael. “Transatlantic Fugue: Self and Solidarity in the Black and Green Atlantics.” *The Black and Green Atlantic: Cross-currents of the African and Irish Diasporas*, edited by Peter D. O’Neill and David Lloyd, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 149–64.

Mara, Miriam, and Andrew Mara. "Ireland on the Waves: Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* as Intergenerational Female Immram." *Nordic Irish Studies*, vol. 14, 2015, pp. 19–36, www.jstor.org/stable/24717421/.

Markey, Alfred. "Irish-American Patriotism: The TransAtlantic Politics and Humanist Culture of Colum McCann." *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, vol. 24, 2020, pp. 135–57, doi: 10.12795/REN.2020.i24.07.

McCann, Colum. "A Conversation with Colum McCann and Elizabeth Strout." *Penguin Random House*, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/207432/transatlantic-by-colum-mccann/9780812981926/readers-guide/>.

McCann, Colum. *TransAtlantic*. Random House, 2013.

Mianowski, Marie. "The Space In-Between in Colum McCann's Novel *TransAtlantic* (2013)." *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, vol. 47, 2014, pp. 1–9, doi: 10.4000/ebc.1810.

Obama, Barack. "Remarks by President Obama, Vice President Biden, and Prime Minister Enda Kenny of Ireland at a St. Patrick's Day Reception." *The White House Archives*, 17 Mar. 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/17/remarks-president-obama-vice-president-biden-and-prime-minister-enda-ken/>.

O'Connor, Joseph. *Star of the Sea*. Vintage, 2003.

O'Neill, Peter D., and David Lloyd. "The Black and Green Atlantic: An Introduction." *The Black and Green Atlantic: Cross-currents of the African and Irish Diasporas*, edited by Peter D. O'Neill and David Lloyd, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. xv–xx.

Ó Murchadha, Ciarán. *The Great Famine: Ireland's Agony, 1845–1852*. Continuum, 2011.

Ouspensky, P. D. *Tertium Organum (The Third Organ of Thought): A Key to the Enigmas of the World*. Translated by Nicholas Bessaraboff and Claude Bragdon. Manas Press, 1920.

Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince* (1831). Penguin Classics, 2001.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago UP, 2004.

Ricoeur, Paul. “Narrative Time.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1980, pp. 169–90, doi: 10.1086/448093.

Singer, Sandra. “The Zigzag Trajectory Through Time of Colum McCann’s *TransAtlantic*.” *Memory Frictions in Contemporary Literature*, edited by María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro and Silvia Pellicer-Ortíz, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 65–84, doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-61759-6.

Simms, Karl. *Paul Ricoeur*. Routledge, 2003.

Schatzki, Theodore R. “Where Times Meet.” *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2005, pp. 191–212, <http://cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/article/view/12/>.

Starostin, Evgeni L., and Gert H. M. Van der Heijden. “The Shape of a Möbius Strip.” *Nature Materials*, vol. 6, no. 8, 2007, pp. 563–67, doi: 10.1038/nmat1943.

Sweeney, Fionnghuala. *Frederick Douglass and the Atlantic World*. Liverpool UP, 2007.

Walters, William. “‘The End of the Passing Past’: Towards a Polytemporal Policy Studies.” *Reframing Social Policy: A Governmental Approach*, edited by Greg Marston and Catherine McDonald, Edward Elgar, 2006, pp. 167–86.

Weaver, Jace. *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenous and the Making of the Modern World, 1000–1927*. North Carolina UP, 2014.

Whelan, Kevin. "Liberty, Freedom and the Green Atlantic." *Caribbean Irish Connections: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Alison Donnell, et al., West Indies UP, 2015, pp. 79–98.

Whelan, Kevin. "The Green Atlantic: Radical Reciprocities Between Ireland and America in the Long Eighteenth Century." *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840*, edited by Kathleen Wilson, Cambridge UP, 2004. pp. 216–38.



Sexual Subject and Textual Braid: Autobiographical Politics of Emancipation in Audre Lorde's *Zami*

Sujeto sexual y trenza textual: políticas autobiográficas de emancipación en *Zami* de Audre Lorde

SHIRIN AKTER POPY

Institution address: Department of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Noakhali 3814, Bangladesh

E-mail: shirin@nstu.edu.bd

ORCID:0000-0003-2095-1113

KHANDAKAR ASHRAFUL ISLAM

Institution address: Department of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Noakhali 3814, Bangladesh

E-mail: ashraf.2205@nstu.edu.bd

ORCID: 0000-0002-0176-4518

Received: 14/03/2025. Accepted: 29/05/2025.

How to cite this article: Akter Popy, Shirin and Khandakar Ashraful Islam. "Sexual Subject and Textual Braid: Autobiographical Politics of Emancipation in Audre Lorde's *Zami*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp. 305–327.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/8j6vqs85>

Open Access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Abstract: A critical study of Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* reveals that Lorde employs the embodied narrative as an emancipatory space, weaving together geography, history, myth, and biography to construct a revolutionary self—one that directly challenges heterosexist domination and the rigid, unitary concepts of identity and authorship. This paper examines how Lorde's naming of both the narrator as "Zami" and the text as a "biomythography" enacts a radical form of resistance, decentering the traditional autobiographical subject and instead positioning a Black lesbian consciousness at the core of the narrative. Through an intricate interplay of intertextual and intratextual storytelling, Lorde constructs an alternative autobiographical form that resists Western hegemonic discourses of the "I." Drawing on Sidonie Smith's concept of the "manifesto" and Françoise Lionnet's métissage as strategies of autobiographical emancipation, we argue that in *Zami*, Audre Lorde not only reclaims Black lesbian subjectivity but also deconstructs conventional narrative structures, employing a braided textuality that subverts dominant Western autobiographical traditions.

Keywords: Sexual "I;" poetics of difference; trickster; textual braid; genre blend.

Summary: Introducing Emancipatory Politics. Metissage and Manifesto. Revisiting Existing Scholarship and Framing Method. Autobiographical Subject in the Poetics of Differences. “I” as a Sexual Subject. Afrekete as the Sexual “I” and Textual Trope of Trickster. Sexual-Textual Braid. Narrative Braid in the Genre Blend. Conclusion.

Resumen: Un estudio crítico de *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* de Audre Lorde revela que Lorde emplea la narrativa corporizada como un espacio de sutura de emancipación, entrelazando geografía, historia, mito y biografía para construir un yo revolucionario que desafía directamente la dominación heterosexista y los conceptos rígidos y unitarios de identidad y autoría. Este artículo examina cómo la denominación que Lorde hace tanto de la narradora como de “Zami” y del texto como una “biomitografía” representa una forma radical de resistencia, descentrando el sujeto autobiográfico tradicional y, en cambio, posicionando una conciencia lesbica negra en el centro de la narrativa. A través de una intrincada interacción de narrativas intertextuales e intratextuales, Lorde construye una forma autobiográfica alternativa que resiste los discursos hegemónicos occidentales del “yo”. Basándose en el concepto de “manifesto” de Sidonie Smith y el métissage de Françoise Lionnet como estrategias de emancipación autobiográfica, sostengo que en *Zami*, Audre Lorde no solo recupera la subjetividad lesbica negra sino que también deconstruye las estructuras narrativas convencionales, empleando una textualidad trenzada que subvierte las tradiciones autobiográficas occidentales dominantes.

Palabras clave: “Yo” sexual; poética de la diferencia; embaucador; trenza textual; mezcla de géneros.

Sumario: Introducción a la política emancipadora. Mestizaje y manifiesto. Sujeto autobiográfico en la poética de las diferencias. El “yo” como sujeto sexual, Afrekete como el “yo” sexual y tropo textual del embaucador. Trenza sexual-textual. Trenza narrativa en la mezcla de géneros. Conclusión.

INTRODUCING EMANCIPATORY POLITICS

In *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body*, Sidonie Smith asserts that for women who are culturally marginalized and whose voices are often deemed “inauthentic” (62), autobiography serves as a powerful language of assertion. Through this genre, autobiographical subjects engage with and challenge the dominant discourses that shape subjectivity. As unauthorized subjects, they are often positioned within contradictory frameworks, yet by drawing meaning from their lived experiences, they disrupt traditional autobiographical constructs of a free, autonomous self and linear narrative structures. Rather than adhering to many autobiography conventions, these writers embrace the genre’s inherent instability, using it as a reflection of their fluid consciousness and dynamic engagement with “subjectivity, identity, and narratives” (Smith, *Subjectivity* 62). Smith identifies these acts of resistance and self-definition as “emancipatory politics” (*Subjectivity* 188). She further argues that writing an autobiography as a “manifesto” is one of the most effective

ways to enact this autobiographical politics of emancipation. Similarly, Françoise Lionnet, in *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, and Self-Portraiture*, describes autobiographical writing as an “unfailing commitment to a process of emancipation that can redefine the nature and boundaries of the political” (xii). She argues that contemporary female writers, in their efforts to articulate the female self, find it entangled in patriarchal myths of identity. In the process of rediscovery, they interrogate “the sociocultural construction of race and gender” and challenge “the essentializing tendencies that perpetuate exploitation and subjugation . . . on behalf of those fictive differences created by discourses of power” (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices* 5). Finding existing traditions insufficient and disempowering, these writers construct a new vision of female authorship, which Lionnet identifies as the “politics . . . of métissage” (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices* 1), a blending of multiple voices, cultures, and influences to resist imposed hegemonies.

In fact, in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* Lorde employs the embodied narrative as a space of emancipation, weaving together geography, history, myth, and biography to construct a revolutionary self—one that directly challenges heterosexist domination and the rigid, unitary concepts of identity and authorship. This paper examines how Lorde’s naming of both the narrator as “Zami” and the text as a “biomythography” enacts a radical form of resistance, decentering the traditional autobiographical subject and instead positioning a Black lesbian consciousness at the core of the narrative. Through an intricate interplay of intertextual and intratextual storytelling, Lorde constructs an alternative autobiographical form that resists Western hegemonic discourses of the “I.” Drawing on Sidonie Smith’s concept of the “manifesto” and Françoise Lionnet’s métissage as strategies of autobiographical emancipation, we argue that in *Zami*, Audre Lorde not only celebrates Black lesbian subjectivity but also deconstructs conventional narrative structures, employing a braided textuality that subverts dominant Western autobiographical traditions.

1. METISSAGE AND MANIFESTO

Before analyzing the construction of subjectivity and narrative in the paper, it is important to discuss, in brief, how Lionnet and Smith define métissage and “manifesto” respectively. Françoise Lionnet, in her *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*, identifying the

life writings of women of color as the reflection of their heterogenous differences, theorizes autobiography as métissage. Métissage, nearly untranslatable, roughly translated as “braiding,” views autobiography as an author’s engagement with history, myth, and cultures and proclaims it as a braid of multiple voices and disparate forms. In autobiographical writing, Lionnet identifies métissage as a language of novel vision. As Lionnet asserts, “métissage is a praxis and cannot be subsumed under a fully elaborated theoretical system. . . a form of bricolage, [that] brings together biology and history, anthropology and philosophy, linguistics and literature” (*Autobiographical Voices*8) in the spaces of métissage:

multiplicity and diversity are affirmed . . . For it is only by imagining non hierarchical modes of relation among cultures that we can address the crucial issues of indeterminacy and solidarity. . . Métissage is such a concept and a practice: it is the site of undecidability and indeterminacy where solidarity becomes the fundamental principle of political action against hegemonic languages. (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices* 5–6)

The present study reads métissage as “a way of merging and blurring genres, texts and identities; an active literary stance, [a] political strategy” (qtd. in Bishop et al. 2) of blending history with myth, personal with communal in the crafting of the autobiographical narratives of emancipation.

Sidonie Smith explores the concept of the autobiographical manifesto in her influential essay, “The Autobiographical Manifesto: Identities, Temporalities, Politics.” She describes this form as one of several autobiographical strategies that lead to political empowerment. By challenging conventional notions of subjectivity that ignore differences and fostering resistance, the manifesto proposes a redefined relationship with identity, subjectivity, and the body. According to Smith, the autobiographical manifesto questions the supremacy of the singular “I,” affirms the validity of alternative knowledge systems, politicizes the private while personalizing the public—thereby unsettling traditional binaries of selfhood—and ultimately “speaks to the future” (Smith, “The Autobiographical Manifesto” 194). In her work, Audre Lorde exemplifies this resistant subjectivity by intertwining self and sexuality in a way that aligns with Smith’s vision of the autobiographical manifesto. Lorde challenges established narratives and politics by constructing a new, explicitly political “I” that disrupts the dominance of the universal subject.

Furthermore, in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Lorde's autobiographical narrative is deliberately political and serves as an emancipatory practice aimed at revealing both the "true" self and the reality of that self's experiences. In this exploration of identity and experience, she weaves together diverse myths and traditions, employing métissage as a model of female textuality.

2. REVISITING EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP AND FRAMING METHOD

Since its publication, *Zami* has been widely analyzed through black lesbian and generalized lesbian perspectives. Barbara Dibernard interprets it as a *Künstlerroman*, while Georgia Scribellito contextualizes it within the *Bildungsroman* tradition by examining its feminist and intercultural dimensions. Lynda Hall, focusing on Lorde's representations of lesbian identity, explores the performative nature of sexuality and gender in *Zami*. Stephanie Li highlights Lorde's shifting concept of home—from her mother's Carriacou to the embrace of women—whereas Stella Bolaki views the lesbian community as a theoretical home and traces the process of "making home" throughout the text. Bethany Jacobs identifies the maternal as both social and sexual, while Malini Sheoran frames it as an "ecological praxis" (1) in constructing black lesbian identity. Charlene Ball and AnnLouise Keating examine Lorde's engagement with myth, categorizing her as a revisionist mythmaker. Keating argues that Lorde replaces Judeo-Christian myth with African female-centered myth, while Ball asserts that she reinterprets both African and Eurocentric archetypes. Ashley Coleman Taylor compellingly posits that Lorde "alters her sense of self and her being through religio-erotic experience" (680). However, despite these varied interpretations, *Zami* is consistently analyzed as either a novel or an autobiographical fiction. Some scholars, such as Katie King and Benjamin Odhoji, classify *Zami* as an autobiography. King explores the interconnectivity between narrative strategy and identity but limits her discussion to lesbianism, overlooking other intersecting identities. Odhoji applies myth criticism, focusing on the role of maternal myth in identity construction. It can be argued that *Zami* aligns with the American slave narrative tradition, challenging Lorde's project of reversing traditional narratives. Similarly, Sarita Cannon situates the text within the Afro-American "autobiographical literacy narrative," emphasizing how Lorde uses literacy as a tool for empowerment. Unlike previous critiques, this study highlights how Lorde employs feminist autobiographical

strategies—specifically métissage and manifesto—as tools for reconfiguring subjectivity and form in marginalized authors' narratives. It explores myth and geography as textual tropes of resistance and empowerment, advancing *Zami*'s (Lorde) revolutionary agenda of reclaiming tradition and carving out space for Black lesbians. This analysis broadens our understanding of *Zami* (Lorde) as an autobiographical act of defying Western cultural hegemony in a postcolonial, global context.

The present study seeks to examine how Lorde employs Black lesbian subjectivity to subvert dominant discourses of race, gender, and sexuality and to what extent her narration embodies the unstable and hybridized form that both Smith and Lionnet associate with marginalized women's life writing. To explore these research questions the study adopts an interpretive, qualitative approach grounded in feminist autobiography theories of métissage and manifesto and explores the ways in which Lorde constructs a hybrid, politicized self within her biomythographical narrative. The methodology employed centers on textual analysis, thematic exploration, and genre examination, guided by the understanding that autobiography is not merely a record of personal history but a political site of resistance and emancipation. Employing a close textual analysis as the basis of this inquiry the study examines how the autobiographical "I" is constructed not as a unified, stable entity, but as a dynamic, fragmented, sexual subject. The employment of thematic coding that focuses on recurring motifs such as cultural memory, naming, heritage, and sexuality helps contextualize the narrative within broader socio-historical discourses, particularly those related to race, gender, and sexuality in mid-twentieth-century America. Reading Lorde's *Zami* within this methodological framework attests that Lorde deploys autobiography as a sexual-textual tool for constructing subjectivity and ensuring emancipation for the silent and marginalized others.

3. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SUBJECT IN THE POETICS OF DIFFERENCES

The closing line of *Zami*'s pre-prologue, "Becoming. Afrekete" (Lorde 5), signals the unfolding of an autobiographical enterprise in which the female subject assumes agency as both narrator and protagonist of her own story. However, for Lorde, this story resists categorization, as the narrator does not embody a singular, fixed identity but is instead immersed in what Neuman describes as the "poetics of differences" (*Zami* 223). As a self-affirming "black lesbian feminist mother lover poet" (Lorde, *The Cancer*

Journals 25), Lorde's autobiographical subjectivity exists at the shifting "intersections of race, nationality, religion, education, profession, class, language, gender, sexuality" (Neuman 224), historical context, and material conditions. In this framework, identity itself becomes a métissage—a weaving together of diverse strands. As Julia Watson argues, métissage challenges essentialist notions of womanhood by recognizing that women's identities are shaped by "ethnicity, class, time, and location rather than a singular feminist experience" (75). Lorde articulates this multiplicity when she writes:

Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. (Zami 226)

Lorde's marginalization within white American masculine culture is a recurring theme throughout the text. As a child, Lorde endures gendered violence through molestation and rape. As a Black girl in a racist society, she regularly finds "a glob of grey spittle" on her coat or shoe during school. Lorde draws a direct correlation between her specific embodied experience—amputated, one-breasted, and surviving cancer—and her identity as a Black, lesbian, female, and working-class individual. She frames her body not as a passive site of affliction but as a palimpsest of survival and resistance. As in *The Cancer Journals* (Lorde) she poignantly asserts: "growing up Fat Black Female and almost blind in america requires so much surviving that you have to learn from it or die" (40). Her working-class struggle is further defined by occupational hazards—she accepts a job operating an X-ray machine because "there's not too much choice of jobs around here for Colored people, and especially not for Negro girls" (Lorde, Zami 125), unaware that "carbon tet destroys the liver and causes cancer of the kidneys" (Lorde, Zami 126). As a Black lesbian in the 1950s, Lorde's sense of alienation intensifies. She finds no place within the solidarity of either white women or Black men. Black women, conditioned by systemic racism, are taught to regard one another with "deep suspicion" (Lorde, Zami 224). At the same time, her sexual identity further isolates her: "Downtown in the gay bars [she] was a closet student and an invisible Black. Uptown at Hunter [she] was a closet dyke and a general intruder" (Lorde, Zami 179). Even as a gay subculture emerged in

resistance to heterosexual norms, Black lesbians remained on the margins, their visibility considered dangerous. Lorde reflects on this precarious existence: “To be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet in a white environment, even to the extent of dancing in the Bagatelle, was considered by many Black lesbians to be simply suicidal” (*Zami* 224).

Confronted with multiple layers of exclusion, Lorde found existing autobiographical models inadequate for representing her lived experience. She rejected both the self-representation traditions of male writers and the introspective personal narratives of white Western women. Instead, she fused history, myth, and biography with autobiography, creating a radical new form of self-narration that defied fixed categories. As an act of resistance, Lorde transforms writing into a political tool, crafting what Hartsock describes as “an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top and can transform the margins as well as the center” (qtd. in Smith, “The Autobiographical Manifesto” 191). By interweaving personal biography with history and myth, she reinvents the self as *Zami* (Lorde). This unconventional braiding of narrative forms is essential for articulating a new vision of both sexuality and textuality. In this analysis, *Zami* (Lorde) emerges as both a manifesto of self-invention and an assertion of the politics of identity. Its subtitle, “biomythography” becomes a textual métissage—a fusion of myth, reality, history, fantasy, and dream that resists imposed definitions and asserts the complexity of marginalized subjectivities.

4. “I” AS A SEXUAL SUBJECT

Audre Lorde opens *Zami* by exploring the histories of Grenadians and Barbadians, a move that, as Smith observes, allows her to transform experiences of oppression into a call for new awareness. By reclaiming an alternative cultural narrative, Lorde both critiques dominant political structures and “counter valorize an alternative nationalism” (Smith, “The Autobiographical Manifesto” 202). This cultural reclamation is especially evident in her depiction of Carriacou, her mother’s homeland, which she presents as a site of intergenerational memory and identity. Reflecting on her visit to Grenada, Lorde writes:

When I visited Grenada I saw the root of my mother's powers walking through the streets. I thought, this is the country of my foremothers, my forebearing mothers, those Black island women who defined themselves by what they did . . . There is a softer edge of African sharpness upon these women, and they swing through the rain-warm streets with an arrogant gentleness that I remember in strength and vulnerability. (*Zami* 9)

The vision of androgyny that Lorde seeks in the prologue is embodied in the women of Carriacou, who combine both masculine strength and feminine beauty. These women engage in daily labor, tending to animals, farming, and building homes, while also performing rituals to ensure prosperity. They sustain their families and communities, and in the absence of their men—who are often away at sea—they form deep bonds with one another, both as companions and lovers. Lorde affirms this unique sense of connection by highlighting the meaning of *Zami*, which she defines as “a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers” (*Zami* 255). She further emphasizes their legendary strength and beauty: “How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty” (Lorde, *Zami* 14). Through Carriacou, Lorde constructs a geography of women-identified women, where lesbianism is not merely a personal identity but a historical and social phenomenon. By reclaiming this cultural myth, she challenges dominant narratives of nationalism and belonging, centering Black women’s resilience, labor, and love as acts of resistance.

In the text, Lorde realizes her sexuality as Zami: “patois for ‘lesbian,’ based on the French expression, *les amies*” (*Zami* 385), as Chinosole remarks, in the very moment of her first menstruation. In her mother’s kitchen, when she was pounding spice with the mortar and pestle to make “souse,” a traditional West Indian dish, to celebrate her first cycle, a love-making rhythm aroused in her. However, she didn’t imagine the pestle as a phallus in a traditional way. On the contrary, the whole imagery of grinding spice with the mortar and pestle evoked a lesbian erotic in her mind and aroused a sexual awaking in her body and psyche, as she says, “I smelled the delicate breadfruit smell rising from my print blouse that was my own womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious” (Lorde, *Zami* 77). In Stella Bolaki’s words, “Lorde sexualizes the Carriacou ritual of pounding spice” in order to embrace “a woman-identified sexuality” (201). Making this awakening as natural and autonomous as menstruation blood and as spicy as “souse,” Lorde talks

back to the discourses of “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 11) that women are by nature heterosexual. Against the repressive mechanisms of desire and myth of the body, Lorde reinvents the myth and reconnects it to her sexual identity to her matrilineal heritage as the sources of subjectivity, power, and emancipation. Naming her Zami, Lorde affirms her Black female sexuality and deploys the “arrogant gentleness,” “strength,” and “love” of her Carriacou mothers and grandmothers in her “I.” Moreover, in her development of the self as a performing subject, she will be applying the place as an intertextual chronotopic space. Therefore, Lorde’s ancestry is a trope to corroborate her difference not only as a Black female but also as a woman whose sense of survival comes from other women and who owes to many other women in her becoming process, reaching a new consciousness in the text.

A declaration of the subject as Zami or lesbian is an instance of witnessing the dislodgement of the “Eurocentric, phallogocentric ‘I’” (Smith, “The Autobiographical Manifesto” 189) mostly white, able-bodied, heterosexual male human. This new subject treats sexuality as a vital point of belongingness, a source of power, and a form of subjectivity and resistance. According to Zimmerman, “As the protagonist assumes her lesbian identity through her first realization of love or sexuality, she also changes from an outsider into one who belongs; she has ‘come home’” (249). Lorde politicizes lesbianism to answer the sexual hegemony of heteronormativity and those black feminists too “who once insisted that lesbianism was a white woman’s problem now insist that Black lesbians are a threat to Black nationhood, are consorting with the enemy, are basically un-black” (*Sister Outsider* 121). Lorde foregrounds the body and creates the homosexual sublime by depicting Lorde’s relationships with women as friends and lovers, who gave meaning to her living and provided fuel to her burning survival.

Through her experiences with various “journeywomen” in lesbian relationships, Audre Lorde explores her Black female sexuality in a revisionist manner. Lorde’s intimacy with Eudora—an exiled white Texan woman who turned lesbian in Mexico—is depicted as an exchange of strength, creativity, and intellectual passion. Through her relationship with Eudora, Lorde portrays lesbian sexuality as a powerful antidote to invisibility. Eudora, as her gay lover, becomes a catalyst for Lorde’s reclamation of freedom, beauty, and visibility. This transformation is metaphorically aligned with her experience in Mexico, which offered the tranquility and self-affirmation that New York and her childhood home

had denied her. In Mexico, Lorde learns that the word “negro” is used to mean “something beautiful” (*Zami* 173), mirroring Eudora’s affirmation that she is “more beautiful than [she] know[s]” (*Zami* 165). Through both the space of Mexico and the gaze of Eudora, Lorde begins to see herself a new, stating: “It was in Mexico that I stopped feeling invisible. In the streets, in the buses, in the markets, in the Plaza, in the particular attention with in Eudora’s eyes” (*Zami* 175). In this sense, Eudora and Mexico become symbolically interchangeable—both serve as sites of recognition, love, and self-discovery.

Beyond visibility, Lorde’s relationship with Eudora celebrates lesbian sexuality as a vital source of emotional and physical strength, rooted in a network of women’s love. Eudora’s counsel—“waste nothing Chica, not even pain. Particularly not pain” (*Zami* 236)—resonates deeply with Lorde’s writing in *The Cancer Journals*, where pain is reclaimed as a source of power and truth. Lorde writes not only of emotional suffering but also of embodied experience, giving voice to the body through her literature. The memory of Eudora—marked by “the pale keloids of radiation” (Lorde, *Zami* 167)—is evoked as a shared language of survival and resistance. It is as though Eudora, twenty-four years her senior and once her lover at nineteen, reappears symbolically before Lorde’s mastectomy, offering a legacy of endurance and empowering her to face loss with courage and clarity in *The Cancer Journals*.

In her intimacy with Ginger, she challenges conventional beauty standards by celebrating Ginger’s “snapping little dark eyes, skin the color of well-buttered caramel, and a body like the Venus of Willendorf” (Lorde, *Zami* 136). This description subverts the traditional ideal of white, slim, and rosy beauty, instead centering a “dark,” “fat,” and “caramel”-skinned Black body as desirable and powerful. With Muriel, her weird white lesbian partner, the erotic transforms into an all-encompassing force capable of healing and liberation. Lorde describes this power as “all-powerful,” one that could “give word to . . . pain and rages . . . free . . . writings, cure racism, end homophobia” (*Zami* 210). Her activism in establishing a lesbian identity moves beyond physical relationships, embracing a broader vision of resistance and transformation. As Ruth Ginzberg argues, Lorde moves beyond a fixed lesbian identity, instead portraying it as a dynamic interplay of “acts, moments, relationships, encounters, attractions, perspectives, insights, outlooks, connections, and feelings” (82). Thus, Lorde’s work introduces a revolutionary rhetoric of lesbianism, positioning herself as an active subject rather than the passive

object to which she has historically been confined. As Smith notes in “The Autobiographical Manifesto,” “she purposefully identifies herself as subject, situating herself against the object-status to which she has been confined” (190). Through this reframing, Lorde not only reclaims her identity but also expands the possibilities of lesbian existence as a political and creative force.

5. AFREKETE AS THE SEXUAL “I” AND THE TEXTUAL TROPE OF TRICKSTER

Lorde intertwines the erotic body with linguistic expression through the trickster figure Afrekete, embedding her within what Smith terms “the representational politics of language” (“The Autobiographical Manifesto” 203) in the manifesto. Central to Lorde’s representational politics is her identification of métissage as a means of reclaiming and reimagining the past. As Lionnet asserts, “renewed connections to the past can emancipate us, provided they are used to elaborate empowering myths for living in the present and for affirming our belief in the future” (“Métissage” 7). Lorde implements this process by weaving history, mythology, and language into a transformative narrative, embodied in the trickster figure of Afrekete. An African goddess and the youngest daughter of the mythical mother Mawu-Lisa, Afrekete originates within the African trickster tradition. Judy Grahn in *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay World* (1990) identifies Afrekete with Esu, the supreme trickster god, describing him as: “Eshu-Afrikete is the rhyme god, the seventh and youngest son in the old Mawulisa pantheon . . . As the trickster, he . . . makes connections, and is communicator, linguist, and poet. Only Afrikete knows all the language of the gods” (125).

By invoking Afrekete as a trickster figure, Lorde subverts dominant linguistic and mythological structures. As Gates notes, Esu, a key figure in African diasporic cultures, functions as “a trickster and . . . messenger of the gods [who] figures prominently in the mythologies of Yoruba cultures” (xxi). In *Zami*, Lorde reimagines Afrekete as the “youngest daughter,” an embodiment of “linguistic skill and Black female strength, intelligence, and sexuality” (Provost 46). By situating Afrekete as a predecessor of Esu, Lorde not only revises the trickster myth but also reclaims divinity through a Black, female-centered perspective. Lorde’s reimagining of mythology subverts the conventional depiction of a white male deity, thereby disrupting the binary framework of Western thought,

which prioritizes whiteness over Blackness, masculinity over femininity, and logic over emotion. This strategic reconfiguration aligns with Lorde's broader rejection of "the master's tools," allowing her to "spiritually remember and reconstruct [her] cultural past" (Keating 91). Through Afrekete, Lorde disrupts hegemonic narratives, reclaiming language and mythology as tools of empowerment and resistance for Black women.

With the reconstructed past in the trickster figure, Lorde writes freely of the "changing boundaries of our racial and sexual bodies" which Lionnet considers "an important step in the complex process of female emancipation" (Lionnet, "Métissage" 66). Lorde's handling of language, in *Zami*, becomes increasingly trickster-like when Afrekete emerges in the text not as Esu—an abstraction—but as a real-life woman, a friend, a partner in the bed through whom Lorde "links the revolutionary agenda of her emancipatory psychosexual politics" (Smith, "The Autobiographical Manifesto" 197) in print. Afrekete emerges when Lorde is physically frozen and psychologically lost from the broken relationship with her white, weird friend Muriel. As a complete package, she combines all earlier loves and proves more of what they lacked. With her "full" mouth, "chocolate color skin," "broad-lipped beautiful face," and "great lidded luminescent eyes" (Lorde, *Zami* 243), Afrekete was not only sexually appealing but also could seduce like Ginger, illuminate like Eudora, her lesbian lovers. Afrekete's transcending love not only breaks the "carapace" of Lorde's bodily inaction but also answers many of Lorde's questions that have been inflicting her for years. Lorde learns to accept many things that lived with her as suppressed agony: the loss of friends to alcoholism, her friend Gennie's suicide, the break-up with Muriel, and "internalized racism and sexism" (Ball 72). Afrekete, thus, heals many of the imperishable scars from Lorde's psyche and helps Lorde emerge as a dominant voice in black lesbian activism. Although the affair between Lorde and Afrekete was of a short time the power of it was immense as Lorde claims "her print remains upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo" (*Zami* 253).

6. SEXUAL-TEXTUAL BRAID

Lorde weaves a sexual-textual braid treating sexuality as a form of matrilineal heritage and her mother's motherland, Carriacou, a geographical intertext. In Lorde's lovemaking with Afrekete, Lorde evokes home, Caribbean, and Africa. Her apartment seems to be a tropical

paradise of Carriacou, decorated with “pot after clay pot of green and tousled large and small-leaved plants of all shapes and conditions” and a tank full of “translucent rainbowed fish dart[ing] back and forth through the lit water” (Lorde, *Zami* 248). Describing their lovemaking Lorde says, “[w]e bought delicious pippins, the size of french cashew apples.” There were ripe red finger bananas, stubby and sweet, with which I parted your lips gently, to insert the peeled fruit into your grape-purple flower” (Lorde, *Zami* 249). The “breadfruit,” “avocado,” “banana,” and “coconut” (which bear both her mother’s and Afrekete’s smell) are traditional Caribbean fruits, which both the mother and Afrekete buy from the market “under the bridge” (Lorde, *Zami* 249). Thus, the homeland memory in terms of visual and gustatory imagery of fruits is dancing with her female-oriented bodily desire in the textual construction of sexual subjectivity.

About the performance of the new identity, Smith says, “The manifesto revels in the energetic display of a new collocation of identity” (“The Autobiographical Manifesto”193). With Afrekete, Lorde’s identity is expressly a “conscious display” of a revisionary act of the embodied erotic. In the last scene of the lesbian erotic, “in the shadow of the roof chimney,” at Afrekete’s rooftop, Afrekete’s and Lorde’s bodies move against each other “making moon, honor, love” (Lorde, *Zami* 252). The lesbian union of their black bodies becomes an honorable act of love, and “making moon,” transcends the limitation of time and space. Moreover, by affecting the tide, the moon represents hope and opportunity for change. Thus, it promises to celebrate differences and “speaks to the future” that will fight off homophobia, sexism, class consciousness, and racial supremacy. The reflection of the moon in their sweat-slippery bodies, demands Lorde as “sacred.” Such a compelling choice of the word “sacred” transgresses the binaries of physical and spiritual. The lovemaking becomes a ritual act that fuses the body with the soul. This can be viewed as an example of the “flamboyant performance of the revolutionary woman” (“The Autobiographical Manifesto”199) in Smith’s language.

Moreover, this revolutionary subject exuberantly employs stylistic strategies, as Audre Lorde immerses herself in incantatory italics:

Afrekete, Afreketeride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman’s power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters, that the discarded evils, abandoned at all crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys. (*Zami* 252)

Here, Lorde invokes Afrekete, pleading with the goddess to carry her to the crossroads, a sacred space where they can unite in women's power. Mythically, Esu—the Yoruba deity of communication and transition—is known to meet people at the crossroads, inspiring the construction of shrines in these liminal spaces. Similarly, Lorde envisions Afrekete as “the officiating priestess of the crossroads” (Anzaldúa 102), where their lovemaking transcends the personal and becomes a collective prayer for “strangers and sisters.” In this sacred union, the oppressive forces of stereotyping, subjugation, and deprivation are cast away. Through this enactment of sexual subjectivity, woven into the textual fabric of *Zami*, Lorde sets forth a radical reimagining of identity and authorship. Her work resonates with Evelyn M. Hammonds’ assertion that Black lesbian sexualities are not merely fixed identities but dynamic spaces of discourse and material existence. By focusing on Black lesbian experiences, she argues, a new mode of expression emerges—one that breaks the historical silence imposed on these identities. Rather than being confined to rigid categories, Black lesbian sexualities become active sites for the creation of “speech, desire, and agency”(Hammonds 181), challenging dominant narratives and fostering new possibilities for self-definition and resistance. By positioning the erotic as a space of resistance and transformation, Lorde not only reclaims Black lesbian subjectivity but also challenges the silence historically imposed on it, opening the way for new forms of expression, desire, and empowerment.

Zami (Lorde) has been proved to be the manifestation of these activities as “with the language of the body the narrator inaugurates the utopian regime of the (Black women), the newly coined sovereign” (Smith, “The Autobiographical Manifesto” 199). As we know, Lorde embarks on “becoming Afrekete” in *Zami*. By “recreating (her) in words” (*Zami* 255), Lorde becomes the trickster goddess who becomes the speaking subject and talks in different languages. Afrekete becomes the trope of Lorde’s ability to write what as a way of emancipation she has been seeking desperately as a black woman. With the power of writing, Lorde engenders a lesbian utopia. In their brief last meeting, Lorde and Afrekete become “an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge” (*Zami* 253). Together they reformed and reshaped their concept of “self,” identity and the community. After their last lovemaking scene in the Tar Beach, when they strolled down “into the sweltering midnight of a west Harlem summer,” they found “mothers and fathers smiled at [them] in

greeting as [they] strolled down to Eighth Avenue, hand in hand" (Lorde, *Zami* 252–53). In these smiling greetings, Lorde heralds a new age, one in which sexuality erupts strength, injects vitality, and builds a community of "we" the way the subject of the manifesto stands "to speak as one of a group to speak for a group" (Smith, "The Autobiographical Manifesto" 193).

Thus, Audre Lorde disrupts the traditional Western autobiographical "I," which primarily centers on male narratives, by redefining autobiography through a Black lesbian perspective. Rather than adhering strictly to factual details, she reinterprets Africa while transforming her own lived experiences—growing up in 1940s Harlem, navigating the McCarthy era, and embracing her identity as a Black lesbian in the 1950s—into myth. By invoking the goddess Afrekete, Lorde weaves together personal, social, political, and historical elements with mythology, creating a Black feminist critical consciousness shaped by geography, sexuality, class, race, and language. Thus, Lorde integrates the subversive trickster figure into her identity, reinventing herself as both the collective "Zami" and Afrekete—a writer who taps into the suppressed power of female sexuality to energize her literary voice.

In such a formulation, Lorde "resists the totalizing definitional politics of traditional autobiographical practice" (Smith, "The Autobiographical Manifesto" 186) since traditional autobiography is a male Western genre of the egoist "I," in which "the author, the narrator, and the protagonist" (Lejeune 5) are identical, who is always confident, uninfluenced by external affairs, separate from others as a discrete and finite unit of society. Lorde has replaced the "I" reflecting on Lionnet's view that the female model of self is a métissage or braiding of multiple voices within the self. Critiquing Augustine's concept of self Lionnet states that "Augustine's search for plenitude and coherence leads him to emphasize wholeness and completeness, whereas for the women writers, it will become clear that the human individual is a fundamentally relational subject whose 'autonomy' can only be a myth" (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, 27). According to Lionnet, "from autobiographical writings" of women we can learn "a new way of listening for the relational voice of the self" (*Autobiographical Voices*, 248) in which the self instead of becoming other or "los[ing] itself in other's essence" opts for "assimilation, incorporation, and identification with a mirror image" (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, 67). Lorde's Zami has constructed the self in the similar vein with Lionnet's vision. Instead of defining herself "through individuation and separation from

others" (Schweickart 54), Lorde has created a flexible ego boundary that defines herself in incorporating the characteristics of Eudora, Ginger, Muriel, and many other women.

Lorde's autobiographical self is shaped by multiple voices allowing her to adopt the role of a trickster linguist, Afrekete, who dismantles rigid binaries of identity and language. This transformation challenges the traditional idea of individual autonomy, replacing it with what she describes as "a new vision" in her conversation with Tate. In this vision, the Western concept of a singular, sovereign self-fades, as Lorde surrenders her individual "I" to the collective presence of ancestral and personal figures. By embodying these real and mythical women, she becomes Afrekete and, ultimately, Zami. Rather than embracing a fixed identity, Zami fosters a shared consciousness, and is shaped by multiple voices, historically and culturally grounded, and open to fluidity. Through this narrative approach, Lorde illustrates that both subjectivity and writing are inherently interwoven with the voices and influences of others. Lorde's narrative practice challenges the idea of individual autonomy, replacing it with a vision of selfhood that is relational and contextually rooted in a broader social and historical framework. This reimagining of identity, as fluid and collective, provides a powerful critique of traditional autobiographical forms and offers a more inclusive and interconnected approach to understanding the self.

In fact, Lorde's *Zami* is an evocative and intimate depiction of her life through personal and interpersonal growth. However, it encodes heterogeneity through the intertextual references to Charlotte Bronte, Dante, Sara Vaughan, Frankie Lymon, and many other writers and singers on the one hand, while with her mother's, Ella's, and Gennie's stories of intersectional oppression of race and gender, constantly produce intratextual diversity on the other. Lorde gives voice to her subjectivity that is built in an intersubjective fashion identified with other women. Writing the text, she takes the "reality of *mētis* as a form of *techne* projects itself on a plurality of practical levels but can never be subsumed under a single, identifiable system of diametric dichotomies" (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, 14). Lionnet argues that the Greek *mētis* "is the allegorical 'figure of a function or a power,' a cunning intelligence like that of Odysseus, which opposes transparency and the metaphysics of identity" (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, 14). This power is exercised in Lorde's neologism, biomythography, where leaving the customary

“auto” it turns to be a “complexly-integrated and relational” (Davies 56) theoretical narrative braid and the subject becoming Zami exercised that cunning intelligence of trickster god Odysseus. With her linguistic trick, she resists the Western hegemonic orthographic dominance which Cannon identifies as “the manipulation of language to create a space for herself in a world that often refuses to see her” (345) and any marginalized like her. She deliberately capitalizes words like “Black” “Colored” and “Indian” while writing “america,” “white,” “german,” “catholic,” “united states,” “white house” and “french” in lowercase. As Elizabeth Alexander notes, “these choices are ideologically driven: She spells America with a lowercase a, again exercising her prerogative as marker of the body of the book and letting her spelled language bear her perspective on the world” (704). Moreover, the choice of the words and phrases like “thundering space,” “light” (Lorde, *Zami* 249) “electric storm,” “energy,” “charge” (Lorde, *Zami* 249) for describing lesbian love is injected with revolutionary zeal reflecting Smith’s notion that the manifesto’s “language must become the revolutionary palace” of the new subject (“The Autobiographical Manifesto” 196).

6.1. Narrative Braid in the Genre Blend

In our argument of the genre blend as a strategy for the emancipation of marginalized women authors, the concepts of manifesto and métissage happen to be much more relatable once more. Smith argues that since the subjects of the manifesto are “resisting” voices, in practice, they “require and develop resisting forms” (Smith and Watson 433) of autobiography. Smith exemplifies Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years* as a manifesto that makes a “textual montage” (Smith and Watson 433) of journal entries, sketches, prose analysis, and poetry. This textual montage resonates with Lionnet’s métissage “that is the weaving of different strands of raw material and threads of various colors into one piece of fabric” (“Métissage” 213) as a strategy of emancipation of the textual construction of “I.” Weaving different genres into a piece of life writing Lorde executes métissage as the resisting form of a manifesto.

Expressing the crucial moments of her life, in her expression of gratitude: “To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?” (Lorde, *Zami* 3), in her dearest wishes: “If my mother were like everybody else’s” (Lorde, *Zami* 16), in emphasizing: “the most vicious kind” (Lorde, *Zami* 12), in expressing sensuality, in expressing urge for transcendence,

Lorde's prose turns into italicized poetry. In her acknowledgments, Lorde pays her gratitude to those "writers of songs whose melodies stitch up [her] years" (*Zami* "Acknowledgements"). Throughout *Zami*, for various purposes, Lorde uses songs. She adopts songs as a tool to reconnect herself with her mother mythically, since her mother's people "had a song for everything" (Lorde, *Zami* 11). Moreover, "the endless casual song-making" that constructed her mother's "self" has become a part of Lorde's unconscious. Consequently, Lorde connects events with songs and in the climax of the plot, Lorde feels the spiritual as a "surge of strength" (*Zami* 239) to come back to life from her sense of being lost after her breakup with Muriel, as Lorde said,

The bus door opened and I placed my foot on the step. Quite suddenly, there was music swelling up into my head . . . They were singing the last chorus of an old spiritual of hope:
Gonna die this death
on Cal-va-ryyyyy
BUT AIN'T GONNA
DIE
NO MORE . . . ! (*Zami* 238)

In this "music swelling" in her head, Lorde "felt rich with hope and a promise of life—more importantly, a new way through or beyond pain" (*Zami* 239). In this newfound way to a promising life, Lorde stood beyond the physical realities. It turned into the moment of revelation when Lorde heard "the sky fill with a new spelling of my own name" (*Zami* 239). Therefore, its blend of prose with poetry, drama, and songs substantiates, textual montage/métissage/braiding of literary forms, to combat the leanness of generic autobiography and counter its claim of universality.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on its construction of the new "I" as the sexual subjectivity, and deployment of linguistic politics through mythical, geographical, and orthographic tropes the present analysis has claimed that *Zami* "offers an arena in which the revolutionary can insist on identity in service to an emancipatory politics" (Smith, "The Autobiographical Manifesto" 196). Although we have seen that Lorde's life is braided in her intersectionally marginalized identities, as a racial, gendered, poor, and sexual subject

position, she recovered herself from marginality and erasure with self-consciousness about her black mothers and community myths and stories. Lorde's trajectory has emancipated by harboring the new subject Zami, a revolutionary black lesbian who is capable of performing the identity publicly, asserting it as a possibility for a promising future during a time when lesbianism was a taboo and black lesbianism was completely imbued with silence and invisibility. Her work has become a form of speech/action/performance that withstands symbolization within a homogeneous framework of life writing. Exercising the power to transform the logic and the clarity of concepts of autobiographical "I" and narrative, she writes the self without "auto," and makes the graph a braid of traditions, which makes her biomythography the "locus of her dialogue with a tradition she tacitly aims at subverting" (Lionnet, "Métissage" 262). Thus, not only has she given voice to marginalized identities but also envisioned a communitarian social vision and created a space for upcoming generations of writers. As one of the contemporary radical lesbian authors, Jamaika Ajalon declares, "With *Zami*, Lorde both named and gave a blueprint for a way of writing our existence, our truth. The idea of mythologizing one's life, one's lived experience, burst all kinds of doors wide open for me artistically" (1).

FUNDING

This work was supported by the Research Cell, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Noakhali 3814, Bangladesh, Research ID:NSTU-RC-ENG-T-23-99.

REFERENCES

Alexander, Elizabeth. "'Coming out Blackened and Whole': Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde's *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals*." *American Literary History*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1994, pp. 695–715. doi:10.1093/alh/6.4.695.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands La Frontera*. Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

Ajalon, Jamika. "How Audre Lorde's Genre-Blurring *Zami* Spoke my Truth into Existence." *Literary Hub*, June 10, 2021, lithub.com/how-audre-lordes-genre-blurring-zami-spoke-my-truth-into-existence/#top/.

Ball, M. Charlene. "Old Magic and New Fury: The Theophany of Afrekete in Audre Lorde's 'Tar Beach.'" *NWSA Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2001, pp. 61–85, www.jstor.org/stable/4316783/.

Bishop, Kathy, et al. "Narrative Métissage as an Innovative Engagement Practice." *Engaged Scholar Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2019, pp. 1–17, doi: 10.15402/esj.v5i2.68331.

Bolaki, Stella. *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American*. Brill, 2011, doi: 10.1163/9789401200677.

Cannon, Sarita. "Reading, Writing, and Resistance in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*." *Biography*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2019, pp. 335–54, doi: 10.1353/bio.2019.0030.

Chinosole, "Audre Lorde and Matrilineal Diaspora: 'Moving History beyond Nightmare into Structures for the Future...'" *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, edited by Joanne M. Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin, Rutgers UP, 1990, pp. 379–94.

Coleman Taylor, Ashley. "Religio-erotic Experience and Transoceanic Becoming at the Shoreline in Audre Lorde's *Zami*." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 91, no. 3, 2023, pp. 680–97, doi: 10.1093/jaarel/lfae020.

Davies, Carole Boyce. *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. Routledge, 1994.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford UP, 1988.

Ginzberg, Ruth. "Audre Lorde's (Nonessentialist) Lesbian Eros." *Hypatia*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1992, pp. 73–90, doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.1992.tb00719.x.

Grahn, Judith. *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds*. Beacon P, 1990.

Hammonds, Evelyn M. "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence." *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, edited by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Routledge, 1997, pp.170–82.

Keating, Ann Louise. "Myth Smashers, Myth Makers: (Re)Visionary Techniques in the Works of Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldua, and Audre Lorde." *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 26, no. 2–3, 1993, pp. 73–95, doi:10.1300/J082v26n02_04.

Lejeune, Philippe. "The Autobiographical Pact." *On Autobiography*, edited by Paul John Eakin, and translated by Katherine Leavy, U of Minnesota P, 1989, pp. 1–30.

Lionnet, Françoise. *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. Cornell UP, 1989, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g5zp/.

Lionnet, Françoise. "Métissage, Emancipation, and Female Textuality in Two Francophone Writers." *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, edited by Bella Brozki and Celeste Schenck, Cornel UP, 1988, pp. 260–80.

Lorde, Audre. *The Cancer Journals. Spinsters/AuntLute*, 1980.

Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Persephone Press, 1982.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press. 1984.

Neuman, Shirley. "Autobiography: From Different Poetics to a Poetics of Differences." *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, edited by Marlene Kadar, Toronto UP, 1992, pp.213–30, doi: 10.3138/9781442674615-019.

Provost, Kara. "Becoming Afrekete: The Trickster in the Work of Audre Lorde." *MELUS*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1995, pp. 45–59, doi: 10.2307/467889.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)." *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15, no.3, 2003, pp. 11-48.

Schweickart, Patrocinio P. "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading." *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, edited by Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart, Johns Hopkins UP, 1986, pp. 31–62.

Sheoran, Malini. "Audre Lorde and Queer Ecology: An Ecological Praxis of Black Lesbian Identity in *Zami*." *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2024, pp. 314–32, doi: 10.1080/10894160.2024.2362115.

Smith, Sidonie. *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. Indiana UP, 1993.

Smith, Sidonie. "The Autobiographical Manifesto: Identities, Temporalities, Politics." *Autobiography and Questions of Gender*, edited by Shirley Neuman, Routledge, 1991, pp. 186-212.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Women, Autobiography Theory: A Reader*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

Watson, Julia. "Toward an Anti-Metaphysics of Autobiography." *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-representation*, edited by Robert Folkenflik. Stanford UP, 1993, pp. 57–124.

Zimmerman, Bonnie. *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969–1989*. Beacon Press, 1990.



Mourning for the Lost Nation: The Transformative Poetics of Derek Jarman's *The Last of England* and Terence Davies' *Of Time and The City*.

Luto por la nación perdida: La poética transformadora de Derek Jarman *The Last of England* y Terence Davies *Of Time and The City*.

DIANA ORTEGA MARTÍN

Institution address: Facultad de Filología, Universidad Complutense, Plaza Menéndez Pelayo s/n, 28040, Madrid.

Email: dorteg02@ucm.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-2880-4241

Received: 25/09/2024. Accepted: 02/07/2025.

How to cite this article: Ortega Martín, Diana. "Mourning for the Lost Nation: The Transformative Poetics of Derek Jarman's *The Last of England* and Terence Davies' *Of Time and The City*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46. 2025, pp. 328–353.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/0n1bee98>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#). / Artículo de acceso abierto distribuido bajo una [Licencia Creative Commons Atribución 4.0 Internacional \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Abstract: The mourning for the decay of England's glory has become a constant presence in postmodern English culture. There is an ever-present feeling of nostalgia for the dissolution of the past, while, simultaneously, the future is being cancelled. Both Derek Jarman and Terence Davies transformed films into poetic devices where the emotion was to be poured out, reflected upon, and revitalized. This article aims to study how the authors' poetics are articulated, aiming to analyze the intersections between poetry, film, politics, and national identity. To achieve that, the poetic resources and strategies are to be interpreted in relation to the political situation, as both authors establish connections between individual emotions on a micro-personal level and the broader political and collective panorama. Jarman and Davies were adept at crafting a nostalgic epistemology from poetics that allowed them to acknowledge the current state of bleakness while also constructing a new identity for the nation.

Keywords: Nostalgia; Film; Politics; National Identity; Poetry; England

Summary: Introduction. Weep for *The Last of England*: Jarman's Experience of Despair. The Land of Lost Content: The Elegy of Terence Davies. Conclusions.

Resumen: El duelo por la decadencia de la gloria de Inglaterra se ha convertido en una presencia constante en la cultura inglesa posmoderna. Hay un sentimiento siempre presente de nostalgia por la disolución del pasado, mientras, simultáneamente, se cancela el futuro. Tanto Derek Jarman como Terence Davies transformaron las películas en dispositivos poéticos donde la emoción debía ser vertida, reflexionada y revitalizada. Este artículo pretende estudiar cómo se articulan las poéticas de los autores, con el objetivo de analizar las intersecciones entre poesía, cine, política e identidad nacional. Para ello, se interpretarán los recursos y estrategias poéticas en relación con la situación política, ya que ambos autores establecen conexiones entre las emociones individuales a nivel micro-personal y el panorama político y colectivo más amplio. Jarman y Davies supieron elaborar una epistemología nostálgica a partir de una poética que les permitió reconocer el actual estado de desolación, pero también construir una nueva identidad para la nación.

Palabras clave: Nostalgia; Cine; Política; Identidad Nacional; Poesía; Inglaterra.

Sumario: Introducción. Llorad por los últimos de Inglaterra: La experiencia de la desesperación de Jarman. El lugar de los contenidos perdidos: La elegía de Terence Davies. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

The cultural postmodern atmosphere gave rise to many speeches lamenting the nation's feeling of being adrift after the dismantling of the post-war consensus and its transition to neoliberal profit policies. The nation's national identity crisis has been attributed to several factors like the inability to mourn the loss of the Empire or the coercive turn in state policies. Many of these discourses were transmitted via cinema, within the margins of the hegemonic cinematic versions of the nation. Films like *A Month in the Country* or *Maurice* (1987) triumphed among mainstream audiences, as the heritage film industry was particularly prominent during the Thatcher years. It often provided audiences with the fantasy of an idealized English past; however, as Higson notes, the historical link between heritage and conservatism was aesthetic and not necessarily discursive. Higson argues that these films' portrayal of the past was complex and contested, despite some critiques displayed narratively to the most prominent societal flaws (class, gender, and race discrimination): "At the level of the image, at the level of the lovingly created *mise-en-scène* of the national past, these films seemed to invite a conservative nostalgic gaze which overwhelmed the narrative critique, a loving, desiring gaze that celebrated the vision of the past" (122). Higson's claims were disputed by other scholars like Claire Monk, who found in heritage films hybrid spaces of shifting identities (123). While Monk's claims are valid, as many anti-heritage critiques are often too categoric, even Monk recognizes the genre's "tension between an excess of period spectacle and the ironic critiques present in the scripts" (123). Consequently, the films offered a

reified vision of the past that did not question the fundamental pillars of British national identity but offered, sometimes, a surface critique of its most problematic aspects.

The margins of cinema provided a space for more alternative filmmakers with independent visions of the nation and different approaches to nostalgia. It is the case of both Derek Jarman and Terence Davies, filmmakers who emerged in the Thatcher years and who converted film into a poetic medium, an evocative rather than narrative device based on rhythm, emotion and imagery. Jarman and Davies were able to transform their anger and despair at the state of the nation into a new idea of how national identities should be approached. The directors' power of transmutation is inscribed within the possibilities of film poetry, of which Ken Kelman explores some of the basic elements: "All elements here exist for the sake of the direct impact of the artist's vision. The effect of the narrative as such, or the rhythm of cutting as such, is completely absorbed in the poetry. We are primarily held by emotion as such" (Kelman 5). Emotions are what drive both Jarman and Davies' works, crafting a poetic reflection on loss, the nation's cultural heritage, and the possibilities for the future.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the poetics of both filmmakers concerning the politics of national identity and their socio-political reflections through the poetic and filmic medium. Derek Jarman proposes a visual allegory on national essence and the causes for the nation's downfall: from the inability to mourn the dismemberment of the empire and the remaining Imperial mindset to the changing paradigm when neoliberalism emerged. Terence Davies instead, crafts an homage to an old Liverpool that represented a different mindset, where communities and the collective were the cornerstones. Both filmmakers converge in transforming the visual medium into a poetical tool that mourns the loss of a cultural and emotional heritage but also elaborates a transformative proposal for a newer and different future for the nation. By exploring visual techniques, the aim is to delve into the differences and connections between their individual emotions and the broader political panorama, bridging the gap between the private and the public, the personal and the political. Ultimately, both directors craft an epistemology of nostalgia as a tool to investigate the causes of the nation's crisis.

1. WEEP FOR *THE LAST OF ENGLAND*: JARMAN'S EXPERIENCE OF DESPAIR

Derek Jarman's *The Last of England* serves as a powerful meditation on England's state of fragmentation and dereliction. The visually impactful allegorical poem employs a violent lyrism that reflects on the nation's past and the specters that persist to both haunt the present and abolish the future. Moreover, the choice to use Super 8mm film with low frame rates provides the image with a unique and characteristic texture. The film grapples with the heavy weight of war—there are mentions of both WWII and the Malvinas conflict—deindustrialization, and imperial heritage, all of which are portrayed as the spectral presences haunting English existence. Poetry and politics are constantly intertwined in *The Last of England*. Poetry becomes the medium through which the political nature of the nation's existence is examined and articulated. The nightmarish poetical allegory functions as a macro-whole, providing a liminal space for micro-reflections on England's most powerful ghosts. The political pathos, generated by Jarman's poetics through the experience of a nation in decline, is built upon three main emotions: despair, anger, and nostalgia.

Despair is the everlasting feeling that permeates the whole experience of the film, both visually and narratively. It is rooted in the complete loss of hope and expectations for the destiny of the nation, and it collides with one of the film's most meaningful themes: the cancellation of the future. Temporality is completely disjointed throughout *The Last of England*, lacking references that provide a sense of contemporaneity besides disco music on the diegetic level. Similarly, space is dislocated with the juxtaposition of numerous images that continuously combine past (through home movies) and present (via poetic images of desolation), inducing an effect of panic and anxiety over the loss of epistemological time categories. The idea of the cancellation of the future is deeply related to an existential ennui, hopelessness, and the lack of expectations previously mentioned. Franco Bifo-Berardi elaborated on how this notion develops:

I am thinking, rather, of the psychological, which emerged in the cultural situation of progressive modernity, the cultural expectations that were fabricated during the long period of modern civilization, reaching a peak after the Second World War. These expectations were shaped in the conceptual framework of an ever-progressing development. (18)

Bifo-Berardi alludes to the post-war consensus and delves into the consequences of the abandonment of both the progressive mentality and temporality for a sort of displacing and dislocating consciousness. Jarman himself expresses the turn in society's expectations for progress: "I grew up in the wind of change ma'am! Quite! Quite blew away my reason" (Jarman 00:31:24). Following Bifo-Berardi's footsteps, Mark Fisher delves into one of the techniques that Jarman employs: the 'jumbling-up of time.' "The 'jumbling-up of time,' the montaging of earlier eras, has ceased to be worthy of comment; it is now so prevalent that it no longer even noticed" (6). According to Fisher, then, Jarman's employment of the technique becomes more to the realist, mimetic, documentarist side than to the poetic, imaginary, version. However, Jarman's alternation of images of past and present creates an oneiric poetical frenzy through scene colors, music, and voiceovers. This fragmented time is realized through a composition and blend of emotions, sounds, and images from different eras, representing England's cultural decline, decaying present, and uncertain future: "Jarman is largely fascinated by the temporal frame-within-the-frame of film narrative, the leap of epochs acting as a disruptive shock not only to the viewer's sensibility but to his/her sense of linear history" (Orr 331). Francesca Balboni explains both the aesthetic and narrative impact of these techniques of mixing past and present, home movies and decadent present landscapes: "With the confluence of past (and future) in the present, various fictions and realities also meet; we cannot so easily separate the presumed 'realness' of the home movies from the fantastic and horrifying events of Jarman's imagined present" (223). The idea of fighting the audience's tendencies to categorize, which both Orr and Balboni mention, enhances a feeling of nightmarish reality with no temporal categories. The film's narrative voiceover starkly declares: "Tomorrow has been cancelled owing to a lack of interest" (Jarman 00:14:11). The paradoxical message's lack of interest reinforces the idea of existential ennui, of a hopeless and passive slumber, alongside the cancellation. The polysemy of the term "interest" also highlights the presence of financial slang and money in public and private arenas, especially concerning time and its categories.

This despair over the cancellation of the future is realized visually and narratively through numerous symbols. References to imagery related to winter—a symbol of darkness, bleakness, and despair—are found within the narration—the voiceover alerts that: "They say that the Ice Age is Coming" (Jarman 00:02:39) or that "The Frosty Heart of England blighted

Each Spring Leaf / all aspiration withered in the blood" (Jarman 00:32:05). These references indicate the despair over being denied the possibility of renewal by the current decaying, violent, and bleak state of the nation. There is a perpetual sense of stagnation that allows nostalgia to flourish. symbol of winter does not appear to be casual, given the time when the film was released. A decade ago, before the film's release, in 1979, James Callaghan was replaced by Margaret Thatcher after what was called 'The Winter of Discontent', a period of social and economic instability that coincided with the coldest weather in 16 years. The period became a conservative myth for the supposedly unstable and inefficient progressive politics, marking the beginning of the neoliberal reign: "The 'Winter of Discontent' in 1978/1979 marked the point of no return when Thatcher's party attracted a "formidable Rassemblement of social forces fearful of further unrest." (Jessop 19). The narrator's words of the 'final winter' seem to imply that England has been in winter ever since Thatcher's rise and that the worst is yet to come, winter also being a symbol of death.

Visually, the film reinforces this constant anguish for this lack of future and the state of the country through visual metaphors: Scenes depict mourners dressed in black with red poppies in a grotesque funeral for the nation; a baby is covered with a blanket made from a newspaper with dreadful headlines of the Falklands War, symbolizing the crushing of future possibilities by the dreadful state of the present. Not only does despair crystalize in the denial of tomorrow but also in the overwhelming dreadfulness of today. Ruins are a recurrent symbol shown throughout the film, juxtaposing a glorious past and the nightmarish present of a nation crumbling. The ruins, often factories, both reference the destruction after WWII and the aggressive deindustrialization of Thatcherism.

England is portrayed in its highest moment of decadence, with individuals who wander around alienated from their own existence and who only appear to depart from such existential confusion and ennui through the experience of sex or drugs: In one scene, a number of drug addicts are about to shoot heroin after confusingly wandering through the landscape. The anesthetized state of the boy, never looking at the camera but focus on his fags and drugs with deadened eyes, and the shaky camera movements suggest anxiety and hopelessness. Drugs are the only remaining route to evasion from the bleak reality, as the narrative voiceover reminds us: "What's the password? EVASION" (Jarman 00:13:40). Evasion is the key to salvation here but also the cause of death. The film's imagery evokes intertextual allusions to T.S. Eliot's *The*

Hollow Men, an apocalyptic poem that meditates on the decadence of existence. This is not the only connection between Jarman's oeuvre and Eliot's work; the film's apocalyptic tone and the leitmotif of garbage echo the poet:¹ "Picking through the tatters of your lives we jumbled the lot, and squatted your burnt-out hearths / Your world, beavering away at its own destruction" (Jarman 00:07:52). In this part of the narrated poem, Jarman creates a dialectical opposition between a 'we' and a 'you,' criticizing the lack of rebelliousness to daily capitalism: "Not your clean-limbed cannon fodder for the drudgey nine-to-five" (Jarman 00:07:02).

Disjointed temporality, modernist undertones, combinations of death imagery, an apocalyptic tone or juxtaposition, and intertextuality are some of the other common traits between Eliot and Jarman. Both works also convey a tone of growing disillusionment, as well as featuring radical, meditative, and hermeneutic poetic voices. The apocalyptic vision that links Jarman to T.S Eliot is also realized by means of the film's aesthetic process. Beyond the already discussed visually driven narrative, Jarman transferred the film footage to video, allowing a degradation of the image's quality that enhances the feeling of apocalyptic decay.

The feeling of despair is always coupled with what may be considered one of the most primary emotions: anger. There is a space for anger and rage at the English status quo, and how the rulers, with the passivity of some, use the national icons as a smokescreen to conceal the failed and corrupt state of the nation: "A thin yellow pus drained through exhausted institutions / Citizens stood mute, watching children devoured in their prams. And all you did, in the desperation, was celebrate the Windsor, yet again" (Jarman 00:08:22). The reference to yellow is a common motif of the decadent movement, and a symbol for decay and death used, among many others, by Arthur Conan Doyle in his description of London: "The yellow glare from the shop-windows streamed out into the steamy, vaporous air, and threw a murky, shifting radiance across the crowded thoroughfare" (Conan Doyle 19). Conan Doyle's portrait of London shares this murky ambiance and alludes to yellow as a sign of decadence. In Jarman's case, however, the reference to the color functions in a more metaphorical way, as it is referencing the rottenness of the English

¹ There are many similarities between Jarman and T.S Eliot. Formally, they are defined by fragmentation, blending different forms like nursery rhymes through rhythm and collapse. Thematically, just like Eliot, Jarman was mourning the ruins of a civilisation through cultural lament.

institutions. The British monarchy, “one of the sociological wonders of the contemporary world, Europe’s greatest living fossil, the enchanted glass of an early modernity which has otherwise vanished from this world” (Nairn 115), is usually used as a smokescreen to cover up the country’s situation. Tom Nairn sardonically explains the performative character of the institution of the monarchy, considering it anachronistic and useful only as patriotic exaltation, in line with the film’s denunciation. Anger permeates the film, directed at the experience of despair, at the state of the nation, at the ruling of violence, at the loss of the national essence and identity: “Outside in the leaden hail, the swan of Avon dies a syncopated death” (Jarman 00:03:02).

The metaphor for the loss of national culture, using Shakespeare’s nickname, is realized through the imagery of violence. Violence is provoked by anger and anger derives from the current broken condition of the nation. The montage and the breakneck speed of the scenes signal the violence. The diegetic sound contributes to enhancing the experience of violence throughout the film, including the gunshots heard numerous times to accompany the visuals and create contrast against the peacefulness of the images. The domesticity of the footage of Jarman’s father, a pilot for the RAF, is mixed in with the looming anxiety over an imminent threat, which occurs commonly throughout the film. There is also anger in the portrait of the escalation of violence in which the nation has seen itself immersed. Juxtapositions of clustered images of fire and water, alongside images of police riots, display one maxim: the violence never stops. Jim Ellis indicates the nation’s transition: “The bombed-out buildings of the Blitz are replaced by the abandoned houses and factories of Britain’s industrial decline, and a nervous optimism has given way to anger and despair we go from the people’s war to Thatcher’s war on the people” (Ellis 140). Once again, as highlighted by Ellis, anger and despair appear as the main protagonists. The presence of hooded men in balaclavas, whose function is unclear, adds another layer to the disquieting feeling of violence and anxiety. The men appear to be guardians or custodians of the dystopic city, and they stroll around and dance. However, they also point guns at people, who appear to be expatriates or refugees. No one is freed from such threat and, although there is a vague resemblance to the IRA because of the chosen attire, there is no specification as to such. Steven Dillon alludes to some context provided by Jarman himself, explaining a similar plot, and illustrates how many times, at least for the spectators’ experience, violence arises from confusion:

The angels were a paramilitary group called the Outriders engaged in mopping up the remains of a world, our world, that had passed away (...) *The Last of England* does not allow its soldiers or its apocalypse to inhabit the conventional cinematic genre. These soldiers are all the more terrifying for their lack of context. (174)

One of the most terrifying moments regarding the paramilitary group is in the funeral scene where a conversation occurs between these men and the mourners dressed in black wearing a death crown and poppies. While it remains unclear if the ladies symbolize Thatcher, it is evident that they share her mentality:

- LADY: "Did you enjoy the Falklands?"
- SOLDIER: Oh, yes, Ma'am.
- LADY: Preparing for the next one?
- SOLDIER: Yes, Ma'am
- LADY: It's going to be a big one, isn't it?
- SOLDIER: I hope so, Ma'am.
- LADY: Keep up the good work" (Jarman 01:15:09)

The cycle of violence is once again depicted as never-ending and exhausting, although the ladies on the scene appear to enjoy it. The Falklands War was Thatcher's master movement to hide her inefficacies under the flag of exacerbated patriotism: "The Falklands/Malvinas witnessed a reinvigoration of residual discourses of martial and religious patriotism, unwittingly laying bare the archetypal myths and mechanics of popular nationalism" (Belgley 232). The film seems to highlight what Jon Belgley alludes to the links between the Malvinas War and a wave of populist patriotism that sought the population's approval.

Neoliberal creeds, such as the fetishization of money and the pursuit of maximum profit are also present in the form of images of excess. A boy, seemingly of a higher social status, indulges excessively in drinking, a symbol of decadence. The poetic metaphor of the Union Jack surrounded by booze and syringes expands as the boy starts engaging in sexual intercourse with one of the men in balaclavas. Besides other readings this article does not focus on, like the corporality of queer bodies, there is also a strong political reading: the alliance and copulation of crime and the higher strata of society, a symbol of the corrupted state of the country: "In the silence of an English suburb, power and secrecy dwell in the same

house" (Jarman 00:32:12). The boy represents power not only because of his attire but also because he is the one exhibiting agency; he approaches the paramilitary and initiates a sexual affair. On the other hand, the paramilitary is an obvious symbol of secrecy, the soldier wearing a balaclava that covers his face. This uncanny alliance of shadowy power was illustrated by Niven as one of England's founding maxims:

But by far the most complex and profound facet of Englishness is the third and final of the triumvirate. This is the notion of hiddenness and void . . . the feeling that the governing processes of English social and political life are somehow taking place out of view is, like confinement, a sensibility with roots in the older feudal system. (40–41)

This tradition is reflected by Jarman in this powerful allegorical scene. On the Union Jack power and secrecy lay together in ardent desire. The bandit and his confusing role echo Niven's arguments about the governing processes of the nation occurring out of public sight.

Anger and despair are just two of the emotions expressed through lyricism and visual poetics by Jarman. Both emotions are related to the present state of the nation, related to each other, and related, also, to the third and most complex emotion distilled in the film: nostalgia. Nostalgia is a complex emotion that is mainly anchored in the past whilst also rooting itself in the future. It allows Jarman to explore and criticize the hopelessness and denial of the future through the erasure of the temporal distinctions of past and present, as Oliver and Whitehall point out: "The dream like structure of *The Last of England*, both literal and metaphorical, facilitates this interrogation its mutability enabling a fluidity of colour that helps blur the distinction between past and present" (7). Therefore, the formal experimentation both in the structure of the film with the fragmented narratives and through the formal elements enhances the film's poetics, revealing the cultural decadence of the Thatcherite era. However, the film does not dwell so much on the nostalgia of an idealized past or an English Arcadia. Unlike other films like *Jubilee* (1978), it instead focuses on a feeling of loss, an essence miscarried of a heritage long forgotten. Jarman explained that he "need[ed] a very firm anchor in that hurricane, the anchor is my inheritance, not my family inheritance, but a cultural one" (*Kicking the Pricks*, 177). All the intertextual references, as well as the poetry, seem to be an attempt to resuscitate a cultural anchor from the slumber of current Englishness. Jarman links his micro-identity and

Englishness, the poetic is political, and the political poetic, everything is interrelated.

The poem evokes this nostalgia through its exclamation that “on every green hill mourners stand, and weep for *The Last of England*” (00:03:53). The green hills are evocative of a pastoral, pre-technological England. These references to England’s past depart from the bleakness of most shots: Tilda Swinton, Jarman’s muse, first appears with her long hair loose and wearing a long dress that resembles the women of Pre-Raphaelite movement paintings. It could be argued that her character embodies Jarman’s trajectory and feelings towards England. Her first shots are the embodiment of innocence and calmness, sitting in a tree surrounded by daffodils. As described in the Wordsworth poem, Swinton seems to find bliss in solitude and the natural world in that initial stage. The initial shots, alongside the shots of natural beauty, seem to reinforce, not a sense of glorifying the nation, but a notion of longing for a paradise that has been lost, as Jarman himself suggested: “The home movie is the bedrock, it records the landscape of leisure: the beach, the garden, the swimming pool. In all home movies is a longing for paradise” (qtd. in Brydon 120). The natural shots also hint at a possibility of rebirth and renewal, a theme that will be further explored in the film’s final scenes. However, to contemplate the possibility of rebirth, a thorough exploration of the malaise is needed first.

The film’s title is a direct reference to Pre-Raphaelite Ford Maddox Brown’s painting *The Last of England* (1855), which depicts a couple sailing away from the country, a motif repeated throughout the film. In addition to the group of immigrants being deported, there is a recurrent shot in which a man, either in a boat, or walking is being followed by the immigrants while illuminating the darkness with light. The recurrent image aligns with the allegorical undertones of the film, reminiscent of both Virgil and Dante. The metaphor of the guide of the light illuminating in the darkness can be interpreted both as the possibility of renewal after the destruction of the land, akin to Aeneas. Simultaneously, it serves as a guide for the poet, paralleling Dante’s descent, to dig up the sin in the soul of the nation. The nostalgic undertones of a loss of essential national identity coexist with tracing the story of England, and, thus, analyzing its sins. Beyond the sardonic reproach aimed at the Windsor family and their power and the cycle of never-ending violence, the film also incorporates clusters of images with Imperial tones. The Albert memorial is juxtaposed with military parades and scenes of Indians serving their colonial rulers.

Here lies one of the juxtapositions of Jarman's work as the film feels nostalgic about the loss of a cultural heritage but also exposes the dark underbelly of nostalgia by linking it to imperialism and violence. Moreover, the idea of enclosure is also a recurrent English theme, with the projection of northern houses fenced with barbed wire. The feeling of being enclosed has always been one of England's founding maxims too, an early initiator of capitalism that abandoned the previous pastoral collectivism. Niven also comments on this traditional feeling:

The deliberate enclosure of the English landscape in successive waves from the medieval period to the nineteenth century is clearly partly at the root of this cultural mode, as of course, slightly more recently, is the industrial class system, which scored rigid and often immovable lines across the social architecture of the nation. Whatever the cause, the lasting effects of these deep structural presences are all around us. (39)

The film portrays the effects of the feeling of enclosure, coupled with the perception that England's ruling forces operate in secret shadows, leading to chaos, ruin, and desperation. Despite the prevailing bleak tone, there is, however, space for rebirth and renewal in the last scenes of the film.

Tilda Swinton's character evolves from an initial stage of innocence to a period of commitment and maturation, culminating in the last scenes where she is shot amongst water, next to a burning pyre. Commitment has given way to solitude, desperation, and chaos. Initially, she wanders, lost, and confused. As the moments pass by, the cathartic energy of her desperation and anger takes over and she discards classic symbols concerning two institutions: the wedding gown and the rose, corresponding to marriage and the nation. Fragmented shots and a whirling rhythm accompany Swinton in her dance of destruction which becomes more and more powerful. Her cathartic energy of destruction seems to become godlike; she has gained the consciousness of her grief and desperation and has been able to get rid of her constraints and master them. The poetry of the scene emerges through the lyric dance combined with the vibrant colors and the elements of fire and water. The awareness of destruction opens the door to a new beginning. The last shot mirrors the opening one—the guide blasting light on a boat full of people. It remains unclear whether they are the refugees being deported by the paramilitary, but the poet, having uncovered sin and illuminated the darkness, guides

them now towards a potential new beginning, or, in a Greek homage, possibly to death.

The Last of England is a film where poetry permeates every aspect; from the visuals, including the structure and conception, to the narrative voiceover, and the political message. It bridges the individual and internal perception of the filmmaker with the collective and external experience nation's transformation. The poetics that Jarman unravels are politically charged and aesthetically impactful but never explicitly dictated. Poetry is the tool through which the essence of the country is explored and mourned for, but meaning is never closed, as it is the form through which England's enclosure can be fought against in the best manner: "There are more walls in England than in Berlin, Johnny" (Jarman 00:06:41). The poetic feeling becomes the way of debunking those walls, of existing both in the ruins of the English cultural and moral heritage, as well as in the ruins of the self. The walls and the multiple scenes of bars and barbed wire are negotiated with the awareness that through the chaotic and destructive expression something can be created, something can be debunked, trespassed. Oliver and Whitehall refer to the idea of identity reconstruction, allowing a new place to start without embodying complete rejection of British identity: "There is foregrounded a locus of a particular construction of identity, that inherently needs to be acknowledged, worked through and presented rather than rejected. Like all the paradoxes in Jarman's work this ambivalence aims to interrogate rather than erase" (7). The film interrogates those identity aspects through the discursive representation of some recurring elements like desolate auras or decaying landscapes. It is an allegorical poem with elements of elegy, of mourning for what has been lost. Through avant-garde experimentation and punk aesthetics, Jarman recreates the decaying state of Thatcherite England. The fragmented time reminisces a fragmented consciousness but also a fragmented national identity, challenging hegemonic notions of the Empire that were reinforced at time through political discourses. Herein, T.S. Eliot's influence comes to fruition as, despite the postmodern qualities, the film plays out like a modernist poem at the end; historically aware of the weight of the past undergirding the need for a new point to start the present. T.S. Eliot pointed out the need for truly modern and new art to relate to the previous tradition, even to debunk it, as no art can stand in isolation without relation to the past. By calling attention to the decadence and void of the present era and the flaws and victories of the past cultural heritage, Jarman reinterprets

tradition inserting his allegorical oeuvre and therefore altering past and present.

The film's recurrent symbols of violence and death, but also its emphasis on defiance, evoke a critique to Thatcher's government but also have implications for Jarman's own authorship, his AIDS diagnosis being discovered during the film's production. Daniel Humphrey points out the links between the personal and the political: "The kind of historical consciousness his traumatic aesthetic expresses—infected by his personal trauma—reveals something more. It exposes the latency from which historical interpretation and meaning must emerge in order to confront the ideologies responsible for social injustice" (214). The film leads the audience to question their assumptions regarding a dialectic history through the visual and symbolic representation of moral ideas. Jarman's allegorical poem represents abstract ideas about sickness, death, or the nation by merging fragmented imagery with recurrent symbols. Jarman himself alluded to the allegorical nature of his film: "In dream allegory the poet wakes in a visionary landscape where he encounters personifications of psychic states. Through these encounters he is healed ... *The Last of England* is in the same form" (*Kicking the Pricks*, 156).

As Jarman emphasizes, the poet turns out to be the medium, never imposing a meaning, for all the interpretations given are valid, as the poetic voice also states at the beginning: "I leave footprints for others to excavate" (Jarman 00:02:34). By having the agency to excavate, holding the strength to embrace the most primary drives while digging up the past, a political pathos can be articulated that allows reconstruction from death, despair, and destruction.

2. THE LAND OF LOST CONTENT: THE ELEGY OF TERENCE DAVIES

Terence Davies's *Of Time and The City* takes the form of an elegiac visual poem that mourns the loss of the former Liverpool. It is also a meditative and philosophical reflection on the passing of time and the inextricable binds between a space, in this case, a city, and those who inhabit it. Composed of vintage archive footage and narrated by Davies himself, the film traces the evolution of the city which, as was the case for Jarman and *The Last of England*, is linked to the creative evolution of Davies. From its early days to its current, unrecognizable present, the audience accompanies Davies on a coming-of-age journey. The elegiacal tones are representative of the permanent feeling of loss and the mourning for the

days that will never return. Besides the combination of old and contemporary footage, the soundtrack fulfills a diegetic role that also inspires the nostalgic mood that impregnates the whole film.

In Jarman's film, feelings and emotions are intertwined, although despair, anger, and a hint of nostalgia are the most noteworthy. This variety of emotions and the primacy of violence obeys the violent times the film was released, in 1987, towards the end of Thatcher's tenure with the complete collapse of collective struggles, such as can be seen in the miners' strikes, and a climate of bleakness and destruction. In Davies' work nostalgia reigns as the dominant emotion for the length of the film, punctuated only with occasional notes of irony. The film was released in 2008, when Gordon Brown was Prime Minister and the principles that had given New Labour a wide victory almost ten years previous were now worn down. Liverpool's appointment as European capital of Culture allowed the filmmaker to do an historical overview of the urban development and rapid changes overcoming the city. To evoke this sense of nostalgia, visual and narrative techniques are articulated to reflect on the rapid speed of time. Davies combines archival footage with his personal narration to achieve a unique and nostalgic tone.

The many poetic devices employed contrast, in some cases, with those employed by Jarman, but there are also similarities at the core. One of the most notable differences is the rhythm. Unlike Jarman, who employed whirlwind clusters of images and shaky camera movements, all such techniques in Terence Davies's film are slow and paused, recreating the sights of simpler times. The slow rhythm alludes to a pastoral and at times idealized period of the post-war consensus. Davies himself references many times that slow rhythm: "On slow Saturdays, when football, like life, was still played in black and white, and in shorts as long as underwear. When it was still not venal" (Davies 00:09:17). Slowness is constantly associated with leisure, and leisure is spoken of as if was not yet spectacularized, or at least not in the same terms as technological capitalism, where leisure has become yet another fetishized arena.²

Davies values the period of peacefulness and social advances of the post-war consensus: "World War II was over / peacetime and hardship

² Capitalism has turned leisure into a commodity, shaping the ways we desire to rest from work. Many activities become a marker of social status or identity, like skydiving or a wellness spa. The platforms we watch TV on or even the steps we walk a day have become instrumentalised consumer goods.

eased / And all day on the beach / completely unsupervised" (Davies 00:42:27). Time seems to pass slower for Davies in these early childhood days when slowness meant having the time to reflect, where things were not done for profit, as the filmmaker subtly mentions. Annette Holba explains the worth of leisure as departing from the fast-paced logic of capitalism in the pleasure of doing something just for the sake of the action and not the result: "Mitchell Haney (2010) argued that the value of leisure is inherently in its slowness. . . . Leisure involves a mindful doing without an interest in the end result" (184). Davies recreates those idle, slow days when his childhood and adolescence were linked to watching movies or boxing matches in black-and-white Liverpool.

In the nostalgic tone of the film, the idea of slowness is not only associated with the idea of leisure but with the idea of time: "Davies's narrative recreates a personal time that is lost forever and yet still present and 'real'" (Everett 30). Time is perhaps, alongside architectural Liverpool and a type of omniscient narrator-flaneur, the great protagonist of the oeuvre. Despite the occasional footage of present-day Liverpool at the beginning and middle of the film, time here, unlike in *The Last of England*, is not disjointed, fragmentary, or broken. There is a clear temporal line that begins with the blooming of the city, as the first shots of the railroads show, continues with Davies's childhood, and ends in the contemporary era (2008). Wendy Everett distinguishes between different types of time within Terence Davies' filmography. While there are examples of expanded and, especially, autobiographical time—as the film establishes links between filmic time, memory, and ontological subjectivity—the most prominent temporal mode referencing the aforementioned stillness and slowness is "arrested time." Most frames, notably those in black and white, reminiscing the past, are still: "Davies's dense and beautiful image uses stillness to create a network of virtual images and sensations associated with time and space" (Everett 35). The stillness invites the reader to reflect on the nature of time and its connections to memory and nostalgia, as well as the inner structures behind our relationship to the spaces we inhabit.

The film opens with a shot of a red theatre curtain opening while A.E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* is recited by Davies:

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows
What are those blue remembered hills

What spires, what farms are those?
 That is the land of lost content
 I see it shining plain
 The happy highways where I went
 And cannot come again (Housman XL)

The nostalgic tone of Housman's poem is echoed by Davies, once again sharing with Jarman the notion of a paradise lost. Time, Davies warns us, "renders, deceives the eye, deceives the heart" (Davies 00:25:58). One of the technical similarities between Jarman and Davies is the presence of intertextuality that connects all national cultural legacy, not through pastiche, but rather through craftsmanship. It is worthwhile mentioning, however, how Jarman resembled Eliot in his disjointed style and temporality and how Davies resembles Housman. In a time of avant-garde techniques, Housman looked to classicism for inspiration, making traditional rhyme, slow rhythm, and melancholia his poetry's biggest virtues. Davies is doing precisely what Housman did in *A Shropshire Lad*; he is observing the passing of time on the land that once was his home and regretting the loss and futility of those days. "We leave the place we love, then spend a lifetime trying to regain it" (Davies 00:05:17). The elegy is Davies's way of trying to regain a sense of the place he loved as a child.

Time is also deeply related to memory and also to dreams. At the beginning of the film, when the stage curtain is opening and succeeding the recitation of Housman's poem there is a reference to dreams which presents itself almost as a metatextual invite: "Come closer now.../...and see your dreams./Come closer now. . and see mine" (Davies 00:05:27). As with Jarman's text, the audience is induced to the oneiric and particular world of the author. The metatextual invite is also supported by the fact that every break of the fourth wall is accompanied by a dolly zoom: "No detached ethnography, *Of Time and The City*, is a ruminative and wistful journey into a past that for Davies is always present" (Koresky 19). The mythical reconstruction of Davies' Liverpool that started for him in his 1950s childhood represents a pseudo-autographical abductive fiction and, hence, the continuous references to dreaming and memory:

The film's cartography of memory is therefore structured in accordance with the same spatializing logic that underpins the model of the archive city as a relational assemblage: a navigation through different stopping off points in a database of archival film memory. (Roberts 6)

The imagery related to dreams and memory provides an ontology of the self that is bound by the landscape; but more than a documentary, it appears as a Simmelian metropolis of the mind; a contrast of external and internal stimuli and past and present impressions that heighten the emotional charge while highlighting the relationship between the city and the psyche. It is also a mythical reconstruction that, as we saw with Jarman, does not forget the US. Britain is once again defined through dialectical opposition to the US, the English presented as being what Americans are not. Unlike Jarman, however, the comparison is voiced and not visual. The ode to simpler times and the elegy to its loss that Davies tries to evoke are not without nuances. A part of his mythical construction resides in the fact that he is crafting the poetics both in a provincial and a universal tone: from his soul and his city to the rest of the world.

That Liverpool is mostly idealized, but not without notes of irony and inquisition, especially when it comes to matters related to the hegemonic English essence such as the church, or, more specifically, the monarchy. As well as in Jarman's text, the most ironic and raging undertones appear when "the institution" is brought up, with Davies's attack being even more direct than Jarman's. The Liverpudlian filmmaker recalls the number of items spent on Elizabeth II's coronation, to whom he refers to as 'Betty' (Davies 00:26:12), stripping her of all sacrosanct worth and presenting her as a mundane subject. The footage of the coronation is presented in golden tones, a symbol of lavishness and unnecessary splurging. In contrast, the footage of the masses celebrating is presented in black and white, expressing poverty and simplicity Davies ironizes: "Her Majesty allegedly saved all her clothing coupons" (Davies 00:29:49). While the masses are fighting starvation and attempting to recompose the nation after the war, obscene quantities of luxurious items and money are wasted on the Queen's coronation. Davies takes the opportunity to express his perspective on the monarchy: "as yet another fossil monarchy justified its existence by tradition and deluded itself with the notion of duty" (Davies 00:30:03). In *The Last of England*, Jarman bitterly complains about the obeisance surrendered to the institution and how it has become a smokescreen to cover up the nation's real problems. Similarly, Davies antagonizes the monarchy as a pointless oxymoron, a 'fossil,' something that time has left untouched in an oeuvre where the passing of time is its biggest lament. The director plays with antithetical terms like sleeping and awakening throughout the whole film but, here the antithesis to time is the

mere existence of the monarchy and the waste: “Privileged to the last, whilst in England's green and pleasant land, the rest of the nation survived on rationing” (Davies 00:30:10). There is an acute contrast between the higher and lower strata of society.

Wars, such as the Korean War, come, and the fantastic golden tones are replaced by more realistic ones with the violence of suffering, “after farce, realism” (Davies 00:31:36), as spectators are told by the director. This is the part where the architectural landscape gains the most prominence; it is the key for the audience to realize of the passing of time. The audience witnesses the demolition of the characteristic red brick buildings in favor of the classic 60s and 70s housing: cheap high-rises. The spirit of the city and all its mutability are projected into the architecture:

Of Time and The City is most fascinated by architecture—how we interact with it, and how it defines landscape, character, and national and local identity. Liverpool's buildings, from its terraced working-class row houses to its municipal establishments, are the clearest evidence of the simultaneous development and decay that are the twinned hallmarks of any Western city throughout the twentieth century. (Koresky 19–20)

Architecture also appears in the narrative arena of the film, not only in the visual, and populates Davies' mental landscape and, thus, its language. It embodies change with visual metaphors like the ‘Empire’ closing (referring to Liverpool's Empire building as well as to the British Empire,) but it is also a symbol for the old times of optimistic youth: “hopes as high as Blackpool Tower” (Davies 00:43:53). There is everlasting dialectics between past and present that locates that past as a site of nostalgic tenderness while signaling the alienation from an incomprehensible present. The nostalgic tones that the film evoke are also enhanced by the choice of music, creating a counterpoint between music and visuals that heightens the narration. The previously mentioned scenes of demolition are accompanied by Peggy Lee's “The Folks Who Live on the Hill” (Davies 33:28), thus maximizing the nostalgia.

Time is related to memory, to dreams, and to the slowness of times past, although ultimately, time is mostly a cycle for Davies. In his use of oxymorons and antithesis, dialectical oppositions like living and dying or lying awake and sleeping are recurrent. The author possesses a classical perception of time and nature as a type of physis, a recurrent cycle of all living beings from birth to death. Everything grows older, everything

changes, everything does and is born again, differently. Davies repeatedly reminds the audience and himself of such an inescapable fact: “in my end is my beginning” (Davies 00:58:23). The idea of cyclical time is of the utmost importance to him; he repeatedly complains and regrets the loss of his childhood and those golden days but as the end will reveal, cyclical time offers a chance for hope. Time and time lost are deeply attached to childhood memories and the evocation of meaningful Liverpudlian locations, something Davies already explored in previous autobiographical works, as Álvarez puts it: “His autobiographical cycle, composed of the shorts *Children* (1976) [sic], *Madonna and Child* (1980) [sic] and *Death and Transfiguration* [sic] . . . explore the traumatic memories of his childhood.” However, Álvarez comments on how, in these other works, Liverpool is depicted as more of an oneiric place that matches the filmmaker’s memories rather than a real one (42). However, in *Of Time and The City* the spaces are depicted, not only evoked, and there is a specific linear narrative that contrasts past and present, thus reinforcing Davies’s topographical identity to Liverpool’s past. Davies feels outside time in a moment he no longer understands, and neither is he able to feel a sense of belonging: “Alien in my own land” (Davies 00:59:56).

The film was released in 2008, celebrating Liverpool’s nomination as European Capital of Culture. The financial crisis and the beginning of Austerity Britain had left the nation with little to celebrate, a perfect opportunity to momentarily escape to the past when facing a decadent present. Moreover, the Labour Party’s change in policies had left some classical voters alienated from their ideas, as many believed that class experience had been replaced by status and multiculturalism. While the film is subtler than *The Last of England* in its political reading, there is an implicit critique of the path the nation has taken that is materialized in the way Liverpool has changed. This critique is realized in two ways; first, by portraying the distance between the exported concept of nation and the reality of the population. As previously mentioned, there are remarks on the ‘farcical monarchy’ or the wars and losses that common people had to face. These contrasts are also emphasized in the film through the architectural shots: “The presence of these and other recognizable landmarks in *Of Time and The City* emphasises the stark contrast between the representations of the imperial, economic or religious power and the streetscape where people hustle and bustle in their everyday life” (Álvarez 44). The second way in which the film enacts a political reading is through a critique of the decommissioning of the pillars that once sustained

Davies's ideas about the nation. The dismantling of the post-war consensus, the urban renewal, and the entering of neoliberal policies influence the way Liverpool changes. These changes prompt Davies to feel alienated from what it used to represent regarding his topographical identity. However, as the film progresses, he gains awareness of his role as the poet/filmmaker/narrator of the times: "Nietzsche writes that the genius is always ahead of his or her time since he or she is thrown into the flow of time in order to stop the wheel from spinning so quickly, to be a brake on the cycle of time" (Miller 17). Through his visual poetry, there is an attempt to stop the wheel of time from spinning so quickly. However, there is a Nietzschean reversal, for in the end Davies realizes that his cycle is coming to an end, or, as he ponders, a new beginning, while reciting Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" where there exists a lament for time passed, but also a final acknowledgment that the real importance lays in the memories made along the way. Davies ultimately fulfills that purpose through his visual poetry. With the employment of old footage and its everyday poetry, the director is able to reconstruct his mental, mythical Liverpool, tracing a journey from innocence to maturation, to final illumination: "We shall not cease from exploration. / And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started / and to know the place for the first time" (Davies 01:04:09). Poetry allows him to explore those corners of his mind so as to find the seeds of his beloved youth and to truly understand the cycle of life: "when the last of earth left to discover is that which was the beginning" (Davies 01:04:18). Just like Jarman did, Davies is quoting T.S Eliot. In his poem "Little Gidding," a part of the *Four Quartets*, Eliot referenced the circularity of time and the paradox that the end of a spiritual journey can be a new beginning. Again, there is a juxtaposition of opposing concepts, a symbol of the unstoppable dimension of change. The Liverpool depicted is a Liverpool Davies fails to recognize, as Álvarez remarks: "Liverpool's waterfront is currently a city tableaux in which Davies is so out of place that he had to dive into archival footage to find his way back to the city that shaped his personality" (51).

The final scenes depict a grandiosity far from the black-and-white industry scenes of the beginning. The social and economic fabric have shifted, and the city has changed. The ending does not revive a lost positivity but gains a peaceful acceptance. In his acknowledgment of his approaching the end of the timely cycle, Davies is able to create a new beginning. This provides the filmmaker with existential comfort.

Consequently, one of the last sentences of the film, before bidding the audience farewell with a good night, is a sincere “and all shall be well” (Davies 01:04:25). In gaining the conscience of the ending, of death, of the inescapability of change, Davies has opened a new beginning, a rebirth that may restart again the whole cycle.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this article was to study and explore the poetical strategies and aesthetic resources employed in Derek Jarman’s *The Last of England* and Terence Davies’ *Of Time and The City*, focusing on their role in negotiating nostalgia, cultural memory, and national identity. Despite working in different temporal and political contexts, both authors converge in their use of the cinematic medium to elaborate a poetics tinted with despair for the national situation. They transform their personal despair into a deeper reflection on the state of the nation, using film as a poetic canvas to narrate a loss.

Derek Jarman’s poetics are based on juxtaposition, combining elements of acceleration and stillness, the old and the new, the personal and the allegorical. Through these allegorical elements, Jarman illuminates the darkest corners of his mind, as well as the darkest corners of the nation, tracing both a synchronic and a diachronic reflection on the state of the nation and why and how the situation has ended the way it has. His fragmented and dislocated imagery mirrors the disintegration of both his inner world as well as the outer nation under Thatcher’s government. However, Jarman is never unidimensional and refuses to impose a singular vision on the audience, always allowing the audience the space to navigate the layers of meanings and symbolism and search for their own interpretation. This openness, alongside his deeply unique experimental vision, make of his poetics something worthy of analysis in consonant with national identity.

In contrast, Davies’ poetics are more traditional and slow-paced but share the same meditative depth: “Without ever losing the beat, Davies synchronises his personal memories with archival footage, merging history and story, past and present, and facts and feelings, in an ambitions combination that manages to bring back the old cityscape to the screen” (Álvarez 52). He uses his city as a mythical landscape and as a way of reflecting on the passing of time. The awareness of change and evolution provides Davies with the knowledge to ease his anxiety and minimize his

nostalgia about how the land of his childhood and of his heart has changed. Unlike Jarman's raw despair, Davies reflection is loaded with an awareness of evolution and acceptance of time's course.

Melting their inner worlds and dreams with the outer political realities allows both poetic filmmakers to articulate an epistemology of nostalgia for a lost, or at least crumbling, mythical landscape. In their forms of poetic expression, they mourn the loss of a cultural legacy, while also interrogating the limits and purpose of mourning the past. Therefore, their way of articulating nostalgia is not a nostalgia mistaken for a truth that expects to bring back the past in a national rant. It is an epistemology of nostalgia because it reflects, through the poetic mimesis in both cases, the very same notion, its limits, and its potential. However, it involves departing from the usual undertones of the conservative gaze of the heritage film³ while adopting some of the recurrent tropes of a paradise lost and mixing them with present footage and more disruptive elements. For Jarman it involves converting laments into rebelliousness and defiance and confronting the state of the nation. In contrast, Davies' work involves his reconciliation with change while preserving the cultural memory of his childhood Liverpool. Film becomes poetry, and poetry becomes a vehicle to achieve and raise awareness of the political; from the inner to the outer, from within to the outside. Following this path and this pathos, both Davies and Jarman get to overcome the initial mourning, transforming their laments into a new notion. Both directors emerge with a renewed idea of the nation and a new identity that never forgets the past, tries to grasp the present, and may even look forward to the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work has been supported by the research project Brex-ID: "Brexit, Nationalism(s) and Post-Empire: Culture Wars and the Politics of Identity in Modern and Contemporary British Narratives" (PID2023-147649NB-I00), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

³ While most heritage films offered a linear, stable picture of the nation that projected nostalgia for an idealised past; Jarman and Davies enact a counter heritage that is queer and working-class through their formal innovations and radical politics. Both filmmakers use nostalgia as means of resistance rather than preservation.

REFERENCES

Álvarez, Iván Villarmea. "Urban Self-Portraits and Places of Memory: The Case of Terence Davies' *Of Time and The City*." *Cityscapes: World Cities and Their Cultural Industries*, Common Ground Publishing, 2014, pp. 40–53.

Balboni, Francesca. "Burning Through: Derek Jarman's Realism in *The Last of England* (1987)." *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2019, pp. 217–31, doi: 10.1093/oxartj/kcz003.

Bifo-Berardi, Franco. *After the Future*. AK Press, 2011.

Belgrave, Jon. "The Literature of the Falklands/Malvinas War." *Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, edited by Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson, Edinburgh University Press, 2012, pp. 231–40.

Brydon, Lavinia. "The Nostalgic Gardens of Derek Jarman's England." *Dandelion: Postgraduate Arts Journal and Research Network*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2013, pp. 1–15, doi: 10.16995/ddl.288.

Conan Doyle, Arthur. *The Sign of the Four*. Oxford UP, 2014.

Davies, Terence. *Of Time and The City*. Hurricane Films, 2008.

Dillon, Steven. *Derek Jarman and Lyric Film: The Mirror and the Sea*. University of Texas Press, 2004.

Ellis, Jim. *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Everett, Wendy. "Remembering the Future: Terence Davies and the Paradoxes of Time." *Film Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2006, pp. 29–39, doi: 10.7227/FS.9.6.

Fisher, Mark. *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. John Hunt Publishing, 2014.

Higson, Andrew. "Nostalgia is not What It Used to Be: Heritage Films, Nostalgia Websites and Contemporary Consumers." *Consumption Markets & Culture*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2014, pp. 120–42, doi: 10.1080/10253866.2013.776305.

Holba, Anette. "In Defense of Leisure." *Communication Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2014, pp. 179–92, doi: 10.1080/01463373.2014.890117.

Housman, Alfred Edward. *A Shropshire Lad*. Project Gutenberg, 2020. www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5720/pg5720-images.html/.

Humphrey, Daniel. "Authorship, History and the Dialectic of Trauma: Derek Jarman's *The Last of England*." *Screen*, vol. 44, no. 22, 2014, pp. 208–15, doi: 10.1093/screen/44.2.208.

Jarman, Derek. *The Last of England*. Anglo International Films, British Screen Productions, Film4 Productions, Tartan Films, ZDF, 1987.

Jarman, Derek. *Kicking the Pricks*. Overlook, 1998.

Jessop, Bob. "Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism: Dead but not Buried." *British Politics*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2015, pp. 16–30, doi: 10.1057/bp.2014.22.

Kelman, Ken. "Film as Poetry." *Film Culture*, no. 29, 1963, 22–27.

Koresky, Michael. *Terence Davies*. University of Illinois Press, 2014.

Miller, Elaine P. "Harnessing Dionysos: Nietzsche on Rhythm, Time, and Restraint." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, vol. 17, 1999, pp. 1–32, www.jstor.org/stable/20717702/.

Monk, Claire. "The British 'Heritage Film' and its Critics." *Critical Survey*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1995, pp. 116–24, www.jstor.org/stable/41555905/.

Nairn, Tom. *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and Its Monarchy*. Verso Books, 2011.

Niven, Alex. *New Model Island: How to Build a Radical Culture Beyond the Idea of England*. Watkins Media Limited, 2019.

Oliver, Elisa, and Jonathan Whitehall. "The Past Dreams the Future Present": Dream as Political Visual Historiography in the work of Artist and Film Maker Derek Jarman." *IDEA—Interdisciplinary Discourses, Education and Analysis*, no. 2, 2022, pp. 72–88, e-space.mmu.ac.uk/630671/1/EOJW-JarmanDreamsfinal.pdf/.

Orr, John. "The Art of National Identity: Peter Greenaway and Derek Jarman." *British Cinema, Past and Present*, edited by Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson, Routledge, 2013, pp. 327–38.

Roberts, Les. "Of Time, Dissonance and the Symphonic-Poetic City." *Eselsohren: Journal of the History of Art, Architecture and Urbanism*, vol. 2, no. 1–2, 2014, pp. 89–104, livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3029831/1/Roberts_Of_Time_Dissonance_%26theCity_2015.pdf/.

Verrone, William. *Adaptation and the Avant-garde*. A&C Black, 2011.



Text's transmission of *Pe boke of ypocras*: editing and studying its Early Modern English witness contained in London, Wellcome Library. MS 7117 (ff. 92r–94v)

Transmisión textual de *Pe boke of ypocras*: edición y estudio de una copia en inglés moderno temprano albergada de Londres, Wellcome Library. MS 7117 (ff. 92r–94v)

IRENE DIEGO RODRÍGUEZ

Institution address: Paseo de la Senda del Rey, 7, Moncloa, Aravaca, 28040, Madrid.

E-mail: irene.diego@flog.uned.es

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9608-1436>

Received: 21/10/24. Accepted: 30/01/2025

How to cite this article: Diego Rodríguez, Irene. "Text's transmission of *Pe boke of ypocras*: editing and studying its Early Modern English witness contained in London, Wellcome Library. MS 7117 (ff. 92r–94v)." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp. 354–379.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ddz5gz50>

Open access article under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

Abstract: *Pe boke of Ypocras* is a zodiacal lunary which outlines the effects that the moon causes in each of the twelve zodiacal signs upon parts of the body leading to different diseases. During the Late Middle Ages this tract circulated extensively and was translated from Latin into different European vernaculars. Middle English manuscript witnesses have been recently studied (Diego Rodríguez, *Pe boke*). However, post-1500 witnesses remain unidentified and unedited. This paper aims to bring to light the sixteenth-century witness of *Pe boke of Ypocras* contained in London, Wellcome Library. MS 7117 (ff.92r–94). Its edition enables the identification of this witness and to place it in the line of transmission. Also, it provides new insights to reflect on how this treatise influenced the ongoing interpenetration of medical astrological thought in the sixteenth century.

Keywords: *Pe boke of Ypocras*; Early Modern English manuscripts; astrological medicine; Wellcome Library MS 7117.

Summary: Introduction: English Medical astrological literature. *Pe boke of Ypocras* in Late Middle English manuscripts. *Pe boke of Ypocras* in London, Wellcome Library. MS 7117. The text transmission line of *Pe boke of Ypocras* contained in London, Wellcome Library. MS 7117. Conclusions.

Resumen: *Pe boke of Ypocras* es un lunario zodiacal que resume los efectos que la luna produce a su paso por cada uno de los doce signos zodiacales sobre las diferentes partes del cuerpo, causando diferentes enfermedades. Durante la Baja Edad Media, este texto circulaba ampliamente y fue traducido del latín a diferentes lenguas vernáculas europeas. Manuscritos en inglés medio que albergan este lunario zodiacal han sido recientemente estudiados (Diego Rodríguez, *Pe boke*). Sin embargo, copias que daten más allá de 1500 no han sido identificadas ni editadas. Este artículo saca a la luz la copia del siglo XVI de *Pe boke of Ypocras* que alberga el manuscrito Londres, Wellcome Library. MS 7117 (ff.92r–94). Su edición permite establecer la identidad de esta copia y situarla dentro de la línea de transmisión. Además, ofrece nuevas perspectivas que permiten la reflexión acerca de cómo este tratado influenció la transmisión del pensamiento médico astrológico en el siglo XVI.

Palabras clave: *Pe boke of Ypocras*; manuscritos en inglés moderno temprano; medicina astrológica, Wellcome Library MS 7117.

Sumario: Introducción: Literatura medico astrológica inglesa. *Pe boke of Ypocras* en manuscritos en inglés medio tardío. *Pe boke of Ypocras* en Londres, Wellcome Library. MS 7117. La transmisión textual de la versión de *Pe boke of Ypocras* en Londres, Wellcome Library. MS 7117. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION: ENGLISH MEDICAL ASTROLOGICAL LITERATURE

From the earliest periods to the present day, scientific writing in English language is the register which reveals almost unbroken continuity (Pahta and Taavitsainen, “Vernacularisation” 1). Medical writing in English is, according to Robbins, a “territory crying out for exploitation” (413). Medical writings in English are closely connected with astrology and the interpretation of the sky. During the Middle Ages, astrological medicine was a recognized practice whose main aim was to diagnose a disease, apply the right treatment, and determine its outcome (Voigts, “The Medical”). Therefore, astrological considerations underpinned diagnosis, prognosis, and therapy (Taavitsainen, “A Zodiacial”).

The belief that each zodiacal signed ruled each of the twelve parts in which the human body was divided (*homo signorum*) was widely disseminated across western Europe.¹ The association between zodiacal signs and parts of the body (organs and limbs) is intimately connected with the animals associated with them and built “upon the idea of shared virtues or characteristics” (Rawcliffe 86): Scorpio is linked to “the secret parts and bladder” (London, British Library. MS Sloane 2270 f. 3r.) as the power of scorpions is in their tail. Astrological medicine relies on the connection between “celestial influences and humoral physiology” (Chapman 287). In addition, planets present a natural affinity with zodiacal signs (Däath).

¹ For further information on the doctrine of the Zodiac Man see Gleadow, and Clark.

Finally, human beings are constituted of four qualities (dry, moist, heat, cold) in combination with the four primary elements (earth, water, fire, air). Their natural character is determined by the command of the four constituent and vital fluids of humors in their body: blood (air), yellow bile (fire), phlegm (water) and black bile (earth). Health depends on the balance of these humors.

Writings on astrological medicine were attributed to a wide range of medical authorities; however, Hippocrates was the supreme authority (Pahta and Taavitsainen, “Authorities”). This attribution to the great physician of Cos awarded medieval writings with prestige. Thus, spurious treatises, mere “fabrications of the Middle Ages” (Kibre, “Hippocratic Writings” 371), circulated extensively in many medieval manuscripts. *Pe boke of Ypocras* is not part of the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, but its ascription to Hippocrates was “unquestioned by medieval physicians” (Kibre, “Hippocratic Writings” 400).²

Astrological medical literature was classified into different prognostic text-types with the purpose of categorizing all individual astrological writings.³ Lunaries were by far the most prevalent and widely disseminated prognostic genre during the Middle Ages (Means, “Electuary” 378). Lunaries are defined in detail by Taavitsainen (“Identification” 18–19):

Lunaries are perpetual prognostications for the lunar month arranged either according to the thirty days of the moon’s cycle from one new moon to the next, or according to the moon’s passage through the signs of the zodiac. They predict the outcome of actions undertaken at a given point of time, advise people in medical matters, and prophesy the fact of children.

Taavitsainen (*Middle* 46) identifies three different categories of popular lunaries:

² Glasgow, Glasgow University Library, Hunter MS 513 contains one late fifteenth-century witness of *Pe boke of Ypocras*. William Hunter, in the late eighteenth century, wrote himself an index of the different treatises contained in Hunter MS 513 and entitled *Pe boke of Ypocras* “A pretended book of Ypocras.” In Young and Aitken’s catalogue on manuscripts from the Hunterian Collection, *Pe boke of Ypocras* appears as “Pseudo-Hippocratis” (421).

³ For further information on English medical astrological writings and their classification, see Taavitsainen (*Middle English Lunaries*), Means (“Electuary,” *Medieval Lunar Astrology*).

- (1) Days of the Moon (lunaries proper) give their prognostications according to the varying light of the moon.
- (2) Mansions of the Moon give their prognostications according to the light into the mansions.
- (3) Signs of the Zodiac (zodiacal lunaries) give their prognostications according to the moon's passage in the zodiac.

Lunaries gained significant circulation from the mid-fourteenth century onward, achieving considerable popularity and readership during the fifteenth century, until the mid-sixteenth century, when they started to be replaced by printed almanac adaptations (Braswell 188). However, this is not the case of *Pe boke of Ypocras*, a zodiacal lunary which circulated extensively during the late Middle Ages, which was transmitted during the first decades of the early modern period, but which was never printed. In the mid-sixteenth the Ptolemaic system which placed the man in the centre of the universe, and which survived well until the seventeenth century, was gradually disappearing (Taavitsainen and Pahta, *Medical* 97), and physicians' approaches to study sickness objectively decry aids of astrology (Copeman 3). Moreover, these changes fostered the quest for an alternative to classical authors like Hippocrates (Siraishi, *History*). This implies that attributing astrological medical knowledge to the Father of Medicine was no longer an effective procedure to persuade readers to trust that there is no reason to question the correctness of the doctrine (Pahta and Taavitsainen, "Authorities" 97–98). This gradual decay of astrological medicine⁴ has contributed to the absence of the tract on this subject in manuscripts from after the sixteenth century. However, the study of *Pe boke of Ypocras* in early modern manuscripts reflects the ongoing interpenetration of medical and astrological thought in the sixteenth century,⁵ as well as it contributes to the study of a prognostic subgenre which remains ill-defined and little analyzed. There remains much work to be done, as many individual treatises still need to be edited, and affiliations still to be established (Means, "Electioinary" 402).

1. *PE BOKE OF YPOCRAS* IN LATE MIDDLE ENGLISH MANUSCRIPTS

⁴ For further information on the history of astrological medicine during the early modern period, see Capp, Tester, Wear, Siraishi (*History*) and Dooley.

⁵ For further information about the history of the transmission of the tract in English and Spanish sixteenth-century witnesses see De la Cruz Cabanillas, Isabel and Irene Diego Rodríguez, "Astrologia Ypocratis."

Pe boke of Ypocras is a zodiacal lunary which outlines the effects the moon produces in each of the twelve zodiac signs upon parts of the body leading to diverse kinds of sicknesses.

Pe boke of Ypocras appears in ten fifteenth-century medical miscellanies (Table 1).⁶ It opens by crediting the treatise to Hippocrates and includes an introduction before presenting the signs of the Zodiac (Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, and Pisces). The treatise closes with a text relating to apostemes or abscesses.⁷ These fifteenth-century witnesses of *Pe boke of Ypocras* have been recently edited (Diego Rodríguez, *Pe boke*) and thoroughly studied (De la Cruz Cabanillas and Diego Rodríguez, “Astrological Medicine”; Diego Rodríguez, “Englishing”).

⁶ Three incomplete fifteenth-century witnesses are disregarded for this study. For further information on *Pe boke of Ypocras* in late Middle English manuscripts, see Diego Rodríguez, *Pe boke*

⁷ In the transcriptions, the original spelling has been maintained, whereas the abbreviations have been silently expanded.

Table 1. Fifteenth-century witnesses of *Pe boke of Ypocras*

MS	Folios	Incipit
Cambridge, Gonville & Caius College. MS 336/725	102v–105r	This is the techinge of ypocras. In þis book he techip for to knowe bi what planete syknes comeþ lyf & deeþ
Cambridge, Gonville & Caius College. MS 457/395	77v–78v	Thys ys þe boke of ypocras in þis booke he techith for to knowe by what planete Sykenesse lyf & deth
Cambridge, Trinity College. MS R.14.52	143r–145r	This is the booke of ypocras in this book he techith to knowe the planete Sikenes lif and deth
Glasgow University Library. MS Hunter 513	98r–104r	This is the booke of ypocras in this booke he techith for to knowe by planette Sykenesse lyfe & deth
London, British Library. MS Additional 12195	185r–190v	Thys bok of ypocras tech for to knowe Be þe planetes of seknes both of lyf & deyth
London, British Library. MS Harley 1736	232r–234v	This ys þe boke off ypocras in this booke he techyth ffor to know be planets both lyffe & deth
London, British Library. MS Harley 2378	7r–11v	hys his þe booke of ypocras in þis book he techyt for to knowe be planete seknesse lyf & deth
London, British Library. MS Sloane 340	75v–78v & 81r	this is þe techyng of jpocras. jn þis booke he techyth for to knowe be what planete siyksse comeþ liyf & deþ
London, British Library. MS Sloane 73	128r–131r	This is þe techinge of ypocras In þis book he techip for to knowe bi what planete syknes comeþ. lyf and deeþ
London, Royal College of Physicians. MS 384	85r–86r	Tthis is þe boke of ypocras in this booke he techith forto knowe by planet sekenessis liffe & deþe

Source: Prepared by the author.

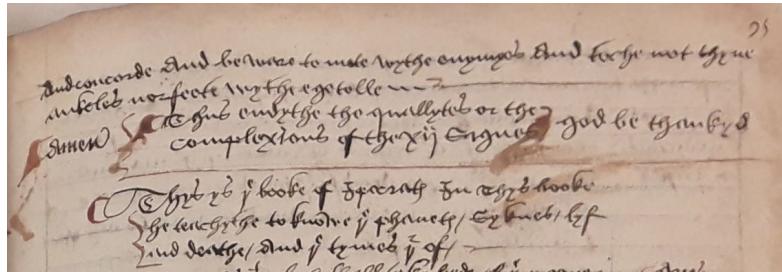
There are three more medical miscellaneous manuscripts which, according to manuscript catalogues (Means, “Electionary,” *Medieval Lunar Astrology*; Keiser), contain fifteenth-century copies of *Pe boke of Ypocras*. However, direct examination of the manuscripts reveals that they contain only fragments of the tract under study: 1) Oxford, Bodleian Library. MS Ashmole 393 (ff. 32r–32v) contains the introduction and the three first signs (Aries, Taurus, and Gemini); 2) Oxford, Bodleian Library. MS Selden Supra 73 (ff. 19r–21r) lacks the introduction and the first zodiacal signs, beginning with Cancer; 3) in Durham, Durham University Library. MS Cosin V.IV.7 the signs of Virgo, Libra, Scorpio and Sagittarius are missing.

Another miscellaneous medical manuscript that is regularly mentioned in manuscript catalogues as a witness of *Pe boke of Ypocras* is Oxford, Bodleian Library. MS Ashmole 210 (Kibre, “Hippocrates Latinus”; Means, “Electionary”; Keiser). However, it has already been demonstrated that what Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 210 contains in ff. 36v–42r is a vernacular translation of the Latin tract entitled *Astrologia Ypocratis* (Diego Rodríguez, “Englishing”). This Latin treatise has been conceived, for a very long time, as the Latin exemplar responsible for the Middle English existing witnesses of *Pe boke of Ypocras*.

Finally, there is another manuscript mentioned in catalogues as container of *Pe boke of Ypocras*: London, Wellcome Library. MS 7117 (Henceforth MS 7117).⁸ The identification of this early modern English witness has been an arduous task. Firstly, because *Pe boke of Ypocras* seems to be included in medical manuscripts which compiled more extensive and well-known scientific treatises. Therefore, scholarship tends to focus on these relevant works (Voigts, “Golden” 123). According to Taavitsainen, “zodiacal lunaries are often incorporated into medical codices in sections of astrological medicine without further notice” (“Identification” 20). Secondly, because sometimes manuscripts do not distinguish one work from another, as there is no clear division between texts (Means, “Electionary” 370). MS 7117, f. 92r deploys a red line to indicate the end of the previous tract and the beginning of *Pe boke of Ypocras* (Fig. 1).

⁸ I am grateful to the Wellcome Library for their permission to reproduce images from MS 7117.

Figure 1. Red line indicating the end of the previous treatise and the opening of *Pe boke of Ypocras* in MS 7117, f. 92r.



Thirdly, manuscript catalogues and reference books are rarely comprehensive and lack cross-references to other catalogues (Kibre, “Hippocratic Writings,” “Hippocrates Latinus”; Voigts and Kurtz). Furthermore, manuscript catalogues, such as Means (*Medieval Lunar Astrology*) or Keiser tend to omit the date of *Pe boke of Ypocras* contained in MS 7117, and to list them together with the medieval manuscript copies listed in Table 1.

2. *PE BOKE OF YPOCRAS* IN LONDON, WELLCOME LIBRARY. MS 7117

London, Wellcome Library. MS 7117 (ff. 92r–94v) is a sixteenth-century English medical miscellany compiled for the usage of an unknown Elizabethan practitioner. It contains an incomplete English copy of John of Arderne's *treatise on fistula in ano*, medical recipes, astrological tracts and a series of lists and classifications of diseases and medicaments. It contains one hundred and forty folios written mainly in dark brown ink, on ruled paper with headings and underlining in red and with almost no decoration (illustrated guide to urine diagnosis in ff. 118v–122r).

The manuscript contains various annotations regarding ownership (Wellcome Library online catalogue), which pointed to the fact that this manuscript circulated until the mid-seventeenth century:

Various marks of ownership: ‘by me Steven Dallymond Draper’ in a contemporary hand, on front paste-down, which also bears, apart from a few additional recipes, the following verse, ‘The hand ys bad/The matter ys good/peeple of the barke/And aprove the wode, Sir William Knyghtle. In mensis december [sic] anno domini 1576. Reade & then judge’; on front cover ‘This Booke was given to me by Mr George Filding [?George Fylding,

surgeon of Lubbenham, Leics. (fl.1603)] in November 1652, & to Mr Samuell Wallis by D. Burton in June 1658.'

The treatise under consideration appears from f. 92r to f. 94v:

f. 92r

Thys ys þe booke of jþocrats jn thys booke
 he teachythe to know þe planetes, syknes, lyf
 and deathe, and þe tymes þer of
 Fyrst sayth jþocrates þat a leche shall take hede of þe moone
 When she ys at þe full, for them woxethe blod þe marowe & brayne
 and other humores which dothe followe þe course of moone
 Wherefore when yo take a cure be yt phisyke or surgery, take
 hede of þe moone & of þe tyme when þe syknes toke hym, and
 yn what singe yt begane first þe moone ys then, an exsample
 j shall shewe yde by all þe xii signis everyone by hymselfe,
 when þe moone ys yn a signe callyd aries, thys signe hathe
 of man þe head & þe chyne that signe ys of kynde hot & drye
 coloure wherefore when þat a planet /signe/ þat hath mars or sole
 the whyche be also hot & drye þe syknes mvst needs be yn þe head
 of hete & of fevers & maye not well speke & þe longes
 & þe brest doth brene wythe heate, yt ys a poynþ of frenesy
 jf so be þat saturne be with þe moone at þat tyme he shale esager
 þe xijij daye after þe syknes take hym remedy ys to
 let hym blad on þe hart vayne & vse cold medecynes in
 hys meate & drykne
 when þe moone ys in bis signe of taurus, þat signe ys of the
 kynd of þe erthe cold & dry, and in a planet calyd saturne
 wythe þe moone jn thys signe of mars þat ys a planet be
 contrarie to þe moone þe sykenes shalle of coldness & drye
 nese thys signe hath of man þe throte þat siknes
 shalle fever quartain cold goute cold dropseye
 & other that be passions of the splene. Wherfore
 yf þe moone be yn thys signe & þe planet whyth hym
 colde that siknes maye not be healyd tyll þe moone be
 f. 92v

contrarie to the planet and yf þe moone holde wythe mars and
 cast light to hym wytheyn xxvij days he shall dye. Jf ye wyll
 a medecyne. When þe moone or venus or þe sonne
 be together of surgerye of cancers & of marmolls and
 other woundes with dead flesshe ever yn thy styme. For
 all other tymes medecyn workth nott to any affect

And thy sys for þe kynde jmpression þat the planet hath
 There cold in kynde whythe ys syknes
 Gemine ys a signe þat ys hot moyste of kynd of þe blod when
 the moone ys yn þis signe & þe planet wythe hym as ys venus
 or moystness then þe syknes mvst be of blod & collor as be
 the fever tercians causyd or apostemes þat bone blad red
 collor & soft in fellyng. When þat a man hath þis siknes
 and þe moone be yn thys signe & other planets contarie
 then ys yt good to geve medecynes. But yf saturne
 and mars be together when þe siknes takyth hym with
 yn xv days he shall dye this signe hath of man the
 armes & sholdres & all þat siknes that longyth to hym
 Therfore þe mone in thys signe he hym self gevyyth non
 Medecyn in þese members for þe medecyns shall not profytt
 nother wytheyn nor wytheoute
 Cancer ys a signe þat ys cold & moyste of kynd of fleme
 when þe mone ys yn þis signe he ys in hys proper house jf
 a man fall sike at thy styme & þe siknes be of fleme þat
 ys cold & moyste as ys þe dropsye fever cotoydain apostem
 thes be in collor whyte & in fellynh soft they csnot be
 curyd tyll þe mone com into a signe callyd leo and yf
 the mone have wyth hym saturne & no planet that ys
 good to geve light wetge þe mone he shall never be hole
 but he shall dye þe next cold wynter after And wynd þat
 comyth oute of þe sowthe be contrary & cause of encreasynge
 of thys siknes. Cancer hath of a man þe brest and
 siknes

f. 93r

siknes of þe brest be yn þis tyme moste grevouse
 Leo ys signe hot & dry by kynd of freeze when þe mone ys
 yn þis signe and a man fall ynto any siknes þat ys hot & drye
 as ys þe jaundes or hot dropsye or other passions þat longe
 to þe lyver þat maye not be curyd tyll þe mone be yn a signe þat
 ys contrary yn kind to þat signe leo ys þe signe scorpio
 pisses or cancer yf a man fall syke when þe mone
 ys yn þis signe and mars & sole be wyth þe mone he
 shall dye yn þe hot somer wytheyn ij ere mone daye
 when þe sonne ys hottyst abowte none. Thys signe hath
 of man þe stomake þe lyver & galle therfor all sicknesses
 & all sores þat be of þe galle & of þe lyver grevythe moste
 when þe money ys yn thys signe
 Virgo ys a signe cold & dry of þe kynde of þe erthe

when þe money s in þis signe yf a man fall into anye
 siknes þat ys cold & dry that guwyth in the wombe
 signes yf death & colica paysio & jllica passio thys
 siknes maye not he be hoahel tyll þe mone com to a
 signe þat ys contrarie to þe kynde of thys signe as libra
 aquarius & gemine jf þe mone haue wyth hym saturne
 he shall dye sone after harvyst yn September and all worthe
 maner of syknes þat are from þe navyll to þe stomok
 grevytg moste when þe mone ys in thys signe
 Libra ys a signe hot & moyste when þe mone ys
 yn þis signe all maner of syknes þat ys in þe raynes
 as the red stone or in þe bladder as þe whyte stone or
 swellyng of the members of blod he shalle non
 medecyne receve but when þe mone ys yn a signe
 lyke scorpio pisses or cancer jf þe mone haue
 wythe hym sone or mars hyt siknes shall never leve
 hym during lyf thys signe hath of a man þe raynes
 & lyndes & bladder for therefore all syknes þat be yn
 f. 93v
 þe members growth moste when þe mone ys in þis signe
 Scorpio ys a signe cold & moyste of þe kynd of water
 when þe money s yn thys signe and yf a man take anye
 siknes in hys foundemet as be þe emoroyds fyggs & condolona/te/
 no medecyne þes for þis syknes tyll þe mone com owte
 of thys signe that is callyd taurus virge & capricornis jf
 venus & mars be wythe þe mone yn þis synge in serten
 tymes they shold bleede þat ys when þe mone meltythe
 sole mercury and venus
 Sagitario ys a signe hot & dry of þe kynde of fyere
 when þe money s in thys signe yf a man fall yn any
 siknes yn the hauche or yn the thyghes or in þe knee lyke
 as yt ys yn artica passio þer shall no medecyn be gevwy
 hym perto tyll þe mone com to a signe callyd capricorns
 or virgo jf þe mone haue wyth hym a planet that
 ys callyd venus hys siknes ys vncurabull he shalle
 torne to a palsey wytge yn ji ere the shythe shalle
 non hyme of hyt loynes from þe gyrdylstod downward
 and all maner passyons that be from hyp bone down to
 the knee grevyth moste when þe mone ys in þis signe for
 thys sygne hath thys parte of a man
 Capricornus ys a signe cold & drye of þe kynde of þe erthe
 when the mone ys in thys signe all maner of siknes that ys

yn þe knee of coldness & dryness shall no medecyne resseve tyll
 jf þe mone haue wyth hym saturnes or venus yf þe signe
 be contrarie & the knee haue no swellyng þat passion
 t ys vncurable thys signe hathe of a man the knee and
 the hame and therfore all sores þat fallyth þerto when þe
 the mone ys yn thys signe be vncurable
 Aquarius ys a signe hot & moyste when þe mone
 ys yn thys signe all maner siknes that be from the
 knee to the ankele shall take no medecyne at the
 crampe in þe calf of þe legge & þe marmolle and the
 dropsye jf the mone haue wythe hym jp jupiter
 and
 f. 94r
 and saturnus þat syknes þat takyth hym yn þe lymbe shall last hym
 tyll the mone haue gon iij tymes abowte that ys three quarters of
 a yere do thy medicine what time ever thowe wyll saving
 when þe money s yv thys signe
 Pisses ys a signe cold & moyste when þe money s yn thys signe
 all maner of siknes þat ys yn þe foote as þe gowte artetica podagra
 sacer ygnis hiersipala nole me tangere to the foote sholde
 no medecyn take whylle þe mone ys yn þat signe & yf sole mars
 or saturns be wythe the mone in thys signe yt ys vncurable
 but yf be so þat the medecyn be gevyn anon afte the mone
 and saturne departe and so of sole and mars afterward
 a man maye see hym and cure hym
 For to knowe of all maner of sores wytheyn and wythe
 owte of what complexion they be know thys rule and
 yf ye soe a sore or apostems þat ys wytheowte in what parte of
 the body se ever yt be / Fyrst take hede of the cullor for yf
 yt be red yn sight and soft yn feeling yt ys engendryde
 of blod and yf yt be hot and moyst hys signe ys gemine 1
 libra and aquarius hys planets are Jupiter & marcurie
 and whythe þe mone ys yn this signe wyth the planets nevell
 not wythe suche a sore / Jf the cullor of the sore be
 red ynsyght and somewhat hard yn feeling yt ys engendryd
 of collor & drye hys signes are aries leo and sagitarius
 hys planets are sole and mars whylle the money s in these
 signes wythe the planets medyll not wythe suche a sore
 / Jf there be a sore that ys graye whyte or blake yf yt be hard
 yt ys ongendryd of coldness and dryness hys signes are taurius
 virgo and capricorne hys planet ys saturne and yf yt be of the
 cullore a sore sayde þat yt to suye greye whyte or blake & syt be

somewhat softe & in fellyng yt ys engendryd of fleme & coldeness
 moyste hys signes be cancer scorpio and pisses hys planets
 be venus and libra thys rule ys generall of all maner
 surgerye of appostems wythowte sor the /amen/
 f.94v
 here endythe the booke of jporcas of
 lyfe and deathe translatyd of astrolamyors
 the best vpon avecen

3. THE TEXT TRANSMISSION LINE OF *PE BOKE OF YPOCRAS* CONTAINED IN LONDON, WELLCOME LIBRARY. MS 7117

The comparison and collation of *Pe boke of Ypocras* contained in London, Wellcome Library. MS 7117 with the late Middle English witnesses will determine where it lies in the text's transmission history, its concrete place in the line of transmission. It will demonstrate first that it is an early modern witness of a late medieval text that widely circulated throughout the Middle Ages and secondly, that the medical astrological ideas contained in *Pe boke of Ypocras* were still valid during the sixteenth century.

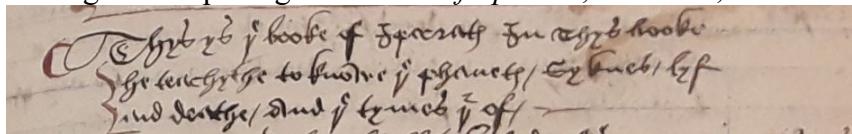
To carry out this collation, first the witness contained in W 7117 (ff. 92r–94v) has been transcribed.⁹ Then, the *incipits* and *explicits* are collated, which facilitates to reduce significantly the list of Middle English witnesses which can be the exemplar from which *Pe boke of Ypocras* in W 7117 derives. After, the introduction of the treatise is compared. The order in which the zodiacal signs appear in the treatise is also considered, as it stands for a valuable resource to establish the line of transmission. The sign of Capricorn is collated in the remaining witnesses with the text in W 7117, as well as some sections from the treatise on apostemes which close the tract. Some observations on the marginalia are provided at the end of the analysis.

In the medieval medical field, the authority and prestige of Hippocrates had no rival (Kibre, “Hippocrates Latinus” 1). Hippocrates' name is frequently mentioned on the title pages or within the introductory sentences of various medical treatises. Consequently, a considerable

⁹ See Appendix 1 for the paleographical transcription of *Pe boke of Ypocras* contained in MS 7117 (ff. 92r–94v). The paleographical transcription of late Middle English witnesses can be found in Diego Rodríguez (*Pe boke*).

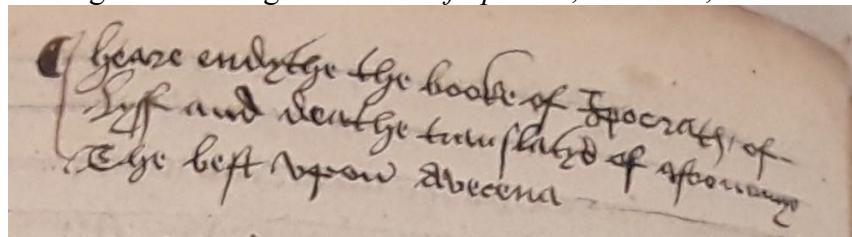
number of apocryphal texts have been erroneously attributed to Hippocrates, with minimal or no substantive connection to his authentic writings (Taavitsainen and Pahta, *Early* 72). The incidence of ancient authorities at the beginning of medical and/or scientific treatises decreases during the early modern period (Taavitsainen and Pahta, *Early* 153). A noteworthy feature is that the Early Modern witness in MS 7117 f. 92r preserves the attribution to Hippocrates in the *incipit*: “Thys ys *pe booke of jpocras* jn thys booke he teachythe to know *pe planetes, syknes, lyf and deathe, and pe tymes per of*” (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Opening of *Pe boke of Ypocras*, MS 7117, f. 92r.



This attribution to the great physician of Cos reappears at the end of the tract: “*Thys rulle ys generall of all maner Surgerye of apostems wythowte for the Amen heare endythe the booke of jpocrates of lyf and deathe translatyd of astronomye the best vpon avecena*” (f. 94v). This feature is inherited from the Middle English versions.

Figure 3: Ending of *Pe boke of Ypocras*, MS 7117, f. 94v.



The *incipit* of *Pe boke of Ypocras* in W 7117 opens with a reference to *Pe boke of Ypocras*: “*Thys ys *pe booke of jpocras**” (f. 92r). Despite the homogeneous (mis)attribution to Hippocrates in the Late Middle English witnesses, there three manuscripts which do not emphasize the book, but the teaching of Hippocrates:

- (1) This is *the techinge of ypocras*. In þis book he techib for to knowe bi what planete syknes comeþ lyf & deþ (Cambridge, Gonville & Caius College. MS 336/725, f. 102v)

- (2) this is *þe techyng of jþocras*. in þis boke he techyth for to knowe be what planete siyknisse comeþ liyf & deþ (London, British Library. MS Sloane 340, f. 75v)
- (3) This is *þe techinge of ypocras* In þis book he techiþ for to knowe bi what planete syknes comeþ. lyf and deeþ (London, British Library. MS Sloane 73, f. 128r)

The comparison of the *explicits* of the late Middle English witnesses with the ones from W 7117, also allows to reduce the list of possible medieval exemplars. The *explicit* of W 7117 starts at the very end of f. 94r (*thys rule ys generall of all maner surgerye of appostems wythowte sor the /amen/*) and continues in f. 94v a reference to the end of *Pe boke of Ypocras* (“here endythe the booke of jþocras”), a mention to the kind of book (“of lyfe and deaþe”), a note about who translated this tract (“*translatyd of astrolamyors*”), and it closes with an allusion to Avicenna, the prince of physicians (“the best vpon avecen”). There are two late Middle English manuscripts which lack the reference to Avicenna at the very end of the treatise, and which close the tract with a *that*-clause after the reference to the translation of *Pe boke of Ypocras*:

- (1) “þese rulis ben generall for all maner Sorgeons of postumus outewarde here endith þe boke of ypocras of deth and lyfe translate of Astrolamyors *þe best þat euer were founde*” (Glasgow, Glasgow University Library MS Hunter 513, f. 104v)
- (2) “These rulys ben generall for al maner surgeons of postemus outward here endith þe boke of ypocras of deþe and liffe translate of astronomyers *þe best þat euyr were fownde & Explicit.*” (London, Royal College of Physicians MS 384, f. 86v)

Moreover, two other medieval witnesses do not only lack the reference to Avicenna but even lack the allusion to the end of *Pe boke of Ypocras* as well as the reference to the translation. This is the case of the following medieval witnesses:

- (1) “Thes rewll is generall for all maner of surgery & for all maner of pastoms outwarde” (London, British Library MS Additional 12195, f.190v)
- (2) “This rewle ys general for all maner off surgery off apostemes owtwarde” (London, British Library MS Harley 1736, f. 234v)

This collation reveals that considering the Late Middle English witnesses listed in Table 1, only three share the same sentence structure regarding the *incipits* and *explicits* with W 7117. This implies that to establish the line of transmission of *Pe boke of Ypocras* contained in MS 7117 (ff. 92r–94v), the late medieval witnesses included in Table 2 need to be further scrutinized.

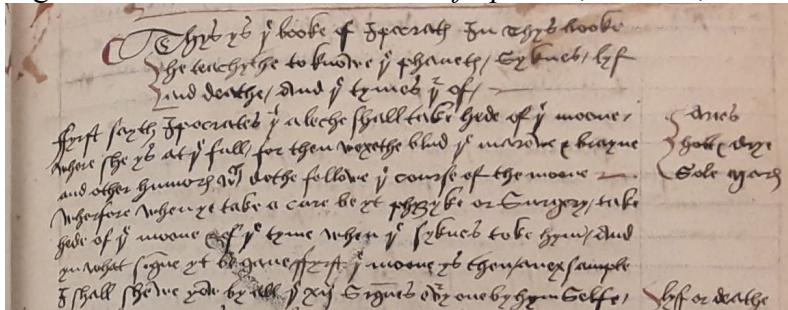
Table 2. *Incipits* and *explicits* of three witnesses of *Pe boke of Ypocras*.

MS	Incipit	Explicit
MS 457/395	Thys is þe boke of ypocras in þis booke he techith for to knowe by what planete Sykenesse lyf & deth & þe tymys therof	þis rule is generall for al maner of Surgyrye of postemys outward here endyth the booke off jpocrase off lyffe & deth translateyd of astronomyerys the beste vpon Avysenit
MS R.14.52	This is the booke of jpocras in this book he techith to knowe the planete. Sikenes. lif and deth and the tymes therof	This rule is general of al maner Surgery of postemes outward here endith the Booke of jpocras of lif and deth translated of Astronomers the best vpon Avicen
MS Harley 2378	hys his þe booke of ypocras in þis book he techyt for to knowe be planete. seknesse. lyf. & deth. and þe times þerof	þis rewle is general for all maner surgerye of apostemus. owtward. her endyth þe boke of ypocras of deth & of lyf translat of astronomerys þe beste super Avicenna

The introduction to *Pe boke of Ypocras* consists of an explanation of its main purpose: to teach about the influence of the planets as far sicknesses and their denouement—life or death—are concerned, as well as to offer a training regarding prescriptions. There are three main points that ought to

be considered prior to treatment. First, to observe the moon thoroughly; secondly, to be aware of the time when the disease was contracted; and finally, to know in which sign of the Zodiac it falls.

Figure 4. Introduction of *Pe boke of Ypocras*, W 7117, f. 92r.



Collating the introduction of *Pe boke of Ypocras* in W 7117 with the three medieval tracts starts highlights similarities with MS R.14.52 and differences with MS 457/395 and MS Harley 2378. The introduction in MS R.14.52 contains a very similar length and number of words, while the other two witnesses are considerably longer. They provide additional details concerning recommendations for treatment:

- (1) This is the booke of jporcas in this book he techith to knowe the planetē. Sikenes. lif and deth and the tymes therof ffirst saith jporcas that a leche shcal take kepe of the mone wher he is at the ful. whan woxith bloode and marow bearyne and *other humores the whiche folowen the cours of the mone* Wher for whan thow takest a cure be it of phisik or of surgery take kepe of the mone and of the tyme whan the sikenes toke and in what signe it bigan first the mone is than a sample j shal shewe the bi al the xij. signes everich on bi hymselfe. (MS R.14.52, 143r)
- (2) Thys ys þe booke of jporcates jn thys booke he teachythe to know þe planetes, syknes, lyf and deathe, and þe tymes þer of Fyrst sayth jporcas þat a leche shall take hede of þe moone When she ys at þe full, for them woxethe bloð þe marowe & bearyne and *other humores which dothe followe þe course of moone* Wherfore when yo take a cure be yt phisyke or surgery, take hede of þe moone & of þe tyme when þe syknes toke hym, and yn what singe yt begane first þe moone ys then, an exsample j shall shewe yde by all þe xii signis everyone by hymselfe (MS 7117, f. 92r)
- (3) Thys is þe booke of yporcas in þis booke he techith for to knowe by what planetē Sykenesse lyf & deth & þe tymys therof ffyrst sayth jporcas þat

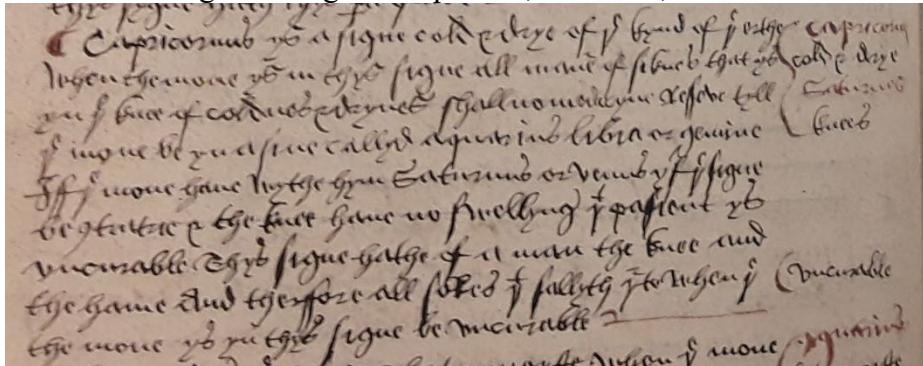
a leche schal take kepe of the mone whan he ys atte þe fulle þan wexit þe blod of man or woman And marowe & braynn & oþer humoris *þe whyche both moyst & cold or moyst And hote these sekenesses þat ben cold & drye or hote & drye he schewyth þe coris of the mone* wherfore whan þou takyst An cure be it of physyke or ells off Surgerye take kepe of the mone & off þe tyme whan the sekenesse toke hym & in what sygne it began ffyrst the mone is þan An ensampyll asj schall shewe be alle þe xije sygnys eueryche on be himself (MS 457/395, f. 77v)

(4) hys his þe booke of ypocras in þis book he techyt for to knowe be planete. seknesse. lyf. & deth. and þe times þerof. ffirst seyth ypocras þat a leche xal take kep of þe mone wanne he is atte þe full. þan waxith blod & marwe & brayne & hoþer humours *þe wyche be moyst & colde. moyst & hote. bilke sikenesse þat be cold & drye. or hote & drye. schewe also þe cowrse of þe mone.* werefor wan þou takest a cure be it of hysykesse. or ellis of surgery ta keep of þe mone & of þe time wan þe seknesse took & in wat sygne it began. ¶ ffirst þe mone is þanne a saumple j xal schewe þe be alle þe .xij. sygnes euereilk on be hymself. (MS Harley 2378, f. 7r)

After the introduction to the tract, the twelve signs of the Zodiac follow. Comparing the order in which the signs of the Zodiac appear is also relevant to establish the line of transmission of W7117. Two Late Middle English witnesses, MS 475/395 and MS R.14.52, reveal the following succession of zodiacal signs: Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius and Pisces. The collation reveals that order coincides with the one in the Early Modern English witness under study. However, it also discloses that in MS Harley 2378 Virgo precedes the sign of Leo. It seems unlikely that the scribe who copied *Pe boke of Ypocras* into W7117 rearranged the order of the zodiacal signs to not reproduce the order where Leo follows the sign of Virgo.

The content of the Zodiac signs is also revealing. The sign of Capricorn is collated with the three Late Middle English versions.

Figure 5. Sign of Capricorn, MS 7117, f. 93v.



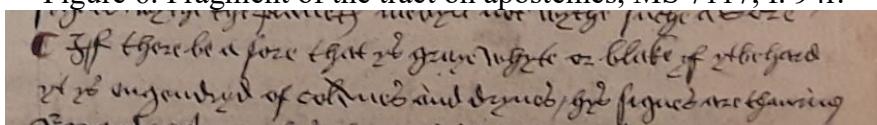
This comparison evidences once again the similarities shared between W 7117 and MS R.14.52. They lack a sentence contained in MS 457/395 and MS Harley 2378 which refers to the moment to avoid taking medication (when the moon is a sign that hits Aquarius, Libra or Gemini):

- (1) CApricornus is a signe that is cold and dry of þe kynde of the Erth whan the mone is in this signe al maner of sikenes that is in the knee of coldnes and drynes shal no medycyne receive. or the mone be in a signe that hight Aquarius libra. or Gemini jf the mone have with hym Saturnus or Venus if the signe be contrary and the knee have no bolnyng that passioun is vncurable. this signe hath of a man the kne and þe hamme and therfor al sores that fallith thereto whan the mone is in this signe bien vncurable. (MS R.14.52, f. 144v)
- (2) Capricornus ys a signe cold & drye of þe kynde of þe erthe when the mone ys in thys signe all maner of siknes that ys yn þe knee of coldness & dryness shall no medecyne resseve tyll jf þe mone haue wþy hym saturnes or venus yf þe signe be contrarie & the knee haue no swellyng þat passion t ys vncurable thys signe hathe of a man the knee and the hame and therfore all sores þat fallyth þerto when þe mone ys yn thys signe be vncurable. (MS 7117, f. 93v)
- (3) Capricornius is a sygne þat is cold & drye off þe kynde of þe erþe whan the mone is in þis sygne all maner sekenesse þat is in þe kne coldnesse or drynesse schall no medysyn receyve or þe mone be in A sygne þat hyȝth Aquarius or libra or gemyn yff þe mone haue with hym saturnus or venus & yf þe sygne be contrarye & þe kne haue no bollwyng þat passion is vncurable þis sygne haþe of man þe kne & þe hamme & þerfor al soris þat falle þerto whanne capricornius cold & drie Saturnus þe mone is in þis sygne þey ben vncurable. (MS 457/395, f.78v)

(4) Capricornus is a sygne þat is colde & drie of þe kynde of þe hebr wan þe mone is in þis sygne al maner syknesse þat is in þe kne of coldnesse and dry nesse xal no medicyne receyue or *þe mone be in a sygne þat hyth aquarius or libra. or gemini.* if þe mone haue wyth hym saturnus or venus yf þe sygne be contrarie & þe kne haue no bolnyng þat passioun is vncurable. þis sygne hatyth of a man þe kne & þe hamme and þerfore al sorys þat falle þerto wan þe mone is in þis sygne be incurable. (MS Harley 2378, f. 10r)

Pe boke of Ypocras finishes with a treatise on apostemes, which advises the reader how to recognize the different types of abscesses, and to establish their connection to different parts of the human body to apply the right treatment.

Figure 6. Fragment of the tract on apostemes, MS 7117, f. 94r.



When this tract on apostemes describes the different colors sores may reveal, it is easy to identify differences in the four witnesses under consideration. W 7117 and MS R.14.52 mention grey, white or black sores whereas MS 457/395 and MS Harley 2378 use the term blackish:

- (1) “Jf there be a sore that ys *graye whyte or blake* yf yt be hard yt ys ongendryd of coldnes and drynes.” (MS W 7117, f. 93v)
- (2) “jf ther be a sore þat is. *gray. white. or blac.* if it be hard he is engendred of coldenes and dryness.” (MS R.14.52, f. 145r)
- (3) “yef þer be a sore þat ys *graye & white or blakkyssh* yeff it be hard he is ingendred off coldnesse & drynesse.” (MS 457/395, f. 78v)
- (4) “yf þer be a sore þat is *grey or wyth or blakyssh* if it be hard he is gendryd of coldnesse & drynesse.” (MS Harley 2378, f.11v)

Pe boke of Ypocras contained in W 7117 is clearly most closely related to MS R.14.52.¹⁰ The lexical and syntactical structures employed by both witnesses are consistent, distinguishing them from the other two

¹⁰ Tavormina identifies *Pe boke of Ypocras* in R.14.52. However, the study and the edition of the Hippocratic treatises gathered in this manuscript focuses on ff. 64r–104r Commentary on the Hippocratic Prognosis.

manuscripts under examination. Moreover, both contain the same *marginalia* at the beginning of each Zodiac sign: the Zodiac sign, its qualities and the planet associated with the sign under consideration:

(1)[Margin] “Taurus cold and dry Saturne.” (MS R.14.52, f. 143r)
(2)[Margin] “Taurus cold & dry Saturnus.” (MS W 7117, f. 92r)

The feature in R.14.52 that has not been transmitted to the early modern witness contained in MS 7117 is the use of a red-ink *littera notabilior* surrounded by a blue-ink border at the beginning of the treatise and at the beginning of each zodiacal sign. This probably points to the fact that the sixteenth-century owner of MS 7117 was more interested in the content than in decorative feature that raise the price of producing the manuscript.

CONCLUSIONS

In early modern England, the prevailing medical paradigm was heavily influenced by the principles of humoral pathology, along with the authoritative texts of classical medicine and astrological considerations. The spread of medieval medical and astrological knowledge, often (mis)attributed to the authority of Hippocrates, persisted through the sixteenth century. This has been demonstrated with the edition and the study of the line of transmission of the sixteenth-century witness of *Pe boke of Ypocras* contained in Wellcome MS 7117. This article demonstrates first, a continuous degree of confidence of sixteenth-century society in astrological physic which proves the continuation of astrology as one of the cornerstones of medicine during the sixteenth century. Secondly, this study also demonstrates the success *Pe boke of Ypocras* enjoyed for centuries.

Pe boke of Ypocras gathers medical and astrological knowledge, and appears in thirteen fifteenth-century manuscripts, considering also uncomplete versions. The examination of manuscript catalogues, and the subsequent examination of the manuscript allows its identification in MS 7117. The first step consisted in collating the *incipits* and *explicits* of all late Middle English witnesses with MS 7117. This initial analysis demonstrates that the structure and lexicon of only three medieval manuscripts coincides with the *incipit* and *explicit* in MS 7117. The subsequent collation of MS R.14.52, MS 475/395 and MS Harley 2378 with MS 7117 shed further light to establish the genetic filiation of the

sixteenth-century witness under study. MS 475/395 and MS Harley 2378, in their introduction and sign of Capricorn, contain sentences that do not appear in the other two witnesses. In the closure, they also use different lexicon as in the case of “blackish.” On the contrary, the collation of the sections highlights the similarities *Pe boke of Ypocras* shared in MS R.14.52 and MS 7117. Therefore, *Pe boke of Ypocras* contained in the late Middle English manuscript MS R.14.52 (ff. 143r–145r) is the exemplar from the scribe of *Pe boke of Ypocras* contained in MS 7117 (ff. 92r–94v) copied from.

The increasing skepticism towards astrology and the rise of Galen as the classical authority of reference were probably responsible for the disappearance of post-sixteenth-century witnesses of *Pe boke of Ypocras*. The theories supported in *Pe boke of Ypocras* were no longer valid, as well as the concepts of medical practice it contains. This tract was lost in the sixteenth century—or perhaps it is more challenging to think that future examination of Early Modern English manuscripts that remain unexplored in library collections worldwide will allow the continuation the study of the text's transmission history.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Cambridge, Gonville & Caius College. MS 336/725.

Cambridge, Gonville & Caius College. MS 457/395.

Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.14.52.

Durham, Durham University Library. MS Cosin V.IV.7.

Glasgow, Glasgow University Library. MS Hunter 513.

London, British Library. MS Additional 12195.

London, British Library. MS Harley 1736.

London, British Library. MS Harley 2378.

London, British Library. MS Sloane 73.

London, British Library. MS Sloane 340.

London, British Library. MS Sloane 2270.

London, Royal College of Physicians. MS 384.

London, Wellcome Library. MS 7117.

Oxford, Bodleian Library. MS Ashmole 210.

Oxford, Bodleian Library. MS Ashmole 393.

Oxford, Bodleian Library. MS Selden Supra 73.

REFERENCES

Braswell, Laurel. “Popular Lunar Astrology in the Late Middle Ages.” *University of Ottawa Quarterly*, vol. 84, 1979, pp. 187–94.

Capp, Bernard. *Astrology and the Popular Press. English Almanacs 1500–1800*. Faber and Faber, 1979.

Chapman, Allan. “Astrological Medicine.” *Health, Medicine and Mortality in the Sixteenth Century*, edited by Charles Webster, CUP, 1979, pp. 275–300.

Clark, Charles. “The Zodiac Man in Medieval Astrology.” *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association*, vol. 3, 1982, pp. 13–38, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol3/iss1/3/.

Copeman, William Sydney Charles. *Doctors and Disease in Tudor Times*. Dawson’s of Pall Mall, 1960.

Däath, Heinrich. *Medical Astrology*. L.N. Fowler, 1907.

De la Cruz-Cabanillas, Isabel, and Irene Diego Rodríguez. “Astrological Medicine in Middle English: The Case of *Pe Booke of Ypocras*.” *Textual Reception and Cultural Debate in Medieval English Studies*,

edited by María José Esteve Ramos and José Ramón Prado Pérez, 2018, pp. 79–99.

De la Cruz-Cabanillas, Isabel and Irene Diego Rodríguez. “*Astrologia Ypocratis* and its vernacular early modern afterlives” [Forthcoming].

Diego Rodríguez, Irene. “‘The ‘Englishing’ of the Pseudo-Hippocratic zodiacal lunary contained in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole MS 210 (ff. 36v–42r).” *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2021, pp. 334 – 350.

Diego Rodríguez, Irene. *Pe boke of ypocras in Late Middle English Manuscripts*. Studies in English Language and Literature, Servicio de Publicaciones y Difusión Científica de la Universidad de la ULPGC, 2023.

Dooley, Brendan. “Astrology and Science.” *A Companion to Astrology in the Renaissance*, edited by Brendan Dooley, 2011, pp. 233–266.

Gleadow, Rupert. *The Origin of the Zodiac*. Jonathan Cape LTD, 1968.

Keiser, George R. “Works of Science and Information.” In *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500*, edited by Albert E Hartung, 1998.

Kibre, Pearl. “Hippocratic Writings in the Middle Ages.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 18, 1945, pp. 371–412, www.jstor.org/stable/27830984/.

Kibre, Pearl. “Hippocrates Latinus: Repertorium of Hippocratic Writings in the Latin Middle Ages (III).” *Traditio*, vol. 33, 1977, pp. 253–295. Reproduced in *Hippocrates Latinus: Repertorium of Hippocratic Writings in the Latin Middle Ages*. Fordham University Press, 1985, www.jstor.org/stable/27831030/.

Kibre, Pearl. “Astronomia or Astrologia Ypocratis.” *Science and History: Studies in Honor of Edward Rosen, Studia Corpenica*, vol. 16, 1978, pp: 133–66. Wroclaw, Warsaw, Krakow, Gdansk and Ossolineum: The Polish Academy of Sciences Press. Reproduced in *Studies in*

Medieval Science. Alchemy, Astrology, Mathematics and Medicine. The Hambledon Press, 1984.

Means, Laurel. "Electionary, Lunary, Destinatory, and Questionary: Toward Defining Categories of Middle English Prognostic Material." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 89, no. 4, 1992, pp. 367–403.

Means, Laurel. *Medieval Lunar Astrology: A Collection of Representative Middle English Texts*. The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993.

Pahta, Päivi, and Irma Taavitsainen. "Authorities in Medieval Medical Treatises." *The New Courant 3*, edited by J.J. Mary Hatakka and Kirsti Peitsara, 1995, pp. 97–107.

Pahta, Päivi, and Irma Taavitsainen. "Vernacularisation of Scientific and Medical Writing in its Sociohistorical Contexts." *Medical and Scientific Writings in Late Medieval English*, edited by Irma Taavitsainen and Päivi Pahta, 2004, pp. 1–22.

Rawcliffe, Carole. *Medicine & Society in Later Medieval England*. Alan Sutton, 1995.

Robbins, Rossel Hope. "Medical Manuscripts in Middle English." *Speculum*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1970, pp. 393–415, doi: 10.2307/2853500.

Siraishi, Nancy G. *Medieval & Early Renaissance Medicine. An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice*. The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Siraishi, Nancy G. *History, Medicine, and the Traditions of Renaissance Learning*. The University of Michigan Press, 2007.

Taavitsainen, Irma. "The Identification of Middle English Lunary MSS." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, vol. 88, 1987, pp. 18–26, www.jstor.org/stable/43343791/.

Taavitsainen, Irma. *Middle English Lunaries, a Study of the Genre*. Société Néophilologique, 1988.

Taavitsainen, Irma. "A Zodiacal Lunary for Medical Professionals." *Popular and Practical Science of Medieval England*, edited by Lister M. Matheson, 1994, pp. 283–300.

Taavitsainen, Irma, and Päivi Pahta. *Early Modern English Medical Texts. Corpus Description and Studies*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010.

Taavitsainen, Irma, and Päivi Pahta. *Medical Writing in Early Modern English*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Tavormina, M. Teresa. *Sex, Aging, & Death in a Medieval Medical Compendium. Trinity College Cambridge MS R.14.52, Its Texts, Language, and Scribe (Vols 1, 2)*. Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006.

Tester, Jim A. *History of Western Astrology*. The Boydell Press, 1999.

Voigts, Linda Ehksam. "The Golden Table of Pythagoras." *Popular and Practical Science of Medieval England*, edited by Lister M. Matheson, 1994, pp. 123–50.

Voigts, Linda Ehksam. "The Medical Astrology of Ralph Hoby, a Fifteenth Century Franciscan." *The Friars in Medieval Britain*, edited by Nicholas Rogers, 2010, pp. 152–68.

Voigts, Linda Ehksam, and Patricia Deery Kurtz. *Scientific and Medical Writings in Old and Middle English: An Electronic Reference CD*. University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Wear, Andrew. *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine, 1550–1680*. CUP, 2000.

Young, John and Henderson Aitken. *A Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of the Hunterian Museum in the University of Glasgow*. James Maclehose and Sons, 1908.



Daniel McKay. *Beyond Hostile Islands. The Pacific War in American and New Zealand Fiction Writing*. Fordham UP, 2024. Pp. 272. ISBN: 9781531505165.

Open access review under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/r1zrv656>

Beyond Hostile Islands. The Pacific War in American and New Zealand Fiction Writing is a comprehensive, well-informed and persuasively argued study of North American and New Zealand fiction produced from the 1960s to the present and set during the Pacific War or its aftermath. The book's originality and interest lie, firstly, in its focus on the Pacific Theatre, overshadowed by the more numerous scholarly works exploring narratives of the Second World War set in Europe. The varied corpus of primary texts outlined by McKay in the introduction already confirms his first claim that “the Pacific and Southeast Asian theatres of operations were destined to occupy a detached category in the historical and literary imagination” (3). The specificities of these war narratives, then, deserve the meticulous analysis carried out by the author throughout this book. The more specific aim of this monograph—and one which is perhaps not fully evident from its title—is to focus on the “ideological dimension” (McKay 4) of the war and the ensuing stereotypical depictions of Japanese subjects. The overall objective is thus to explore how the selected texts variously “sustained, retired, or resurrected the racially-charged ideologies of the war years” (McKay 4) in contexts marked by Cold War geopolitics, the rise of Japan-bashing sweeping through the anglophone world in the 1980s, or the events surrounding the 1995 commemoration of the end of the war. Adopting a genre-based approach, *Beyond Hostile Islands* is organised into five chapters which consider an impressively diverse corpus, including combat novels, corporate thrillers, stories of internment, Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOW) narratives and Manhattan Project novels set in various locations across the Pacific. The author demonstrates a sound knowledge of these genres, their traditions and their narrative conventions, and skilfully fleshes out how they shaped the various iterations of the “hostile island” trope.

The second reason why this book is a welcome addition to the existing scholarship on literary depictions of the Second World War is because it is the only monograph of its kind to establish a conversation between Pacific war narratives coming from the US and New Zealand, two very different (and seldom compared) literary traditions. The author is aware of the pervasiveness of US war narratives in the popular imagination and of the more limited impact of the stories originating in New Zealand, which makes the sections devoted to these lesser-known works the most fascinating. McKay reads these New Zealand works as cases of “ideological coproduction” (8), not completely free from the pervasive influence of US narratives, but at the same time “less disposed to the tropes and ideologies commonly found in American writing” (4) because of their geographical and sociocultural uniqueness. The downside of matching such different traditions—one so solid, the other sparser—as acknowledged by the author himself in the introduction, is that the discussions of the selected works are on occasions slightly unbalanced.

Chapter 1, “Revelations and Comedy: The Combat Novel” (McKay 25–54), engages with representations of American or Japanese combatants in two late samples of the format: James Jones’ *The Thin Red Line*, a US novel fictionalising the Guadalcanal campaign from the perspective of US soldiers, and *An Affair of Men*, in which the New Zealand author Erroll Brathwaite narrates the experiences of a Japanese Captain during the New Britain campaign. The chapter explores how the respective island settings become testing grounds to reinforce the features of each party: exploring the disintegrating effects of the war on US soldiers, while perpetuating visions of the Japanese as anonymous and featureless characters in Jones’ novel; or reinforcing stereotypes of the Japanese and the Pacific Island characters for “an increased or redoubled comic effect” (McKay 46) in the case of Brathwaite’s narrative.

Chapter 2, “Camera Men: Postwar Japan-Bashing” (McKay 55–80) moves away from military conquest and “island combat to multinational business corporations and their ‘takeovers’” (McKay 11) in works featuring Japanese businessmen and tourists produced in the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with Japan’s economic miracle and rising anxieties of its “technological supremacy” (McKay 60). The chapter explores these fears as reflected in Michael Crichton’s corporate thriller, *Rising Sun*; analyses Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* as a response to these Japanophobic discourses; and then discusses, somehow succinctly and inconclusively, the New Zealand version of these stereotypes in two short

stories by Keri Hulme (“Kaibutsu-San”) and Vivienne Plumb (“The Wife Who Spoke Japanese in her Sleep”).

The next three chapters shift focus from war or post-war narratives of conflict and combat to discussions of memory, apology and redress. Chapter 3, “Captive Memories: Interment North and South” (McKay 81–105) goes back to the war context to explore the tradition of internment narratives, largely studied in relation to the experiences of Japanese-American and Japanese-Canadian authors, but hardly ever considered as a “Pacific-wide practice” (82). This Pacific-centred approach is applied to David Guterson’s *Snow Falling on Cedars*, focusing on the internment of Japanese-American civilians, and, a New Zealand YA novel, Wendy Catran’s *The Swap*, discussed after an interesting section on one of the less-known episodes of the Pacific War, the internment of Japanese civilians on New Zealand soil. Both novels place former internees and war veterans in conversation, encouraging readers “to step back from partisanship and observe the historical position of the veteran without necessarily acceding to him” (McKay 103).

Chapter 4, “The Poetics of Apology: FEPOW narratives” (McKay 106–31) moves on to address Far East Prisoner of War narratives, looking at US author Jim Lehrer’s *The Special Prisoner* and a New Zealand novel, *Lucky Bastard*, by Peter Wells. McKay sees these novels as departing from the well-established British canon of captivity narratives, which tended to embrace war propaganda in the depiction of Japanese captors, and intervening in debates of historical revisionism by problematizing FEPOW memories. Lehrer’s novel depicts the exchanges between a surviving FEPOW and a veteran of the Imperial Japanese Army and is read by McKay in relation to the controversies ensuing from the 1995 commemorations of the end of the war and subsequent debates over public apologies. Wells’s work is written in agreement with the premises of oral history (McKay 107) and focuses on the efforts of two siblings trying to understand their father’s traumatic war experiences by coming to terms with the unresolved tensions between private recollections and public memory.

Chapter 5, “Scientists and Hibakusha: Project Novels” (McKay 132–62), deals with narratives of Manhattan Project scientists and Japanese survivors of the atomic bomb (*hibakusha*). It first offers an overview of earlier US Project novels the plots of which tended to centre on the scientists’ moral or ethical dilemmas, to create “an American story that exists in isolation from historical junctures on the other side of the Pacific”

(McKay 135). The chapter then continues with a brief discussion of New Zealand responses, which the author defines as “lifeboat” novels (McKay 146): works which imagine the country as a safe space in the context of a nuclear apocalypse, foreseeing its global status “as a bastion of anti-nuclearism” (McKay 134) consolidated from the 1980s. The chapter concludes with the juxtaposed analysis of James George’s *Ocean Roads* and Dennis Bock’s *The Ash Garden*, both unique in granting equal narrative attention to scientists and survivors, although, as McKay concludes, these portrayals are still reductive inasmuch they rely on previously gendered and sexualised depictions of *hibakusha*.

The book concludes with a coda, entitled “Oceanic Sympathies” (McKay 163–71), which tackles the omission of Indigenous Perspectives, not only in non-Indigenous literary renditions of the conflict—which mostly contribute to the perpetuation of colonial stereotypes or the sidelining of Indigenous voices—but in most present-day scholarship on the Second World War. This coda offers an overview of how Indigenous Pacific authors have engaged with the war and its aftermath, including the damaging legacy of nuclearisation in the region, and is thus a welcomed counterpoint to the rest of the book (where these Indigenous perspectives are hardly addressed). This exclusion is coherent given that the central aim of the book is to explore representations of Japanese and non-Indigenous Pacific peoples; however, adding these final pages as an afterthought does little to minimise the marginalisation of Pacific voices that the author condemns at the beginning of the coda. Moving some of these considerations to more central parts of the book would have helped to combat these gaps more efficiently.

All in all, *Beyond Hostile Islands* is an engaging, solid and well-researched study which reveals an extraordinary knowledge of the Pacific War and the various narratives it generated, and which will be of interest to scholars working in various fields.

REFERENCES

Bock, Dennis. *The Ash Garden*. Vintage International, 2003.

Brathwaite, Erroll. *An Affair of Men*. Collins, 1961.

Catran, Wendy. *The Swap*. Lothian Books, 2004.

Chrichton, Michael. *Rising Sun*. Arrow Books, 1992.

George, James. *Ocean Roads*. Huia, 2006.

Guterson, David. *Snow Falling on Cedars*. Vintage, 1995.

Hulme, Keri. “Kaibutsu-San.” *Landfall*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1996, pp. 458–64.

Jones, James. *The Thin Red Line*. Penguin, 2014

Lehrer, Jim. *The Special Prisoner*. Random House, 2000.

Ozeki, Ruth. *My Year of Meats*. Viking, 1998.

Plumb, Vivienne. “The Wife Who Spoke Japanese in her Sleep”. *The Wife Who Spoke Japanese in Her Sleep*. Otago UP, 1993, pp. 26-36.

Wells, Peter. *Lucky Bastard*. Auckland: Vintage, 2007.

PALOMA FRESNO-CALLEJA
University of the Balearic Islands
paloma.fresno@uib.es