



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

*Rivista Multilingue  
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali*

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## Introduzione

### Scegliamo i margini

C. Bruna Mancini

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Elisabetta Marino

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È possibile fornire direzioni considerate sicure o redigere mappe quando si parte dal margine, o ancora, quando lo spazio che si vuole indagare è permeato dalla marginalità? Probabilmente, in un terreno tanto problematico si può settare la propria bussola solo grazie ai testi che si incontrano passo dopo passo durante le proprie ricerche. Questo è il primo numero di una rivista multilingue – partiamo con l'italiano, l'inglese e il francese ma siamo aperti (e come potremmo non esserlo?) ad altre lingue e linguaggi –, dedicata a ciò che si trova tra un confine e l'altro, tra un limite e l'altro, tra una limitazione e l'altra, col tentativo di interrogarli, analizzarli, forse dissolverli. Scegliere il margine, che si oppone alla centrale/accentrata cultura dominante, vuol dire occupare uno spazio di resistenza. Incarnare la marginalità e il contropotere è essenziale per costituire, decostruire e ricostruire la complessità del reale, perché i margini sono il regno del cambiamento, della trasformazione, della fluidità, del (ri)posizionamento; rappresentano la trasgressione, l'interdetto, l'eccentrico.

Ma quali sono questi testi? Sicuramente, tutti quelli che analizzeremo nel corso delle nostre pubblicazioni. C'è ancora da studiare, analizzare, svelare, riportare alla luce. Per questa prima uscita di *Margins Marges Margini*, però, vorremmo indicare come stella polare gli scritti



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e la figura di bell hooks, autrice che ha scelto di dare voce – una voce potente, trasgressiva, sicura, inconsueta – al sistema della marginalità, dell’asimmetria, della differenza, dell’assoggettamento, del silenzio, della mancanza, del vuoto. Tanto essi hanno contribuito allo sviluppo di questo progetto che oggi vede la luce. Maria Nadotti ha sottolineato come il suo ‘pseudonimo militante’, bell hooks, con entrambe le iniziali minuscole, negli anni Settanta del Novecento sia andato a sostituire il nome anagrafico di Gloria Jean Watkins: bell come la madre, Rosa Bell Watkins, e hooks come la nonna materna, Bell Blair Hooks, in prospettiva matrilineare. Questo ha avuto una triplice funzione:

(...) affermare con forza la valenza politica di un atto di ri-nominazione che è gesto fondativo di una soggettività inedita; ancorare quel nuovo sé femminista, battezzato con nomi materni, a un continuum femminile che solo ora, alla luce di una pratica politica collettiva che sa dirsi tale, può riscattarsi da una silenziosa, secolare, apparente passività; sfidare il “proprietario” – e per le donne “espropriativo – sistema dei nomi, che lungo l’asse maschile incensa non contraddittoriamente individualità e continuità, negandole entrambe lungo quello femminile. (Nadotti, 19)

Essere donna, nera e femminista, le faceva chiedere: “Ain’t I a Woman?”, come si intitola il suo saggio del 1983, che aveva come sottotitolo: “Black Women and Feminism”. hooks riprendeva una celebre frase del discorso che Sojourner Truth aveva pronunciato in maniera estemporanea durante la Women’s Convention di Akron, in Ohio, del 1851. Nata in schiavitù nel 1797 nello stato di New York e nota esponente del movimento antischiavista, Sojourner aveva attraversato la folla incedendo come una regina e raggiunto lo spazio delle oratrici dove aveva pronunciato poche parole, ma dure più di sassi, in stretto vernacolo nero, contro un potere patriarcale e bianco, “che vive sul saccheggio del lavoro e della vita altrui e che ha fatto delle divisioni di classe, di sesso e di razza, del loro inestricabile intreccio, il suo punto di forza” (Nadotti, 8). Spaccando il fronte apparentemente compatto del neofemminismo statunitense degli anni Settanta, hooks denunciava che, esattamente centotrenta anni dopo il discorso di Sojourner Truth, le donne nere erano ancora le invisibili tra gli invisibili.





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In “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” (1989) – tradotto da Nadotti col titolo “Elogio del margine” e inserito nel bel volume *Elogio del margine. Scrivere al buio* (2020) che ha curato per i caratteri della Tamu Edizioni – bell hooks non esita e non spreca una parola fin dall’*incipit*, anzi, dallo stesso titolo del suo saggio. Chi voglia contribuire a creare pratiche culturali controegemoniche deve individuare spazi da cui iniziare un processo radicale di revisione. Si tratta di una “politics of location” che implica un allontanamento dalla posizione *mainstream* e la rottura dei limiti decisi dallo *status quo*; ovvero, un gesto politico di sfida che ha molto a che fare con la trasgressione e il cambiamento:

Within complex and ever shifting realms of power relations do we position ourselves on the side of colonising mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorising, of making culture towards that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible? This choice is crucial. It shapes and determines our response to existing cultural practice and our capacity to envision new, alternative, oppositional aesthetic acts. It informs the way we speak about these issues, the language we choose. (15)

Il linguaggio è, dunque, anche luogo di lotta, di cambiamento, di scontro, di rifiuto. hooks tiene a sottolineare con quanta fatica abbia lavorato per cambiare il proprio modo di parlare e di scrivere, incorporando “the sense of place”, i propri posizionamenti, la propria provenienza, le molteplici voci esistenti nella propria identità: “I have confronted silence, inarticulateness. When I say then that these words emerge from suffering, I refer to that personal struggle to name that location from which I come to voice - that space of my theorising.” (16). Bisogna avere il coraggio di parlare e scrivere con un linguaggio che scavalchi i confini del dominio, i vincoli del potere, il buio dell’invisibilità: “Dare I speak to oppressed and oppressor in the same voice? (...) *our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting*” (16; 17). È necessario creare spazi in cui sia possibile recuperare il passato e sconfiggere il silenzio con la parola, l’ascolto, la ricerca; mi riferisco a quel *talking back* – come si intitola un saggio che l’autrice ha pubblicato



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in un numero di *Discourse* dedicato a “She, the Inappropriate/d Other” (pp. 123-8) e, in seguito, il volume pubblicato nel 1989 col titolo *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (casa editrice “Between the Lines”) – che offre una ‘nuova versione’ del passato e conduce ad una trasformazione della realtà presente e, sicuramente, del futuro. Significativamente, di quel viaggio chiamato vita, bell ricorda gli spostamenti ma, soprattutto, gli “efforts to silence my coming to voice” (17), la resistenza per (ri)venire alla luce “with mind intact, with an open heart.” (17). Infatti, a volte casa è in nessun luogo, oppure, è tanti posizionamenti, è il continuo movimento, le diverse prospettive: “a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference” (19).

Per bell hooks il margine, il bordo/*border*, il limite è spazio di apertura radicale. Non è un luogo sicuro ma necessario, perché vivere il margine permette di sviluppare uno sguardo esterno, innovativo, nuovo – con una prospettiva diversa da quella usuale e canonica, per così dire – sul mondo. Per questo motivo, il margine è uno spazio in cui abitare: “It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (20). È luogo di lotta, creatività, potere, inclusività e trasgressione – quella stessa che propone di insegnare in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994). Parlare di margini è parlare di resistenza perché suggeriscono la possibilità di uscire dall’ombra e dal silenzio. Dal margine e nel margine è, quindi, necessario insegnare a trasgredire; perché cos’altro è l’educazione se non una rivoluzione volta alla trasformazione, al cambiamento, all’apertura, alla lotta, con la ricerca che funga da apprendistato e pratica di una resistenza necessaria, estatica e pericolosa?



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## How the (Un)Dead Became Modern: Supernatural Parodies of Modernity

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### Abstract

This article focuses on nineteenth-century supernatural short fiction and its intersections with the urban in the European modern context. Through readings of texts by John Hollingshead, Charles Dickens and Flor O’Squarr, among others, this research addresses a form of the urban fantastic that employs satire and parody to reflect on the modern city project. In my analysis I compare different characters belonging to the ghost story tradition but whose traits relate to the discourses on progress and on being “a modern citizen”. As I aim to show, character construction, and how character relates to the urban context, underscores the question of what it is to be a modern ghost and, implicitly, what makes a successful (or failed) “modern” supernatural story.



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## 1. Introduction

When we think about the modern city in nineteenth-century narratives, our immediate literary references point us to authors such as Charles Dickens, Honoré de Balzac, Guy de Maupassant or Benito Pérez Galdós. Their realist novels documented the unprecedented renovations of urban space and occupy nowadays a central position in the literary canon. Classical approaches to literary urban studies (Ameel, 2022: 3-5) have greatly overlooked more experimental, shorter texts that the same writers produced using the fantastic mode. Following the studies on the fantastic by Pierre-George Castex (1951), Roger Caillois (1965), Tzvetan Todorov (1970), Irène Bessière (1974), Rosalba Campra (2008), Roger Bozzetto (2005) and David Roas (2018), the fantastic is understood in this article as a specific aesthetic form of the supernatural and not an umbrella term for any non-mimetic feature (cf. Rabkin 1976, Hume 1984, Attebery 1992, Armit 1996). I will therefore only discuss texts that frame the plot within a recognisable, realist world, with an impossible element (for example a ghost) that irrupts in the logic of this mimetic diegesis. In particular, all the short stories I analyse are set in identifiable European cities, such as London and Paris.

The “happy marriage of supernaturalism and modernity”, to employ Clery’s expression (1995: 5), is not a coincidence. The increased democratization and availability of culture, particularly of popular culture products and venues led to the fantastic being read and watched by larger audiences. An increasingly literate middle class benefited from the lowering of printing costs and had access to serialized novels, newspapers, periodicals and literary magazines that regularly published fictions of the fantastic. The circulation of translations also led to this popularization of the fantastic, in particular of the French translations of E.T. A. Hoffmann’s supernatural tales (García, 2021: 11-16).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the ideas in this section were originally developed in *The Modern Fantastic: A Tale of Two Cities* (García, 2021: 1-35).



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This emergence of the fantastic across European cultures was paralleled by the dramatic urban renovations giving rise to a ‘modernized’ experience of the city, cleared, rationalized, improved with greater sanitary infrastructures and political stability. This paradoxical tandem evolution can be explained as the (artistically fruitful) coexistence of a dyad that Richard Lehan (1998: 84-91) calls the Apollonian versus the Dionysian drives in the city. The literature of the fantastic bears witness to the co-existence of two city models. While scientific positivism celebrated the city of lights – the world city to be exhibited as a model of rationalism – the fantastic attested to a resistance to this rationalism. On the one hand, there was Haussmann’s vision of Paris, the paradigm of sanitized urban space. A triumph of scientific progress. On the other, the rise of occultist practices, such as mesmerism and magnetism, that demonstrated a reluctance to surrender to dominant positivist discourses. On the one hand, the World Exhibitions showcasing the advances in science by modern, civilized, metropolitan societies. On the other, societies such as the famous Society for Psychical Research in London (since 1882) are founded to investigate phenomena that escape the confines of reason. With the purpose of systematizing the paranormal, the SPRL held landmark projects such as the Committee on Haunted Houses and a Census of Hallucinations in London. This tension between naturalistic explanations of phenomena and the pervasiveness of paranormal beliefs in industrialized societies – in other words, between the rational and irrational city – provided fertile ground for an unprecedented production of fantastic fiction. A fatigue with tales of remote castles and decadent mansions led to the city becoming a setting for fantastic plots with the urban fantastic taking hold across European countries throughout the entire nineteenth century. Some of the most representative works of the urban fantastic in its shorter forms were offered by Théophile Gautier, Alexandre Dumas, Guy de Maupassant and Jean Lorrain in France; Georges Rodenbach and Charles Flor O’Squarr in Belgium; Rhoda Broughton, Sheridan Le Fanu, Charlotte Riddell, Amelia B. Edwards, R. L. Stevenson and Charles



Dickens in the UK and Ireland; and Benito Pérez Galdós, Pedro Antonio de Alarcón and Emilia Pardo Bazán in Spain.

In this article my goal is to explore some of the supernatural nineteenth-century short stories that portray this tension between the rational and the irrational city. I will address a form of the urban fantastic that employs satire and parody to reflect on the modern city project. In my analysis I compare different characters belonging to the ghost story tradition but whose traits relate to the discourses on progress and on being “a modern citizen”. As I aim to show, character construction, and how character relates to the urban context, evokes the question of what it is to be a modern ghost and, implicitly, what makes a successful (or failed) ‘modern’ supernatural story.

## **2. Fantastic perspectives on modern transport expansion**

### **2.1 “Everybody seems desirous of riding or walking across my back”: *Pity a Poor Bridge* by John Hollingshead (1859)**

*Pity a Poor Bridge* is authored by John Hollingshead, a regular collaborator in *Household Words* (1850-1859) and *All the Year Round* (1859-1895), the two periodicals directed by Charles Dickens and key publishing venues on everyday urban life during the second half of the century. Published in *All the Year Round* in 1859 and later included in Hollingshead’s collection *Odd Journeys in and Out of London* (1860), *Pity a Poor Bridge* offers an unusual point of view on urban mobilities as well as an original treatment of the fantastic. Hollingshead inverts the classical scheme of a human subject narrating his or her transit around the city with a vehicle. Instead in this piece, the relation between human narrator and transport object is dismantled. The entity that addresses us, the focalizer, is the infrastructure employed by the modern citizen to transit urban space. The narrative is delivered by the New London Bridge, complaining in the first person about the amount of transport that it has to hold on its back since it was built.



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The tale opens with the following statement: “I believe that that, by this time, the public is pretty familiar with me; if not, I know this, that I am pretty familiar with the public. I have carried them on my back now for eight-and-twenty years, and my ancestors have carried them for more than eight centuries” (1859: 379). The bridge considers itself “overworked” (379) and complains about the everyday traffic, which has turned it into “the most overloaded thoroughfare in the whole world” (379). This unusual narrator tells us about his back pain due to this “endless procession” (379) of vehicles and pedestrians and proceeds with a detailed inventory of transport: “[A]n average day of four-and-twenty hours, during the present year (1859), will witness one hundred and sixty-eight thousand persons passing across me, from either side: one hundred and seven thousand on foot, and sixty-one thousand in vehicles” (379). It then laments the neglect of the political authorities: “I, in this present scorching month of July, am having my back mended after a severe course of heavy and crowded work, and am waiting for something to turn up that may improve my prospects and condition” (379).

The bridge’s complaint draws attention to the excessive traffic that circulates chaotically in the city of London and to the deterioration that its infrastructures have suffered as a consequence. This neglected, stressed and injured bridge, on the verge of a burnout, begs for mercy, as the title indicates. In this plea to the reader, the bridge’s testimony seeks to mobilize the British population to demand urgent measures to improve the transport infrastructure of modern London. From this original voice, Hollingshead offers us an unusual testimony of the transport crisis in which the city of London is plunged, in a plea of public action to improve it.

## **2.2 “Hopelessly impeding his progress!”: A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering by Charles Dickens (1851)**





Charles Dickens, a prolific ghost story author alongside his famous London novels, published a remarkable supernatural text that worked as a satire of the state of transport in the modern city, in this case, of the rapid urban expansion of the railway system in Britain. Similarly to *Pity a Poor Bridge*, the fantastic element is not the classical ghost or monster. Dicken's tale, entitled *A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering* featured in *Household Words* in 1851. It offers a fantastic scenario that preempts the Kafkian nightmares of bureaucratic dead ends and enclosures. Dickens employs the fantastic motif of a network that becomes a prison for the individual who tries to navigate it, due to this network's disproportionate, disorienting expansion.

The story portrays the anxiety and frustration of Mr. Lost of the Maze, a citizen who is forever trapped on the British railway network, going from one station to another, victim of sudden line cuts, construction works and its consequent schedule changes and platform closures. This character is introduced in the first line as "a gentleman of credit and of average ability" (1851: 361), emphasizing his ordinary attributes and strengthening the bond between character and reader: Mr. Lost, undergoing this extraordinary episode, could be any of us. On an ordinary day, this character leaves his home in Warwickshire for London on a business trip. As he arrives to London, he closes the relevant business deal and heads to Worcester for another business trip. This is when his nightmare starts. Mr. Lost's first attempt to leave the capital is prevented by a barrier that cuts the railway line "hopelessly impeding his progress!" (362), a formula that is repeated several times in the story.

Mr. Lost is then forced to modify his route incessantly to avoid railway cuts and construction works that have turned the map of train lines into (literally) a labyrinth. He does arrive to some destination but never to the one he intended to get to:

He knew where he wanted to go, and he knew he couldn't go where he wanted. He was taken to Manchester, Bangor, Liverpool, Windermere, Dundee and Montrose, Edinburgh and Glasgow. He repeatedly found himself



in the Isle of Man; believes he was, several times, all over Wales; knows he was at Kingstown and Dublin, but has only a general idea how he got there. (362)

Mr. Lost's reaction also bears Kafkian undertones, in that it echoes Gregor Samsa's naturalized reaction to his supernatural metamorphosis (1915). In *A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering*, the protagonist blames a "nameless foe", for "cutting off the communication between one town and another, and carrying out a system of barricade" (362) but he does not seek further explanation. He surrenders to this illogical situation with abnegation. Instead of placing the focus on trying to find a rational explanation, his reaction is to attempt to navigate this circumstance. With no success, however. The ending depicts Mr. Lost confined to a hotel near Euston Station in London, in a delirious state and just babbling a word, "Bradshaw", in reference to the British railway guide containing the relevant train timetables and line maps.

With this tale Dickens configures a hyperbolic parody of the modern railway and its incessant development during the mid-nineteenth century; an episode that, as the title indicates, is presented as one of "extraordinary suffering" for those who live it. Foreshadowing Simmel's famous thesis of urban modernity as hyperstimulation in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), the short story portrays the rapid expansion of the railway system and shows that this speed is not adjusted to the citizen's mental capacity to process these rapid changes.

Beyond this interpretation of the jailed-network metaphor, Dicken's text presents more nuanced readings that touch upon the image of an individual who is permanently displaced and in displacement. Mr. Lost never reaches his destination. He embodies a form of hypermobility, or a condemnation to ceaseless mobility. His situation is described as an "imprisonment" (362) and as "torture" (362): "His face was wan, his voice much weakened, his hair scanty and grey, the whole man expressive of fatigue and endurance. It is an affecting instance of the influence of uneasiness and depression on the mind of Mr. Lost"



(363). The loss of his sense of direction develops into the loss of his sense of self. Mr. Lost becomes a captive of this permanent wandering in a maze of railway dead-ends, knots and barricades, doomed to perpetual movement and, literally, condemned to never reaching a place to be.

### 3. City ghosts: between tradition and modernization

#### 3.1 “When you have an opportunity of visiting the fairest spots on earth...”: *The Lawyer and the Ghost* by Charles Dickens (1837)

The ghost, one of the most well-known figures of the fantastic, may not be traditionally associated with the urban condition. The short stories of the next two sections show otherwise. The discourse of modernity revolves around an assessment on how adequate or obsolete this character is in the context of the modern city. The discussed texts implicitly or explicitly examine what modern ghosts should be like.

One of the most poignant portrayals of an inadequate ghost is presented by Dickens in his ghost story *The Lawyer and the Ghost* (1836) featuring in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) alongside other famous fantastic tales such as *The Ghosts of the Mail*.

As the title indicates, the protagonist of *The Lawyer and the Ghost* is a London lawyer who is currently broke and can only afford to rent an old shabby little room in London. The surprisingly affordable rental price of this room is due to a ghost that haunts it.<sup>2</sup>

By means of frame tale, the narrator provides an introduction that emphasizes the shabbiness of such place in detail:

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<sup>2</sup> The subgenre of urban haunted-house narratives is particularly popular in the British Victorian ghost stories of the mid-nineteenth century. The hauntings of this corpus are city houses and apartments that reflect the pressure involved in finding accommodation in the overpriced and overcrowded Victorian London. In addition to Dicken’s *The Lawyer and the Ghost* (1837) there are further tales authored by Sheridan Le Fanu, Rhoda Broughton and Charlotte Riddell (see García, 2021: 72-75).



I knew a man- let me see- forty years ago now - who took an old, damp, rotten set of chambers, in one of the most ancient inns, that had been shut up and empty for years and years before. There were lots of old women's stories about the place, and it certainly was very far from being a cheerful one; but he was poor, and the rooms were cheap, and that would have been quite sufficient reason for him, if they had been ten times worse than they really were. (330)

With these introductory lines, the narrator presents himself as an immediate acquaintance of the protagonist, as opposed to somebody who has heard this story second hand (or “women’s story”). This device serves to emphasize the verisimilitude of the fantastic occurrence to be narrated in the coming scenes.

The narrator then leads to the actual story, which might be well-known by readers familiar with ghost stories at the time: an “unearthly appearance” (331) irrupts in the tenant’s apartment. The ghost tells its story with the aim of expelling the tenant. In this room the ghost was ambushed by “two wily harpies” (331) and his “wordly ruin was worked” (331). Having died of grief, the ghost is bound to this place ever since: “This apartment is mine: leave it to me” (332).

So far, the tale follows the typical ghost story line of a new tenant that moves to a place in which an unfair act took place and is forced to leave by the haunting of a ghost that reclaims ownership to this place. But Dickens introduces an innovative component at this stage, which the title had already hinted upon. The tale is not about the ghost but about “the lawyer and the ghost”, thus about their interaction. The tenant engages in a dialogue with the apparition, politely giving him advice on how to improve his very condition of haunter. This dialogue concentrates the humoristic undertones of the tale. The lawyer’s logic, “equally applicable to most of the ghost I ever heard of” (332), is the following: if ghosts can traverse material space and haunt any place of their liking, if they have the ability to visit “*the fairest spots of earth*” (332), why would they “return exactly to the very places where [they] have been most miserable” (332)? Consequently, the lawyer advises the ghost to take possession of better and brighter places, than his London apartment.



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'Well', said the tenant, 'it does appear to me somewhat inconsistent, that when you have an opportunity of visiting the fairest spots of earth - for I suppose space is nothing to you - you should always return to the place where you have been most miserable.'

'that's very true; I never thought of that before', said the ghost.

'You see, sir,' pursued the tenant, 'this is a very uncomfortable room. From the appearance of that press, I should be disposed to say not wholly free from bugs; and I really think you might find more comfortable quarters, to say nothing of the climate of London, which is extremely disagreeable.' (332)

Equally in a polite manner, the ghost admits this eye-opening irrevocable logic. "It never struck me till now; I'll try a change of air directly" (332-333). In the final scene, as the ghost vanishes, the tenant kindly asks him to spread this advice to its other ghostly colleagues, "now engaged in haunting old empty houses" (333), which could transform their supernatural lives for the better if they can find more comfortable venues to haunt: "'I will,' replied the ghost; 'we must be dull fellows - very dull fellows, indeed; I can't imagine how we can have been so stupid.'" (333)".

With these final words, Dickens alludes to and dismantles a long history of ghost story clichés. First, the ghost is not portrayed as a scary apparition but as a kind creature, willing to engage in dialogue and learn from the tenants' perspective. Second, the bond between the haunted place and supernatural creature, provides a twist that even encourages the whole army of ghosts to think for themselves and assert their agency over where to live. By admitting the historical "stupidity" of ghosts in choosing their venues, Dickens points to an exhaustion in ghost story formulas and questions one of its most identifiable traits: the haunted place as the place of previous trauma.

### 3.2 "Ghosts have improved themselves over time": *Vision* by Charles Flor O'Squarr (1885)

Further texts in the later part of the nineteenth century exploit this subversion of ghost story conventions by presenting a parody of the classical ghost. *Vision*, by Belgium writer Charles Flor O'Squarr in his volume *Les Fantômes: étude cruelle* (*Ghosts: A Cruel Study*, 1885) offers an



excellent example. In this text the apparition is a polite and well-dressed gentleman that mistakes his victim in Paris. In a first-person narrative, the protagonist addresses us to recall his own experience with an apparition. The intertextual references to revenant literature are set out in the initial paragraph:

Do you not believe in revenants? You are mistaken.  
Certainly, the ghosts of today are no longer the fantastic apparitions of the past who would appear at midnight, close to the cemetery, to terrorize some old-fashioned villagers; ghosts have improved themselves over time, they have advanced with progress and while they still enter the homes of the living without invitation at least they now don the impeccable attire of true gentlemen. (1885: 168, my translation)<sup>3</sup>

The narrator then recalls the first encounter with the revenant some years ago, as he heard some knocks on the window. This initial meeting reproduces the genre conventions of the frightening supernatural meeting: "In front of my window, in the void, a long white shape was suspended, stopped. It was a tragic moment. Between the apparition and me look was exchanged, one of those looks that before the fight undergo the two opponents in a pistol duel; an anguish and a challenge."<sup>4</sup>

These conventions are then subverted as the characterization of the revenant unfolds. Firstly, this is observed in his good manners and modern attire.

Contrary to legend, he did not appear not wrapped in a shroud, but clothed. Dressed up, you can hear me fine. That is to say, in his dress, - which was not a costume, but only a transparent vapor - I unraveled a modern design, jacket cuts. The overall impression, physiognomy and clothing,

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<sup>3</sup> «Vous ne croyez pas aux revenants? Vous avez tort. Certes, les revenants ne sont plus ces apparitions fantastiques d'autrefois, surgissant au coup de minuit, dans les environs des cimetières, pour pétrifier de terreur quelque villageois attardé; les fantômes se sont perfectionnés avec le temps, ils ont marché avec le progrès, et, s'ils pénètrent encore chez les vivants sans se faire annoncer, au moins gardent-ils dans le monde la tenue irréprochable des vrais gentlemen.»

<sup>4</sup> «Devant ma fenêtre, dans le vide, une longue forme blanche était suspendue, arrêtée. Ce fut un instant tragique. Entre l'apparition et moi un regard fut échangé, un de ces regards qu'avant le combat subissent les deux adversaires dans un duel au pistolet ; une angoisse et un défi.»



was favorable. Without a doubt, I was in the presence of the shadow of a well brought up man. (169)<sup>5</sup>

The revenant then kindly asks the victim for permission to enter his lodgings and presents his apologies for the inconvenience: “I am unwelcome, no doubt. ... Sorry to bother you at this time. ... Believe me that. ... No, I’m really confused.’ It sounded like an elector asking for an apostille from his deputy.”<sup>6</sup>

A central part of the comical effect is generated by the naturalization of this supernatural visit. The victim’s reaction to the ghostly apparition also breaks with the established trope of the terrifying haunting and engages in a dialogue with him to express this alleged misunderstanding: “My dear ghost, I said, [...]. Barely dead and you have already adopted ideas from the otherworld. But, my boy, we no longer practice the superstition of the fantastic. [...] I am a child of the nineteenth century and I do not believe in the supernatural” (171). As this statement shows, the narrator presents himself as modern citizen (“a child of the nineteenth century”), inhabiting a period in which science has displaced supernatural beliefs. The narrator treats the revenant with courtesy, even rejoicing in his companionship as the revenant follows him around Paris. The revenant is invited to join the narrator in his *flânerie* around the city, to mingle with the crowd and to accompany him at social and professional gatherings. The revenant is confused, polite, well-intended and lingers in the city until he apologetically acknowledges his mistake. By presenting a characterization of the apparition that is in stark opposition to the expected tropes of revenant literature, *Vision* provides a humorous revision of haunted-tale tropes and a

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<sup>5</sup> «Contrairement à la légende, il ne se présentait pas enveloppé d’un suaire, mais habillé. Habillé, vous m’entendez bien. C’est-à-dire que dans son costume, – qui n’était pas un costume, mais seulement une transparente vapeur – je démêlais un dessin moderne, des coupes de veston. L’impression d’ensemble, physionomie et vêtement, était favorable. À n’en pas douter, je me trouvais en présence de l’ombre d’un garçon bien élevé.» (169)

<sup>6</sup> «Je suis importun, sans doute.... Désolé de vous déranger à cette heure.... Croyez bien que.... Non, je suis vraiment confus... » On eût dit un électeur sollicitant une apostille de son député.» (169)



modern subversion of the story of a revenant that appears to a victim to avenge some past injustice. While the plot is not entirely innovative, the construction of the characters and the setting most definitely are. The object of this haunting, a modern citizen and man of politics, is well versed in the traditions of the supernatural and shows neither fear nor intimidation at the sight of the ghost. These are two modern gentlemen (a human and a ghost) who resolve the misunderstanding that has arisen between them with the urbanity expected of the time.

### **3.3 “People have grown used to my rustle, accustomed to my rattle, habituated to my clatter, familiar with my ring”: A Monotonous ‘Sensation’ (anonymous 1863)**

*The Lawyer and the Ghost* and *Vision* presented ghosts who engaged in a dialogue with their haunted victims and were capable of self-reflection: acknowledging the senseless traditions, in the first case, or their mistakes, in the second. The premise of the self-critical ghost is also central in the short story *A Monotonous ‘Sensation’*, featuring anonymously in the periodical *All the Year Round* in 1863. This text which also works as a summary and parodical criticism of haunted-house tales.

The tale starts by reinforcing the genre clichés: “A certain house at the corner of an obscure but tolerably respectable street in London was said to be troubled. The troublous signs were of the usual kind” (1863: 406). In this house, doors and windows slam shut unexpectedly, tenants have reported the sounds of eery chains, and bells and a long list of tropes that follow the conventions of haunted-house narratives. This property is in London and is cheaper than the average market price because of the ghost that comes with it. Over several paragraphs, the reader finds out that there have been a series of tenants who have rented this property and have left it after a short period frightened by the apparition:

The effect of public opinion on the marketable value of the house was practical enough. The owner of the property, who had tried to restore it to good repute by offering it for a





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short term of years at the low rent of nothing a quarter, with a clause that he himself would keep it in repair, could not, even on those easy conditions, find a permanent tenant, and had abandoned it in despair, so that for a long time the frontage exhibited a combination of smashed glass and accumulated dirt, that was quite sufficient to breed a collection of ghost stories, if none had been already in circulation. (407)

At that point the first twist is introduced. Over time, the newer tenants have grown used to the spirit and – out of financial reasons– prefer to stay there and rent that London place for a cheaper price than a place without a ghost for a much higher rent. The Frenchman who argued that “would rather pay £30 for the house with its chains and its silks than £50 for a similar establishment without such incumbrances” (407) is after a while succeeded by like-minded tenants who follow the same financial logic. For instance, an auctioneer, a Yankee speculator and an “Epicurean” who only wanted the place for office spaces “and did not care sixpence what happened upon them after nightfall” (408). As the haunted house increases in its market value, the omniscient narrator raises the question of whether this meant “the end of the ghost” (408).

As readers, we are made aware of the ghost’s perception of these changes. Frustrated by the new tenants’ indifference to its presence, the ghost, “as active and vigorous as ever” (408), further exaggerates its supposedly terrifying supernatural show, “rustling, rattling, slamming, clattering, and casting shadows without the aid of a substance” (408). However, all this insistent performance is of no use to scare the tenants away. This is when the second twist is introduced. The last scene situates the reader on a Christmas evening, a much-loved timing for ghost stories,<sup>7</sup> with a group of new tenants of the haunted: a company of young actors who use the premises to rehearse. Exhausted by the fruitless effort, the ghost enters the scene and pronounces a wonderful closing monologue demanding that they take pity on him:

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<sup>7</sup> Many of these texts on city hauntings, including *A Christmas Carol* by Dickens, were published as part of much-loved Christmas special issues. On Christmas specials and their relation to the Victorian ghost story, see Tara Moore’s chapter *Ghost stories at Christmas* (2009: 81–98).



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True, I am only the ghost, and much do I deserve your pity. Many years ago I resolved to make a sensation in this neighborhood, and I effected my purpose chiefly by means of the noises, which most of you know but too well. But people have grown used to my rustle, accustomed to my rattle, habituated to my clatter, familiar with my ring. Even my shadow, my grand effect, scarcely elicits a remark. My invention has been exhausted long ago, and noisy as I may be, I cannot command attention. If any one here among you, having greatly distinguished himself in youth, thinks he can go on for ever on the strength of his early reputation, by simply repeating himself, without giving any new direction to his talent, let him take warning by me, or he will find in time that he is only a ghost. (408)

The ghost self-reflectively considers that as it stands its features has gone out of fashion. Addressing this group of young actors, it makes a plea for renewal because simple repetition of a formerly successful character will over time lead to exhaustion, to a “monotonous sensation” as the title indicates. This monologue also offers a remarkable intertextual dimension that parodies commonplace motifs of the fantastic. The ghost’s closing statement reflects the awareness of the monotony of fantastic tropes associated with the haunted-house genre. The succession of similar formulas, such as “accustomed to”, “habituated to”, “familiar with”, “exhausted”, “simply repeating himself”, point to this tradition fatigue that was similarly highlighted in the other discussed short stories.

#### **4. Conclusion: “Modern readers must have modern ghosts” (*The Latest Thing in Ghosts*, anonymous, 1862)**

In an anonymous short story entitled *The Latest Thing in Ghosts* (1862), one of the protagonists notes that current apparitions “have made immense progress. Ruined castles have given place to railway stations” to the point that “Modern readers must have modern ghosts” (101). This gentleman advises a writer friend of his to renew the inventory of ghosts in the stories he writes, otherwise he will not engage modern readers. Modern ghosts must reflect the changes that have altered their urban environments and that I briefly outlined in



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the introductory section to this article. Thus, a “modern spectre” (100) “of the very newest style” (101)

drives to a railway station in broad daylight, takes a ticket (first-class ticket; no ghost has yet been known to travel second), gets into a carriage [...] borrows your Bradshaw, begs you to tell it how it can get to A-, is sorry to trouble you, but it cannot understand Bradshaw [...], converses with you fluently on various subjects, and shakes hands with you affectionately at parting (101).

The stories discussed in this article emphasize a need of renewal of the classic commonplaces of the fantastic. They do so by situating their plots in an urban setting that has undergone profound transformations and to which traditional ghosts must adjust. The literary texts highlight the need to create renewed characters that are attuned to the expectations of modern readers. The character-construction often distances itself from the classic tropes of the Gothic genre, for example by presenting ghosts and revenants who are well-mannered and well-dressed, who engage in conversation with their victims and who are self-reflective and critical of the traits they have inherited. By so doing, the discussed texts parody some of the established tropes of the ghost story tradition and propose aesthetic innovations because “modern readers must have modern ghosts” (anon. 1862). The analysed corpus also preempts some traits commonly associated with more contemporary expressions of the fantastic, namely the “neofantastic” (Alazraki 1990) and the “postmodern fantastic” (García 2015; Roas 2018). These traits, which I outlined throughout this article, include the use of humor, the presentation of the ghost’s voice and perspective, the intertextual discourse and a certain banalization of the horror effect. Ultimately, the argument presented in this article questions the novelty or distinctiveness of the formal aspects attributed to newer forms of the fantastic and shows that after all, well-intended, funny, emotional and pathetic ghosts were “the latest thing” over a century ago.

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## **From Borderline to Borderland. Old Devices in New Narratives**

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### **Abstract**

I want to reflect on margins and marginality focusing on the ways in which, approximately from the 1990s onward (Bennett et al. 2005, 4), the very notion of border has been changing over time. What used to be a line to be crossed to reach safety or freedom or a kind of protection, has gradually widened and become an extended area whose nature challenges the traditional organization of maps in which discrete sovereign territories are by lines and marked by different colors. I am focusing on this specific transformation, that in fact produces a strong impact on the migration journey and articulates the space/time in between the departure from one's own motherland and his/her final destination - often a mirage rather than a real possibility. Borders increasingly appear as complex composites not only when they are extended in space - as happens in the case of Mediterranean crossings - but also when they expand in the "time of waiting" spent in refugee camps or other carcereal locations.

I am considering recent artistic representations and forms of activism, all of them focusing on the Mediterranean area as to see how new maps of the margins are drawn. Chris Cleave (2008), Morgan Knibbe (2015), Mario Badagliacca (2016-ongoing), Valeria Luiselli (2017), as well as the artists working at the Trojan Women Project seem to pursue the idea that to renew their gaze on the enormous tragedy of migration, we need new tools, more dynamic strategies to see how, following the progress of globalization, borders change their nature, and the migrant journey to cross them much more complex.



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## 1. Shifting borders

My work here is part of ongoing research on migration and representation that is grounded in the firm belief that storytelling, and the ‘artivism’ sometimes connected to it, may unveil processes and changes that appear harder to untangle and understand when relying on supposedly more factual, historical, documented representations of the gigantic migratory phenomenon taking place in various parts of the world. I am specifically interested in the Mediterranean area, the closed basin where the ‘phenomenon’ has been more evident in recent years and has triggered more stringent and rigid anti-immigration policies, which, by the way, do not seem to reach the desired purpose. What comes to the fore in these specific contingencies is the high number of deaths, in paradoxical contrast with the increasing tendency of the asylum seekers and migrants in general to resort to smugglers and clandestine crossings to reach Europe. When approaching this topic, it is important to keep in mind not simply the critical definition of the process, but also, and primarily, the human side of the phenomenon, as investigated by Simon Gikandi as early as in 2001. What is taking place must be seen as an *actual* tragedy resulting in the *actual* suffering and death of human beings shipwrecking on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea (Gikandi 2001, 631-32) (Bertacco and Vallorani 2021, 12-13). Full awareness of this aspect implies the act of taking responsibility, both as human beings and as scholars, for what is happening as a consequence of the colonizing process. Therefore, if something is to be done, the work of those in charge of ‘shaping the stories’ must consist in understanding the changes in the process of migration and producing representations capable of emphasizing Western historical responsibilities in the current tragedy (Vallorani 2021, 207-10).



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In this specific analysis, I am focusing on borders as they have been perceived by those leaving home in search of safety, once upon a time and today, and on the way in which they have been resemantized in recent times, thus determining a change in the condition of the migrants.<sup>1</sup> The re-articulation of the very notion frontier, once the line delimiting nationhood, has taken place in a relative short time span, and the process is still on the way. Until more or less a century ago, the border was still, reassuringly, a line, the “edge” that the Conradian Kurtz stepped over when he decided to embrace the wilderness (Conrad and Kimbrough 1988, 69-70). Crossing it was, for Joseph Conrad as well as for the people living in his times, a final act: supposedly, there was no way back. In a play set more or less in the same historical moment when *Heart of Darkness* was written, the notion of border appears in the very title of the work and it is the hub of the story. It is apodictically supported by one of the characters – not surprisingly the Western colonizer – and ironically discussed by the other – the Eastern ‘other’. Ron Hutchinson’s *Durand’s Line* is set in 1893 and basically consists in a dialogue between the British diplomat Mortimer Durand and the Amir Abdar Rahman Kahn. When Durand proudly communicates that, by her Majesty’s order, a line is to be drawn to define a fixed and permanent border to Afghan, the Amir ironically replicates that “these are only imaginary lines on paper, after all [...] Will you fight for these imaginary lines?” (Tricycle Theatre 2009, 34). Historically, the dialogue refers to the line forming the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, originally traced – by the colonizers – to separate British India and the Emirate of Afghanistan and then made into one of the most contested areas in the world. This border was in all respects conceived as an imperial device imposed by the Westerners, alternatively

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<sup>1</sup> Sharing the same position as Mariangela Palladino in her “‘Island is no arrival’” (Palladino in Cox et al. 2021, 405), I’m choosing to use the word ‘migrant’ as an inclusive definition gathering refugees, asylum seekers, migrants of different kinds and fleeing people in general.





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rejected and accepted by the Easterners, and in any case identifiable and identified by both Afghans and the others as a line: if you crossed it, you were in another nation. In the second half of the XIX century, more or less at the beginning of Afghanistan's tormented history, Durand naively seems to believe that drawing a map is the basic act defining a nation, with its own, well-marked borders. It is felt, by him but apparently not by Rahman, as a geographical and a sociocultural division, in full congruence with the etymology of the word: "the Proto-Indo-European root \*bherdh-, 'to cut, split, or divide'" (Nail 2016, 2).

It is my position that this notion appears inapplicable today. The border as a line to be crossed once and forever has been replaced by an area stretching both in space and in time, transforming the migration journey into a process that has a beginning but cannot find an end, if not in death.

Time and space are overlapping categories: it is not only a matter of geography (the in-between areas that the migrants have to travel before reaching their destination), but also a matter of time (spent in trying to cross several borders). In his *Politics and the Other Scene*, within a chapter meaningfully entitled "What is a border?", Étienne Balibar mentions the final, desirable and clear-cut frontier that migrants eventually happen to face when near to their destination. In these occurrences and according to the philosopher, the border tends to be experienced not only as an obstacle almost impossible to surmount, but also as "a place he runs up against repeatedly, passing and repassing through it as and when he is expelled or allowed to rejoin his family, so that it becomes [...] a place where he *resides*" (Balibar 2002a, 83). This way the border to be crossed finds its symbolic extension in the camp (in all its multiple inflections), that can be read as "an extraordinarily viscous spatio-temporal zone, almost a home – a home in which to live a life which is a waiting-to-live, a non-life" (Balibar 2002a, 83): it is delimited in space, though endless in time.



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Within the frame of current mass migrations and in terms of critical approach, at least another possible interpretation of the word ‘border’ appears brand-new, and focuses on the condition and experience of the undocumented migrants. To them, “the border may appear as a discontinuous division across which they are forbidden to pass and from which they are redirected” (Nail 2016, 4-5). Such an interpretation seems poetically connected to Said’s notion of counterpoint, which the scholar applies to the act of reading and analyzing colonial texts (Said 1994), but whose usage may be safely extended to the condition of one’s intermittent belonging to places that are never to be developed into new homes. The space/time in between the departure from one’s own motherland and his/her final destination – often a mirage rather than a real possibility – is by no means a line but a whole area, psychological and geographical, crisscrossed by lines, walls, frontiers, checkpoints and other demarcations. The increasing transnational traffic, both of people and of capital, marking the global age, has produced contradictory effects on the idea of border: for the purposes of commerce, there is a strong drive towards an increasing porosity and easier crossability of national frontiers, but the same frontiers are required to work as “instruments of discrimination and triage” reinforced by efficient and sophisticated apparatuses of control (Balibar 2002b, 82). In Sandra Ponzanesi’s words, the “liquid’ theories” so often mentioned in “recent discourses on transnationalism and globalization have revised the notion of frontiers and borders as being connected to ‘solid’ geographical barriers, invoking the notion of ‘liquidity’ instead in order to pay attention to back-and-forth movements of goods and people” (Ponzanesi 2011, 67).<sup>2</sup> If the border is transformed from a line into an area interspersed with difficulties, filtering and triage happen on the way and they do not require sophisticated apparatuses operating only along the frontier

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<sup>2</sup> Also quoted by Akim Abderrezak (in Cox et al. 2021, 376).



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line of the destination country. In the economy of costs and advantages, however cynical it may appear, driving a migrant for hundreds of miles through a number of different countries all over Europe and the Middle East is much more functional to the purposes of the ex-colonizers.

What is certainly true is that borders are complex composites, that may take on different names, ranging from fence to frontier, from wall to checkpoint, and so on and so forth, and therefore acquiring different flavor though belonging to the same semantic cluster. Balibar clearly states that

The idea of a simple definition of what constitutes a border is, by definition, absurd: to mark out a border is, precisely, to define a territory, to delimit it, and so to register the identity of that territory, or confer one upon it. Conversely, however, to define or identify in general is nothing other than to trace a border, to assign boundaries or borders (in Greek, *hams*; in Latin, *finis* or *terminus*; in German, *Grenze*; in French, *borne*). The theorist who attempts to define what a border is is in danger of **going round in circles**, as the very representation of the border is the precondition for any definition. (Balibar 2002a, 76)

In very recent years, Balibar's position has been developed by many scholars, who, struggling with the attempt to stick to the traditional definition of the border as a line, have gradually switched to a more plausible interpretation of it as "spatiality, wherein human encounter and appearance are uniquely charged, and often representational (see, for example, Pugliese 2010; Nield 2008; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007)" (Cox et al. 2021, 143). The critical and practical awareness of this change has led them to add more flexibility and complexity to the traditional notion, also emphasizing the possible ambivalence of the liminal places experienced all along the journey of migration not only as coercive sites but also as productive and generative. The various conditions of emplacement that punctuate the process of moving from one's own old home to the desirable new one define the repeated biopolitical pivoting



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from a provisional border to another one, all of them located in a transitional area that is in fact liminal in all respects.

The traditional and usual polysemy of the national frontier – which does not, as Balibar notes, “have the same meaning for everyone” (Balibar 2002b, 81) – unavoidably multiplies the complexity of the crossing process, and in the specific case of the migrants the perception of the border is at least duplicitous. It is quite true that for them “*some borders are no longer situated at the borders at all*, in the geographico-politico-administrative sense of the term” (Balibar 2002b, 84).

For the purposes of this work, I will focus on two spaces that may be also read as metaphors: the sea – mostly the Mediterranean sea, as a topographical border area that is diachronically marked as a place of displacement and therefore gradually constructed as a borderland where the migrant identity has been historically rewritten (Horden and Purcell 2000); the camp, variously inflected (refugee camp, detention camp, prison, ICE box...), but always marked as a place of transition, where the time of stay is uncertain and the moment of freedom/safety is constantly postponed. What they have in common is the relevance of the time required to cross a border that is no longer a line, and that may be spent travelling (by land or by sea) or waiting (in a camp, whatever its specific nature). The novelty of the migrants’ condition in this respect has been engendering a huge amount of aesthetic and representational work. I will select some case studies that I believe are particularly effective.

## 2. A liquid space

*Human flow* is the title of an extremely effective documentary film released in 2017 and co-produced and directed by Ai Weiwei. The brilliant and controversial Chinese artist and activist



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decided to shoot the film after visiting Lesbos to understand more about the gigantic tragedy taking place in the Mediterranean sea and filming, with no precise plan whatsoever, scenes of the arrival of the boats and the salvaging operations. The experience left a strong mark:

I could see in their faces an expression of uncertainty. They were scared and had no idea what they might find in this new land. That, even more, made me want to know more about who these people are, and why they have risked their lives coming to a place they don't understand and where nobody understands them. I had so many questions.<sup>3</sup>

In the “sprawling journey” that followed, starting in 2015, Ai Weiwei and his crew visited many entry points for people trying to find safety in Europe and began filming them, spontaneously focusing on the scale of migration, which seemed unprecedented in its numbers and massive in its consequences. What actually happened, as reported in the Production Notes, is that “The huge scale and even greater unknowns of making the film would eventually merge form into function – with the narrative’s liquid structure mirroring for the audience all the sensations of uncertainty, of indefinite time, of swirling limbo that refugees experience”.<sup>4</sup> The very title of the film plays on the metaphor of liquidity, which is complex and ambiguous. Though mostly connected to the enormous scale of the refugee crisis occurring in the Mediterranean Sea, it also evokes the water in general as the borderland where most journeys take place. This borderland may bear different meanings: it is hoped for and positively felt as a place of rebirth, though in practice, and more often, it easily becomes the place of death and a gigantic grave where even the names of the dead travelers are forgotten.<sup>5</sup> Exploiting different

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<sup>3</sup> The quote is drawn from the PRESS KIT of the film, available on the web (Production Notes: p. 9, <http://www.humanflow.com/press-kit/>).

<sup>4</sup> PRESS KIT of the film, available on the web (Production Notes: p. 11, <http://www.humanflow.com/press-kit/>).

<sup>5</sup> A poetic reflection on the need to recover the names of the dead migrant is to be found in Dagmawi Ymer’s short film *Asmat* (2015; available here: <https://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/film/co-produzioni/asmatomni/>).



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technologies (cameras, iPhones, drones...) and collating images gathered travelling through over 20 countries, Weiwei tries to produce a report – at the same time poetic and documented – of the greatest human displacement in history in recent times, prioritizing the human impact of the crisis. Images of overcrowded boats and barbed-wire fences, endless walks through fields or along railway lines report the numberless legs of the journey, in a stop-and-go that is the erratic rhythm of the migrant’s travelling.

For the viewers of the film as well as for the filmmaker, it is quite evident that the traditional, crystal-clear awareness of the geopolitical nature of borders is in need of radical re-thinking in the light of a world map that has progressively lost stability.

Within this frame, migrants are no longer sure about their destination, they do not know where and when they will arrive, and they spend a very long, painful, often physically and psychologically challenging length of time in transition. Sadly, the transition is seldom completed safely. *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* is one of works focusing on the tragic outcome of the migrants’ seacrossings. The film was released in 2014 and – though being in all respects a debut film – is not the first representational experience of Morgan Knibbe in this field. The film is partly made using sequences from the award-winning short *Shipwreck* (2015), but the purposes, style and articulation of the text are totally different.

The opening sequence of *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* is shot by a drone and shows fragments of a shipwreck where, while the camera bobs along following the oscillation of the boat in a storm, a family tries to survive. At a climactic point the grandfather falls from the boat and drowns. The oscillation between two moments – the child’s voice saying “I don’t want to go to Europe” and the drowned old man wondering “Is this paradise?” – defines the narrative pact with the audience. The story – largely based on events that are tragic and true – is going to be told through the gaze of a wandering spirit. Precisely this gaze transforms what could be



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a document or a testimony into a vision filtered through a very precise interpretation. The specter is 'Purgatorial': he is dead, but not allowed to forget his tragic condition as a living being. He is still wandering in the no-man's land of undocumented migrants. The chosen point of view – that of a wandering specter – shapes a brand-new kind of discourse, combining Knibbe's uncompromising and almost brutal facticity with a poetic angle that smoothly transforms a possible 'reportage' into magical storytelling. A tragedy – the drowning of a victim – is artistically transformed into the opportunity to show the migration journey through a different gaze, perhaps cognitively more useful and functional to the understanding of what it means to be excluded even from the possibility of hope. In a counter-narrative of migratory experiences, Knibbe transforms the Bakhtinian notion of 'outsidedness' often quoted by Polezzi (Polezzi 2012, 354) into literal non-belonging to the land of the living: the profile of a dead narrator illuminates the condition of dire human insecurity experienced by the migrants at sea. This sea – effectively renamed the "Mediterranean seametry" by Hakim Abderrezak (in Cox et al. 2021, 373) – reshapes "the idea of borders as liquid figurations" (Ponzanesi 2011: 67). Often depicted as a porous frontier, it takes an "oxymoronic nature" since in it "liquidity has become synonymous with immobility precipitated by preposterous and rigid policies that have transformed a sea into a cemetery" (Ponzanesi 2011: 67).

In her *Trilogy of the Shipwreck (Trilogia del Naufragio)*, and more in particular in the first play of her work – *Lampedusa Beach* (2003)<sup>6</sup> –, Lina Prosa sets the action precisely on the Southernmost maritime margin of the European Union, showing how the sea works as a sieve

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<sup>6</sup> The first version of the play, dated 2003, was awarded the Premio Nazionale Annalisa Scafi per il teatro civile in 2005 and the Premio Nazionale Anima in 2007. The play was first performed at the Theatre des Bernardines, in Marseilles, on February 5, 2008. Here we are referring to the Italian version published by Editoria & Spettacolo in 2013.



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(Abderrezak in Cox et al. 2021, 383-85) that stops the unwanted migrants and finally embraces their dead bodies. Consequently – Abderrezak adds – the Mediterranean basin becomes a mass grave and a maritime cemetery, or ‘seametry’, in which “migration politics related to the sea rely on a set of contradictions and illogicalities that provoke desperate acts and untimely ends. How does a sea associated with flow and fluidity become the world’s largest maritime cemetery?” (Abderrezak in Cox et al. 2021, 383).

Shauba, the female protagonist is portrayed while drowning after falling from the unseaworthy boat on which she is trying to beach on the shores of Lampedusa. Her maritime crossing is not to be completed, and safety is not to be reached. As one of the displaced persons illegally trying to reach Europe in search of a relative who has disappeared, she is an expendable body, made to dissolve in the liquid sea and soon forgotten. Her companions experiencing the same fate are other dead bodies, poetically represented as “never-seen-before fish” (“pesci mai visti prima”, Prosa 2013, 18). Embraced by the sea, they never made it to the shore, and their hopes, dreams, expectations and even fears are conserved in the extended border of the Mediterranean waters. Their death results from the political priority that is given to border control and rejection, and it neutralizes the major political faultlines that could put the stability of Europe at risk (Bertacco and Vallorani 2021b, 83-86).

If Lina Prosa tells a story that could be true but is in fact developed around imaginary characters, a recent docu-drama, entitled *The Swimmers*, reports on the story of two actual sisters, who leave Syria and travel both by land and by sea to reach salvation when the political situation in their motherland becomes unsafe. Yusra and Sarah Maldini, both professional swimmers, are convinced to quit Syria, where life has become impossible, and to undertake the migratory journey following a hybrid route (by land and by sea). The fact that they are teenagers accounts for their difficulty in anticipating the actual conditions in which the





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multiple frontier-crossing is to be carried out, but it also shows the stubborn resistance of two young girls, who will not give up hope.

The last leg of Yusra's and Sarah's journey is a trans-Mediterranean crossing on a faulty boat whose engine breaks down in the middle of the sea. Precisely at this point the filmic representation reverses the most familiar profile of the migrants. Normally experienced as anonymous figures in the mass movement of displaced people, the undocumented migrants as reported in the media are described as deprived of agency and mere victims. Their plight, though detonating the usual salve of pseudo-solidarities (Gilroy 2000, 6), mostly triggers pity and defines them as passive victims, who have neither the strength nor the tools to change their destiny. Yusra and Sarah seem totally different: precisely when their life is on the line, they overturn their destiny, bravely dive into the water, swim alongside the sinking boat overloaded with refugees and take all of them to a safe shore. The film, directed by Sally El Hosaini and released in 2022, confirms a critical statement made by Parvati Nair, who focuses on hope as "the source of agency in contexts that overwhelmingly disempower and displace individuals and communities" (Nair in Cox et al. 2021, 412). Nair also reacts to the linguistic and legal distinction that works as a sieve to discriminate those who are to be saved and those who are to be left behind. If Yusra and Sarah succeed in reaching safety in Germany and Yusra fulfils her dream of participating in the Olympics Games in 2016 in Rio, they do so because they finally decide to embark on an illicit journey and are both bold and lucky enough to survive a journey that could not be made in a safer, more comfortable, less risky and more dignified way. In their case, "hope functions as a vital strategy of survival" (Nair in Cox et al. 2021, 412) at the moment of crossing over to Europe. In doing what they do, they recover their 'agency' and react to the more familiar press identification of refugees as passive 'others', a condition that is not easily reconsidered when they eventually succeed in crossing the wide border of the sea.



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### 3. Islandment with no island

Mariangela Palladino introduces a neologism, 'islandment', to describe the "arrival without an end to the journey; it signifies detention, (...) inhabiting a liminal space in Europe but not quite so, neither geographically nor legally" (Palladino in Cox et al. 2021, 395). In the bureaucracies of reception, initial care and possible integration, arrival is no arrival: getting on shore simply results in another kind of imprisonment. In more ways than one the transformation of the borderline into a borderland re-shapes the very process of migration, which used to be a well-oriented journey towards a specific frontier, clearly drawn on a map. Once crossed, migrants started a new life and triggered the process of becoming new citizens of different nations. What happens today is that they spend a very long time travelling through different countries, crossing multiple frontier lines and not very sure of where they are bound and when they are going to stop. In fact, they pass from being citizens at risk in a country at war to being reshaped as marginal identities stuck in an unwelcoming borderland. In comparison with traditional migrations, there has been an exponential increase of uncertainty as to several aspects of the journey of migration, which does not end when getting ashore. The fluidity somehow implicit in sea-crossing – since "To be at sea is to be not on land. The contrast is implicit, but stark: fluid, fraught with risk, and engulfing as opposed to solid, stable and charted" (Nair in Cox et al. 2021, 414) – extends to the time spent in various carcereal locations where the hierarchies of belonging are kept in place, so as to demarcate refugees from citizens. The periods of time wasted in waiting have the same liquid imponderability and fluidity as the sea.

At the end of the first leg of their journey as well as when they get to Greece, Yusra and Sarah occupy a "space of waiting" whose duration lengthens and shortens regardless of their choices and acts. In the same way, in the short film by Saeed Mayahy and Miriam Carlsen



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entitled *Game Over* and released in 2022, a group of illegal Afghan boys looking for sanctuary but stuck in Zeytinburnu (Turkey) wait for a chance to leave spending their days in hiding and between shady jobs. Their hope to cross over to Europe fades in time, in a form of ‘islandment’ reinforced by their inability to communicate in a language that is foreign to them.

The younger the migrant, the worse the feeling of being thrown into a ‘liquid’ and unpredictable condition. In the case of children, the barrier between seeing and understanding is even more dangerous and it tends to gain a Janus-like quality. On the one hand, the fate of accompanied and unaccompanied minors easily acquires the flavor of a simply human, and therefore universally understandable tragedy (as happened in the iconic, if tragic, fate of Aylan Kurdi: see Bertacco and Vallorani 2021a, 100-108). On the other, for reasons connected to the very process of growing up, the outcome of a long stay in a borderland – be it a refugee camp, a detention facility or the area around a border – is totally unpredictable. In these cases, the feeling of exclusion is experienced by an identity that is not yet shaped and suffers a long process of anomy marked by repeated relocations and predictably ending in being stuck in a detention centre for illegal migrants and unaccompanied minors.

In his on-going project *The Game*,<sup>7</sup> set in the Balcanic borderland, the photoreporter Mario Badagliacca devotes a chapter to the photographic representations of children in refugee camps, encampments and provisional shelters. Apparently able to adapt to a precarious life, the minors are fully aware of the instability of their condition but they try to stick to commonplace habits. Their playground is tragically desolated, but the games are the same: playing football, laughing at a camera, faking the use of a weapon.<sup>8</sup> Uncertainty, collective

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<sup>7</sup> Coincidentally, ‘game’ is a recurring word in the projects concerning the description of the journey of the migrants, both by land and by sea.

<sup>8</sup> The project is available here [https://www.mariobadagliacca.com/the\\_game\\_preface-r9918](https://www.mariobadagliacca.com/the_game_preface-r9918).



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unhappiness, and deprivation becomes a state of being, precipitating the desire for change into hopeless immobility. What happens in fact is that the time spent in the middle ground between war and salvation is marked by a drive towards the reshaping of one's own identity and in some cases, one's own body. The story told by Chris Cleave in his *The Other Hand* (2008), though fictional, successfully reports on the condition of unaccompanied minors when locked in detention centres in the land where they had hoped to find safety. At the very beginning of the novel, the young protagonist has finally succeeded in reaching England, but she is now locked up in a centre on the outskirts of London. Her desire to eventually become free to move around as she wants produces the dream of magically becoming "a British pound. A pound is free to travel to safety, and we are free to watch it go. This is the human triumph. This is called, globalisation. A girl like me gets stopped at immigration, but a pound can leap the turnstiles, and dodge the tackles of those big men with their uniform caps, and jump straight into a waiting airport taxi. Where to, sir? Western Civilisation, my good man, and make it snappy" (Cleave 2009, 1-3). Before that, and much more practically, she had to "reshape" her female body as that of a boy, to reduce the risk of suffering sexual assaults (Cleave 2009, 7-11). Frozen in a condition of inbetweenness actually producing the "discontinuous state of being" mentioned by Edward Said (Said 1984, 137-49), she inhabits her time/space of waiting by imagining endless ways of becoming 'same' rather than going on being 'other'. Thus the increasing fluidity of the very notion of border finds its apt correlative in the various places of containment aimed at receiving wave after wave of refugees. In borderland areas – be they near the Balcanic frontier, in Northern France or on a boat lost in the Mediterranean Sea – the migrants are likely to spend long periods of time simply waiting to become citizens of another country after leaving their own birthplace. In fact, they go through a transformative process,



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though the final outcome of this process does not comply with their original purpose: they are made into objects, corpses, sub-human beings, undesirable creatures, and so on and so forth.

In his essay “Europe as border”, Ètienne Balibar points out the intrinsic ambiguity of the very notion of border:

Every border has a *double meaning*, local and global: it is a “line” (more or less accepted, stable, permeable, visible, thick or thin) separating territories which, by virtue of its drawing, become “foreign”; and it is a “partition” or “distribution” of the World space, which reflects the regime of meaning and power under which the World is represented as a “unity” of different “parts”. (Balibar 2004, 13)

The border, hence, tends to become really dis-located, if not ubiquitous (Balibar 2004, 16). The dynamics of migratory flows, exponentially increasing all over the world produces an impact on what Mezzadra and Neilson define the “heterogenization of borders” (Mezzadra e Neilson 2013, 3) potentiating the already existing deep instability of the traditional geopolitical borders, actually made into a biopolitical device that happens to be essential in distinguishing and separating the locals and the aliens, the national and the foreigner. In the current journey of migration, in the different forms it takes, the line has evolved into a new entity: no longer a device located in space and whose crossing is a matter of minutes, but a geopolitically and symbolically uncertain space. As Mezzadra and Neilson state, there’s “No clear-cut division between the inside and the outside” (Mezzadra e Neilson 2013, viii) of a nation, in the same way as the distinction between being saved but never ‘made legal’ and being rejected right from the beginning is becoming more and more blurred. Border zones, as Mignolo defines them (Mignolo 2000, 236), are configured as extended spatial units, located outside the politically normative space, in the land of nowhere. In these areas, it becomes impossible to distinguish between the national and the foreigner. They may become the locus of metamorphosis, or the



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purgatory space hosting migrants for nobody knows how long or a gigantic grave. In no case do they correspond to the tight, clear-cut line that used to be understood as a border. The wider the border, the harder the process of relocation and restoration of what, according to Said, is “left behind forever” (Said 1984, 137). What has been changing together with the complexification of geographical margins and territorial edges, is the idea that sudden change and equally sudden salvation is possible, while the idea of a neverending process of transition that will produce no forms of stability starts being integrated. This loss starts being told, and the telling is the beginning of awareness. “Telling stories – states Valeria Luiselli, – does not solve anything, does not reassemble broken lives. But perhaps it is a way of understanding the unthinkable” (Luiselli and Davis 2017, 69).

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### **Bio-bibliographical note**

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## **Remaking Meaning Across Modes: Marginality and Transduction in the Verbal and Visual Construction of Migration**

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### **Abstract**

This paper considers the linguistic and multimodal strategies adopted to describe the theme of migration in both textual and visual representations, by drawing on the theoretical notion of transduction (Kress 2010). The transition from one semiotic mode to another is analyzed with reference to the representation of mass migrations in J. Conrad's short story "Amy Foster" and J. Lawrence's *The Migration Series*, in order to shed light on the meaning-making process emerging from this modal shift. The combination of linguistic and visual structures in specific socio-historical contexts makes the "transmodal redesign" (Mavers 2011) a semiotic relocation in which the past travels into the present. However, the shift is not only temporal; the reshaping of meaning also arises in a space made up of multiple semiotic intersections, appropriations, and entanglements (Newfield 2014) which generate, in turn, new meanings. As a consequence, the transmodal moment becomes itself a moment of cross-over, an in-between, so that the discourse on marginality does not only refer to the crossing of geographical boundaries or to the individual dislocation experienced by the migrant, but also concerns textual, multimodal, and semiotic transitions.



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## 1. Introduction

In a well-known passage of *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said defines the migrant as the incarnation of intellectual freedom, embodying the “unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies” of culture. The migrant is a figure “between domains, between forms, between homes, and between—languages.”<sup>1</sup> Said’s reference to ‘decentered and exilic energies’ establishes a connection between the tropes of migration and margins, via conceptual constructions involving change, relocation, fluidity, so that margins become the site of new energies to be released, and new meanings to be created. As a moment of cross-over, the notion of marginality extends beyond the crossing of geographical boundaries, spanning social, political, cultural, and linguistic areas. In terms of language and modes of expression, it also confronts verbal, visual and multimodal spheres.

This study aims to show how different semiotic modes can be adopted to make meanings and deliver messages about the cultural ‘movements’, the ‘transitions’ underlying the notion of migration, by considering the role of interstices and semiotic margins in its textual, visual, and multimodal representations. In looking at the textual and visual strategies adopted to describe migration from a multimodal critical discourse perspective, a few aspects will be considered, that is, how modal shifts impact on meaning, how they create new meaning, and how the modification of meaning entails a semiotic relocation in which the past travels into the present. The notion of transduction quoted in the title of this

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<sup>1</sup> Said’s passage reads as follows: “[...] Yet, it is no exaggeration to say that liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation is today the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and the artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages. From this perspective then all things are indeed counter, original, spare, strange.” (Said 1993, 403).



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article is intended in 'theoretical' terms, as an 'external semiotic action', and not as an 'internal', cognitive process happening in the brain (Kress 2010)<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. Representing migration: semiotic margins and cross-modal mobility

The concepts of 'cross-modal mobility' and 'trans-semiotic mutation' (Newfield 2014) have been studied in a range of disciplines, such as literature, art, photography, and also communication, anthropology, architecture,<sup>3</sup> while the term 'transmodal' has been used by a number of scholars to refer to the semiotic changes taking place when a concept or a topic shifts from one representational mode to another. These modes of representation include many discourses and critical fields, such as psychology, music, art. The term 'transmodal translation', for example, has been applied to the field of cinema studies, while the exploration of the transmodal in media has developed into transmediation. Here, the concepts of cross-modal mobility and 'trans-semiotic mutation' will be considered by looking at the verbal and visual representations of migration in two different texts, Joseph

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<sup>2</sup> The application of transduction in the educational field, which defines children's making of meaning as a crucial aspect of the learning process (Kress 1996), has also been left out.

<sup>3</sup> Newman (2014) states that "Architect Lindsay Bremner argues that her study into the ever-changing, evasive city of Johannesburg is 'nomadic', undertaken and represented through movement and the connections between writing, photography, pedagogy, architecture and city-making (2010). Clingman considers the ongoing metamorphoses and mutations in the work of artist William Kentridge (both across different art forms and within individual texts at the micro-level) as the central creative principle in his work which he calls 'the art of transformation' (2011). 'Transformations' in its plural form is the term used by Pahl to describe children's meaning-making in nursery education (1999). Finnegan, writing as an anthropologist, describes the varied, complex and constantly shifting, performed textualities of communities as 'serial transformations' (2002, 179-200). In media education, Semali calls the cross-modal process 'transmediation' (2002), a term used also by Sanders in a recent book on integrating literacy, the arts and multimodality in English curricula (2010, 110). Iedema advances the term 'resemiotization', to be used as a tool in multimodal discourse analysis for tracing processes of semiotic translation in relation to larger socio-historical processes and issues of institutional power (2003). 'Transmedia' is widely used to name the phenomenon of the circulation and convergence of content across a range of media platforms (Jenkins, 2006), while the term 'transmedia traversals' is used by Lemke to convey a sense of a 'dynamic semiotic cycle in which users interpret what is being displayed to them across many media' (2007)".



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Conrad's short story *Amy Foster* and Jacob Lawrence's collection of paintings *The Migration Series*.

*Amy Foster* was written by Conrad in 1901 and published the same year in the *Illustrated London News*. It is the story of a journey from the physical margins of Eastern Europe to the perceived geographical, cultural, and ideological centre of Europe. It is the story of the failure to adapt to that hegemonic centre. The marginality of the emigrant, a man who comes from the 'eastern range of the Carpathians' (Conrad 1974, 121) acquires a central role, imposing itself on the text and changing the course of action. Yanko Goorall's initial journey by train leads him to the mouth of the River Elbe where he embarks on a ship. Before reaching the ship, he has travelled for many days, experiencing sickness and unable to distinguish night from day. Multitudes of people, 'whole nations', travel with him. Goorall's descriptions exemplify Conrad's impressionist writing and retain a level of abstraction which introduces images that may also represent the migrations which took place in different historical periods, crossing geographical boundaries and time limits, too. His story leads back to Conrad's own personal story of migration and exile, and at the same time looks ahead to other migratory movements represented by artists and writers at a later time, such as *The Migration Series* (1941) by Lawrence, in which the Great Migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North is described. Originally titled *The Migration of the Negro*, the 60 paintings by African-American artist Jacob Lawrence are shared between MoMA in New York and the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC. The collection can be easily recognized as having a social purpose. Scenes of labor, families, daily life, and especially journeys – namely, 'the' journey that would permanently change the country – are dealt with. Struggle, hope, solitude, the attempt at integration are also portrayed in this visual narration.

The two stories have obvious common points in terms of authorial perspective and composition. Conrad and Lawrence experienced movement and relocation as part of their



young lives, and this affected their personal existence as well as their artistic careers.<sup>4</sup> Both authors relied on the narrative strategies of oral literature for the composition of their works. Lawrence's paintings were drawn on the many stories about migrants he had listened to during the years of his Harlem youth,<sup>5</sup> while Conrad took the inspiration for "Amy Foster" from an anecdote he had been told by his friend Ford Madox Hueffer about a German castaway who was the sole survivor of a shipwreck (Conrad 1926, 118). However, these works have been chosen for a comparative analysis not only because their authors shared a common destiny and their treatment of migration contains aspects of similarity. Rather, the choice was suggested by the fact that the multimodal representation of the same subject determines an expansion of meaning that is instrumental for a thorough understanding of cultural and social elements linked to migration itself.

### 3. From verbal to visual: modal shifts and the creation of meaning

In the comparative analysis of the two texts, the verbal and the visual are considered as two equal modes that illustrate the same themes of migration and marginality. According to G. Kress, visual texts are independent, internally organized and structured, and convey their own specific messages, so that "language and visual communication can both be used to realize the 'same' fundamental systems of meaning that constitute our cultures, [each doing

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<sup>4</sup> At a very young age, Lawrence moved from Atlantic City to Easton, Pennsylvania, to Philadelphia, and then he finally settled in Harlem with his mother at the age of thirteen. Also Conrad, as the son of two exiles, spent much of his childhood travelling. He moved to Vologda, in northern Russia, with his parents when his father was exiled, and after their death he went back to Krakow. At the age of sixteen he left Kraków for Marseilles where he joined the French Merchant Navy and kept on travelling by sea across different countries.

<sup>5</sup> Jutta Lorenzen describes in detail the influence of orally transmitted stories on Lawrence's *Migration Series* by also quoting from Lawrence himself: "I grew up hearing tales about people 'coming up', another family arriving. People who'd been ... in the North for a few years, they would say another family 'came up' and they would help them to get established..." (Gates, "New Negroes" 20). Even the library he frequented so assiduously was not only a haven of books, but a place replete with orally transmitted tales" (Lorenzen 2006, 572).



it] by means of its [sic] own specific forms” (Kress 1996, 17).<sup>6</sup> This generates relationships which are neither predictable nor stable, but completely apt for negotiation. Sometimes words expand images to create a wider vision, other times images problematize and reframe the representation of the same concept expressed in words. As different modes have different potentialities and limitations, there may be losses and gains in the process of multimodal meaning-making. What one should look at is the final, comprehensive idea one gets from the relationships emerging through the comparison of different modes. As far as this analysis is concerned, it is precisely from textual and visual ‘margins’ that new meaning on migratory practices is created.

Conrad’s prose is famous for what is known as its ‘impressionistic’ quality, that is, the author’s descriptive ability to depict images before the reader’s eyes. His artistic credo expressed in the Preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* – “my task [as an author] is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel [...] it is, before all, to make you see” – has been interpreted as the illustration of his impressionism. An example of Conradian visual images evoked in verbal structures is given in “Amy Foster” (AF hereafter) in one of the descriptions of Yanko Goorall’s journey: “Before that he had been travelling a long, long time on the iron track. He looked out of the window, which had a wonderfully clear glass in it, and the trees, the houses, the fields, and the long roads seemed to fly round and round about him till his head swam” (Conrad 1974, 114). A reading of these lines in comparison with two panels of *The Migration Series* (MS hereafter) – *Panel 6* and *Panel 38* – will shed light on some interesting elements concerning the subjective perception

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<sup>6</sup> Kress also specifies that “[t]he relation between picture and text is not one of illustration. The picture does not duplicate the text, it does not represent visually what has already been represented linguistically. Nor is there a relation of ‘anchorage’ (Barthes 1996, 116) in which the text elaborates the information given in the picture without providing new information [...] visual structures of representation can either be narrative, presenting unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements, or conceptual, representing participants in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, or structure or meaning” (Kress 2014).



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of the migrant moving from one place to another. The comparative semiotic reading of words and images introduces subjective vs. objective points of view. The narration of Yanko Goorall's journey in Conrad's text has, in fact, a strongly personalized, individual outlook. The figure of the emigrant is dominant in the narration ("he had been travelling", "he looked out of the window", "trees, houses, fields flied around him", "his head swam"),<sup>7</sup> and the scene is one in which what is seen (houses, trees, fields) produces a sense of circularity and dizziness. The two pictures selected from MS, instead, display a double connotation in terms of movement: *Panel 5* portrays linear movement – the one you would actually get on a train – while *Panel 38* portrays circular movement.



Panel 5



Panel 38

Both paintings present an impersonal description (there is no presence of a subjective 'I' experiencing the landscape). Therefore, while in Conrad the migration journey is essentially the adventure of an individual, in Lawrence's painting migration can be considered as a 'depersonalized movement in space'. However, through a more careful semiotic reading,

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<sup>7</sup> However, it is worth noticing that in these few lines recounting part of Yanko's train journey, the protagonist's position in terms of *visual perspective* is one of marginality. He is looking out of the window at the main scene perceived through his own eyes.



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*Panel 38* features the same idea of circularity and dizziness as expressed in AF. By looking at the panel we get the visual representation of a wobbling head ('his head swam', in Conrad's text). And even if the images lack a material subjective presence (no people are depicted), subjectivity is 'translated' from the written text to the visual one in *Panel 38* via the circular lines of the iron track and the consequent sense of 'dizziness' they evoke, which exclusively refers to human perception. Naturally, the 'new meaning' related to 'dizziness' and circularity arises from the semiotic reading of the painting in relation to the short story, so that Conrad's words work as captions to Lawrence's panel. Such transductions are further developed by other lexical and visual-semiotic choices throughout the two texts.

For example, both *Panel 6* from MS and a further extract from AF describe a moment of the migration journey when crowds of people are gathered on means of transport (train and ship, respectively).

It was a low timber dwelling – he would say – with wooden beams overhead, like the houses in his country, but you went into it down a ladder. It was very large, very cold, damp and sombre, with places in the manner of wooden boxes where people had to sleep, one above another, and it kept on rocking all ways at once all the time. He crept into one of these boxes and laid down there in the clothes in which he had left his home many days before, keeping his bundle and his stick by his side. People groaned, children cried, water dripped, the lights went out, the walls of the place creaked, and everything was being shaken so that in one's little box one dared not lift one's head (Conrad 1974, 114).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This description was inspired by images the author had seen on migrant ships in Brema, when he was returning from Adelaide in 1899 (Cfr. Stape 2009, 55).





Panel 6

From a first reading, it may seem that the written text contains additional levels of description and perception with respect to the image. In fact, it focuses on the emigrant's insight of 'soundscape' which underlines the presence of human beings – not only water dripping and walls creaking, but also cries and groaning. On a semiotic plane, this description, delivered through Yanko's hearing, conveys the sense of fear, solitude and anguish experienced by the migrants. After entering a very large room, the protagonist of Conrad's story 'creeps' in to one of the boxes and lays down there, enhancing the reader's understanding of what Yanko is experiencing. The final lines of the extract convey the representation of the 'crowd' in terms of sight and sound, that is, the room being packed with many people whose moaning we can hear through Yanko's ears. We all know that human perception is harder to detect in a visual text. Yet, the 'meaning' of a few verbal images by Conrad's writing is visually conveyed in the panel: the 'low timber dwelling', the



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'ladder'/corridor,<sup>9</sup> the place being 'large, cold, damp and sombre', the 'wooden boxes where people had to sleep' and the final image where 'in one's little box one dared not lift one's head' can be 'seen' in the panel. There is concordance between the images evoked in the written text and those displayed in the visual one up to the point that some elements of the written lines are transduced in the painting, they actually 'travel' in the visual representation. Human feelings and human perception are also visually conveyed in *Panel 6*. The sense of fear and discomfort is expressed through the migrant's eyes (represented as short vertical lines), and by their (half) faces, partially hidden under the blankets ('one dared not lift one's head'), and in one case hidden by the migrant's own hands (top left hand-side of the panel).

#### **4. From the margins to the centre: multimodal connections and semiotic transitions**

An analysis of *Panel 6* according to Kress and Van Leeuwen's critical framework, will exemplify further important elements concerning migration and marginality. Lawrence depicts the train coach as a symmetrical, linear, and proportioned space. The straight lines demarcating the train corridor from the right and left seats (where the migrants are gathered) are framing devices which do not work to disconnect the elements of the layout (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1995, 26). Rather, some repetitions of shapes and colors function as connective devices integrating the pictorial elements into a coherent and significant unit. For example, the repeated shapes of the benches delineate a visual layout emphasizing multiplicity and conveying the sense of the 'crowd'.

The distribution of information value in the painting makes significant use of the visual dimensions of centre and margins, so that marginal elements become central. In the left-hand corner, a mother feeding her child is featured; a suitcase is placed in the central

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<sup>9</sup> Even if the ladder is replaced by a corridor in the painting, the two elements fulfil the same function in terms of visual effect.



corridor, next to her. An apparently minor detail in the general representation, the suitcase is given crucial centrality in the visual space of the panel. It attracts the reader's attention due to its position, foreground placement, and color contrast, too. The bag contains, in fact, clothes revealing bands of colors (all the colors of the panel are contained in the suitcase). A complex interaction of factors, such as size, the sharpness of focus, position, color(s), give 'weight' to the case and concurr in establishing its percpetual salience in the image layout (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1995, 33). As one of the three key aspects of visual composition, together with information value and framing, salience determines the weight that elements have in a layout in relation to others, regardless of their position. In this case, however, salience is not only an aesthetic quality of the suitcase, it also guarantees its semiotic relevance, making it a catalizer of all the relationships and meanings contained in the painting.

As far as color is concerned, a wider discourse must be introduced to demonstrate how its semiotic value expands the 'meanings' presented in Conrad's text. Color in MS and in the specific panel under analysis retains a number of symbolical denotations pertaining the semantic field of migration and marginality. Lawrence uses color in repetitive patterns from the first to the last of the panels of MS. The collection, in fact, was not executed panel by panel, but color by color: green, red, yellow, blue, brown, and black are used throughout the whole series to represent different semiotic relocations, that is, the same color appears sequentially in different paintings with different symbolical meanings, so that they create a rhythm throughout the panels while featuring, in some cases, semantic divergence. For example, in *Panel 27* yellow denotes hope and expectation when used for the stockings and hat of a girl waiting to leave among the crowds. Conversely in *Panel 49*, it is used as the color of a segregating fence. Therefore, it both symbolizes the hardship of migration and the hope behind every migratory movement.



Panel 27



Panel 49

Lawrence's use of color is made even more complex in *Panel 6*, where people are united two by two on the same bench by a monochromatic cover. Apart from hope (the yellow stockings and hat in *Panel 27*) and segregation (the fence in *Panel 49*), color denotes here 'a sense of the communal' by symbolizing the 'appeal to collectivity', a quality that has been identified by Jutta Lorensen as typical of Lawrence's series.<sup>10</sup> To return to the bag, each color contained in the suitcase – together with all its semantic implications – is also reproduced outside, in the blankets covering the migrants. This allows the viewer to establish a visual connection among the various elements of the painting and see it as a whole. It also allows him/her to maintain contact with the picture's overall meaning and

<sup>10</sup> Jutta Lorensen identifies a 'resounding note of the communal' as a prevalent theme in MS. That is, crowds are not a mass of individuals, of single people who do not know each other. Rather, they fill a packed train with 'an appeal to collectivity' which is visually delivered through color. In her words, 'The painting exhibits a train compartment filled with people and with Lawrence's migration colors. Under its logic twoness, each bench unites two voyagers through the migration colors, thus reinforcing the resounding note of the communal, a prevalent theme in the Migration Series' (Lorensen 2006, 577).



recognize the authenticity of its subject matter. The interpersonal metafunction is here guaranteed by the object, the suitcase, which is 1) the symbolical (and visual) centre where notions and meanings about migration are gathered; and 2) an exemplification of the way in which the painter engages with the viewer to make new meaning. The visual margins of the painting in which the migrants are portrayed are not 'ancillary, dependent elements' (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1995, 30); instead, they connect to the visual centre (the suitcase) thanks to the semiotic value they are attributed by salience.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, the comparison between *Panel 6* and Conrad's extract shows how the painting problematizes and amplifies the verbal representation. While the written words express feelings of solitude, fear and desperation, the painting expands the views of the emigrants' journey to a more positive outlook through details of visual marginality and/or centrality that are instrumental to convey a dimension of human connection and solidarity which is not to be found in the short story. This could be demonstrated more thoroughly by expanding the comparative reading to the whole corpus of MS, in order to show how the semiotic analysis benefits from the convergence of diverse signifying systems. Different modal representations of migration raise the topic to a universal level, triggering collective critical insights into migrant travelling, but also into individual and personal migrant experiences. By relying on multiple resources, the transmodal shift firmly merges time and space becoming a moment where different migrations meet to prove that they are not so different. The newly created meanings apply to late nineteenth century Eastern European migrations, early twentieth century American migrations, and the current migration crisis in Europe. At the same time, these social messages reflect the variety of histories and contexts every migration is subject to as the result of complex realities operating throughout time, and across boundaries and societies. Investigating migrant experiences from different



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angles and critical perspectives, concentrating on those 'decentred energies' of culture gives us a deeper knowledge of facts, but also a deeper conscience of what migration really is.



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**On the Margins of the *Manthropocene*:  
Semiotic Violence against Women in Politics  
as a form of Diamesic Creativity**

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to shed light on the impact of 'semiotic violence' on women in politics, emphasizing the importance of using language as a catalyst for positive social change in order to fight gender-based violence in all its manifestations. The study specifically investigates the role of the *Manthropocene* in perpetuating 'semiotic violence' against women in politics, with a specific focus on the recent international media use of sexist language when addressing Finland's first female Prime Minister, Sanna Mirella Marin. The analysis examines how gendered insults, slurs, and derogatory communication techniques are employed to undermine the political authority of the politician, thereby perpetuating discrimination and violence. Given this context, I argue that collective societal action is necessary to challenge and reject sexist attitudes and behaviours, including those facilitated through 'diamesic creativity'.



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*Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face. Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town.*  
(bell hooks, 1984)

## 1. Introduction

The thorny relationship between language and gender-based violence has often had significant implications on the understanding of human relationships. If language has the power to reflect the complexity of human life more than any other form of communicative channel, it must necessarily also play a fundamental role in redetermining gender balance by altering the way we and others perceive and interpret the world around us. As bell hooks (1984) states in the epigraph which introduces this paper, such tweaked interpretations have often been tailored with the aim of relegating women to the margins of society via the systemic and structural discursive forms of gender discrimination construed within a male-dominated language. Nowadays, women, irrespective of their social and economic status or background, still face violence when in public and private spaces; they are discriminated against, denied fundamental rights and often hindered by unfair norms, patriarchal culture and sexist language in a world ruled by men where capitalism and globalisation still commodify and objectify women. Language, in particular, is one of the most powerful means through which sexism, gender discrimination, harassment and the objectification of women are perpetrated and reproduced. A winning tool in



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the hands of those who seek to objectify women can undoubtedly be found in 'linguistic misogyny', or simply linguistic sexism against women, a venomous practice which serves a crucial political purpose in a world of men: the policing and undermining of women's public presence in order to hush their voice and authority (Cameron 2020: 1). Linguistic misogyny is often the result of language change, a core concept in sociolinguistics, which sees language as always characterised by variation and change, since there are various ways, across several languages, to express the same idea. Language change unavoidably leads to linguistic variation mainly, but not exclusively, in the lexicon and its usage within a given speech community, and this change often brings about social change. Diamesic variation – the unique way language change takes place when used across different media – specifically creates and very rapidly spreads new sexist tropes. Women are targeted on social networking systems (SNSs) for their gender and routinely face brutal gender-based cyberviolence that is often a life-threatening and marginalising form of violence. Diamesic creativeness has the ability and strength to produce and circulate new beliefs regarding the construction and interpretation of the roles of men and women and their social relationships. Thus, linguistic variation enacted across SNSs may serve to promulgate negative and sexist discourses spawned by rapid diamesic change that subtly perpetuates sexist stereotypes. For despite the continuous and unceasing struggle that women have waged over the last two centuries to claim their rights, their own spaces and bodies, misogynistic hate is still widespread: diamesic creativeness is ultimately responsible for the linguistic fabrication of digital misogynist discourses, a severe form of verbal violence against women.



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Against this backdrop, this paper will review a series of linguistic tools adopted and implemented by women in linguistics to challenge the *Manthropocene*<sup>1</sup>. Discursive devices have been crafted in the literature to help female politicians or, more generally, women in power, to forgo their longstanding marginalised position and become the new protagonists of change. Such female voices are the ones that will be reported and woven together in this paper with the objective of providing linguistic guidance for the interpretation of abusive and sexist discourses in diamesic variation. Moreover, since “feminist theorists are aware of the need to develop ideas and analysis that encompass a larger number of experiences” (hooks 1984: xvi), a critical approach to online misogyny will necessarily help triangulate and intersect core concepts in digital media studies in order to facilitate a more lucid reading which “will emerge from individuals who have knowledge of both margin and center” (ibidem).

In order to illustrate the way language change truly reflects the complexity of life, the *Cambridge Dictionary* recently expanded the meaning of the lemmas *woman* and *man*. A few months ago during an interview, the leader of the Labour Party, Sir Keir Starmer, appeared to have difficulty providing a definition for the term ‘woman’; Sir Starmer showed considerable embarrassment, evidently fearing that he might express some form of discrimination against trans women. Fortunately, the well-known *Cambridge Dictionary* lent the leader of the Labour party a hand by offering him some lexicographic aid. The Dictionary has, indeed, just updated its entries for ‘woman’

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<sup>1</sup> Do we really need another term to describe toxic and hegemonic masculinity? Of course, we do not. The term *Manthropocene* is exclusively coined here not to add yet another fashionable category to the noxious or injurious manifestations of masculinity we are already familiar with, but simply to refer to that indefinite, timeless period in the history of humankind that saw hegemonic masculinity as solely responsible for our contemporary crisis. *Manthropocene* is thus not a term for removing agency from the responsibilities ascribed to man; it is rather a device in which history, culture and language intertwine in the creation of toxic masculinity to be understood as a prison. It is a life constraint and does not address women exclusively, but rather encompasses several representations of humanity, including other representations of masculinity, which resist patriarchal abuses.



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defining the lemma as a noun referring to “an adult who lives and identifies as female though they may have been said to have a different sex at birth”. Though problematic in some of its linguistic aspects,<sup>2</sup> throughout this paper, I will use this novel and more inclusive definition of the term ‘woman’ since it is an interesting linguistic attempt to generate further inclusivity in society. The linguistic practice of semantic re-signification, not exactly a taken-for-granted activity, seems to incessantly invite us all to rethink and reform the many patriarchal social, cultural, political and economic discourses that have always hindered the well-being, ambitions and self-determination of women and, to some extent, of some men or other gender non-conforming individuals. In this complex and oppressive conundrum, language change seems to play a crucial role in constructing discourses and setting up conceptions, prejudices, and stereotypes that, throughout history, have held back the rise of women in politics.

## 2. Of the *Manthropocene* and other *his-stories*

With the purposefully coined term *Manthropocene*, I mean to primarily address the indefinite era of hegemonic male power throughout which man stands as the protagonist of a long and still ongoing period of impoverishment and destruction of resources. As the sole perpetrator of social and gender inequity, the man also stands responsible for climate crises, biodiversity losses and mounting human waste. The *Manthropocene* upholds the dangerous principle that resurfaces and strengthens the

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<sup>2</sup> While the definition provided by the Cambridge Dictionary represents a step towards the recognition of trans women, it still seems to show some linguistic problems from an inclusive perspective. This is particularly the case with the part of the definition where the lexicographers state “though they may have been said to have a different sex at birth”. The agency of the subject is here challenged by the official performative act of proclaiming someone as male or female, still underlining the institutional power attributed to the *Manthropocene*.



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asymmetrical superiority of men due to the institutionalisation of sex-role differences. This heinous practice has led to the crafting of misogynistic hate across numerous segments worldwide: a vitriolic form of hate that arises and spreads with language, words, phrases and discourses which, particularly in a diamesic perspective, lead to discrimination, violence and even death. The *Manthropocene* is the place where sexism and violence against women are rationalised and accepted, where women are constantly subjected to inappropriate behaviour seen as the legitimate right of men. Gender inequalities in the *Manthropocene* stem from multiple and intersecting factors, all of which must be tackled simultaneously to fight a partial, inexact and entirely male-centred representation of women. Misogynist hate enacted by the *Manthropocene* creeps through intersectional spaces, as Mary Bucholtz (1999, 2002, 2011) would put it, where previously invisible hegemonic categories, such as whiteness, class and heteronormativity, amongst others, converge and intersect with toxic and hegemonic Manthropocenic traits.

Misogynist hate appears to reinforce a suffocating power relationship of a patriarchal type, one which has served to emphasise, primarily through language, the overbearing and dominant role of the *Manthropocene*. Since violent crimes against women are also built upon and promulgated by linguistic creativity in the form of locker room banter, rape jokes, 'give us a smile', catcalling, and even mother-in-law jokes, this paper calls for intense linguistic research on the language of the *Manthropocene* supported by further investigation from a comparative perspective in the social sciences. Indeed, the analysis of language change on SNSs could significantly contribute to expanding current knowledge about the intriguing success of misogynist hate which needs to be placed on the same level as other hate crimes such as racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism.



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The current emergence of a common transnational policy aiming to promote inclusive language and the recognition of misogynist hate as a crime seems to be slowly subsiding due to the fact that such a debate tends to be marginalised within national boundaries. In the UK, for instance, the government has recently announced that all police forces across the country are soon to record crimes specifically motivated by sex or gender, thus marking misogyny as a hate crime<sup>3</sup>. In this respect, the EU intends to amend one of its founding texts to fight violence against women<sup>4</sup> more forcefully by criminalising rape, female genital mutilation, cyber violence, non-consensual sharing of intimate images on the internet, cyber stalking, cyber harassment, and cyber incitement to violence or hatred. Yet, if we look at the Italian situation, where criminal law only punishes crimes and hate speech based on nationality, ethnicity or religion (the so-called Mancino Bill), other discriminatory grounds related to sexual orientation, gender identity and disabilities are not fully disciplined. Even if some unfortunate attempts to integrate the Mancino Bill have recently failed to be granted recognition by the Italian government<sup>5</sup>, the concept of 'hate crime' cannot be ignored any longer. To this end, on January 1, 2021, an update to the guidelines regulating the duties of journalists came into force with the aim of encouraging at least a non-sexist use of the Italian language in newspaper articles<sup>6</sup>. The new guidelines strongly emphasise respect for gender differences, especially in

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<sup>3</sup> The announcement regarding this initiative was reported in *The Guardian* and can be found online at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/mar/17/pmq-sarah-everard-killing-must-be-a-turning-point-says-starmer> (last accessed: January 5, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is working in this direction, providing research, data, and good practices in order to make gender equality a reality in the EU and beyond. More information on the EIGE initiatives can be found online at <https://eige.europa.eu/> (last accessed: January 5, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> See for instance the disgraceful handling of the Zan law.

<sup>6</sup> The document is available online at [https://www.odg.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/TESTO-UNICO-DEI-DOVERI-DEL-GIORNALISTA\\_1%C2%B0-gennaio-2021.pdf](https://www.odg.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/TESTO-UNICO-DEI-DOVERI-DEL-GIORNALISTA_1%C2%B0-gennaio-2021.pdf) (last accessed: January 5, 2023).





those cases of misogyny that often characterise the numerous *Manthropocene* narratives of violence, abuse, discrimination and femicide. Nevertheless, while reading the Italian press, we may still happen across misogynistic headlines such as those reported by Simona Rossitto in the daily newspaper of the Italian economy *Sole 24 Ore*. In her article craftily entitled “Titoli a effetto e racconti di parte: le ferite dei media alle donne vittime di violenza”<sup>7</sup>, the journalist reports the following sexist headline titles:

1. *È stato colto da un raptus senza fine dopo l’ennesimo litigio*  
(trans.: He was seized by an endless rapture after yet another quarrel)
2. *Il dramma di un padre separato*  
(trans.: The drama of a separated father)
3. *Lui lavorava, lei stava dalla mattina alla sera al telefonino*  
(trans.: He went out to work; she spent her days on the phone)
4. *L’ho uccisa per gelosia*  
(trans.: I killed her out of jealousy)

Language is clearly not innocent here; it creates spaces of signification in which, through simple discursive expedients, the victim becomes the perpetrator. The language of the *Manthropocene*, in fact, includes innumerable forms of discrimination and bias aiming to make the female subject marginal or even invisible so as to mark the prevaricating role of men in every social, cultural, economic and occupational sphere. Moreover, as the media coverage of crimes against women has increased along with the crime rate, the coverage of violence against women tends to be unnecessarily realistic and often indulges in victim blaming. News reports focus more on the victims’ activities (e.g., “she was on the phone”) than on the male criminal, thereby reinforcing

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<sup>7</sup> Trans.: “Tabloid-like headlines and biased narratives: how the media wounds women who are victims of violence”. The article is available online at [https://alleyoop.ilsole24ore.com/2021/03/03/titoli-effetto-racconti-parte-le-ferite-dei-media-alle-donne-vittime-violenza/?uuid=106\\_ljABTDyT](https://alleyoop.ilsole24ore.com/2021/03/03/titoli-effetto-racconti-parte-le-ferite-dei-media-alle-donne-vittime-violenza/?uuid=106_ljABTDyT) (last accessed: January 5, 2023).



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common biases and stereotypes against women. It has posited that language shapes thought, a consequent assumption would be to think that sexist language and linguistic stereotypes mould a sexist mind and worldview, and ultimately result in sexist behaviour. This is because language not only reflects but also reinforces cultural beliefs and social norms. Therefore, sexist language can perpetuate and reinforce sexist attitudes and behaviours. For example, the use of derogatory terms to describe women, such as 'bitch' or 'slut', will reinforce negative stereotypes about women and contribute to the devaluation and objectification of women. Similarly, the use of gendered language that reinforces traditional gender roles, such as 'man up' or 'be a real man', can contribute to the idea that men are supposed to be tough and unemotional, while women are supposed to be nurturing and submissive.

However, although *Manthropocene*-made biases are not always fully intentional, an ability to recognise them can empower news readers to filter misogynist discourses out of their contexts while thwarting a negative language change. Word connotations alone, for instance, may influence readers' interpretation of events and issues and lead them towards stereotyping practices (e.g., "he was seized by an endless rapture"). Such negative influence is often found in the coverage of political issues with the aim to shape the audience's initial perceptions, which may in turn influence political decisions (Hamborg *et al.*, 2018) and, as a result, halt the equality process.

### 3. Sexist language: from linguistic sexism to misogynist hate speech

Linguistic sexism was a concept that originated in the US in the 1960s and 1970s and then spread into feminist knowledge and theory around the world. Feminist scholars and linguists such as Robin Lakoff (1975) and, later, Deborah Tannen (1990) began to study language use and gender, focusing on how linguistic patterns and structures



reflected and reinforced gender-based power relations. They identified a range of linguistic practices that contributed to the marginalisation of women, such as the use of gendered pronouns, the association of certain words with gendered traits and behaviours, and the use of sexist language and slurs. The concept of linguistic sexism quickly spread beyond the United States and became a key focus of feminist knowledge and theory around the world. Feminist linguistics and language studies have since developed as a field of study aiming to understand and challenge gender-based discrimination in language use. Today, the study of linguistic sexism continues to be an important area of research and activism for feminists and other advocates of gender equality, as language remains a powerful tool for the perpetuating or challenging of gender-based inequalities.

One of the key tropes in linguistic sexism was the so-called *Deficit Model*, proposed by the linguist Robin Lakoff in *Language and Woman's Place* in 1975 (see also Lakoff 1973). Lakoff asserted that female subordination and the apparent differences between men and women could be revealed either in the way women speak, or rather how they are taught to speak, or in the way men talk *about* and *to* women; the author's contribution is still valuable today, although it has been considered somewhat inaccurate and questionable due to the fact that some of Lakoff's observations based on prejudices appear to target Lakoff herself as a victim.<sup>8</sup>

In 1990's *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, Deborah Tannen explored the differences in communication styles between men and women

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<sup>8</sup> In the Introduction to her book, Lakoff states the following: "[t]he data on which I am basing my claims have been gathered mainly by introspection [...]. [It] is the educated, white, middle-class group that the writer of this book identifies with less worthy of study than any other?" (Lakoff 1972: 40). The author seems to forget that intuition, if left unchecked, might well reproduce specific biases linked to the worldviews of the individual. Corpus-based analyses have allowed for a better understanding of the language of men and women, thus keeping given preconceptions at bay. An interesting example of this is the paper by Brezina and Meyerhoff (2014).



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and how these differences can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. She also discusses the ways in which language can reflect and reinforce gender roles and stereotypes in social situations. For example, women may be expected to use language that is more tentative or deferential in order to avoid appearing too aggressive or confrontational, while men may be expected to use language that is more assertive and direct. Tannen's work on linguistic sexism underscores the importance of paying attention to the ways in which sexist language can perpetuate gender stereotypes and inequalities.

One of the most interesting but least known definitions of linguistic sexism was provided by the American sociolinguist Tamara Valentine (2004: 142) who in her *Language and Prejudice* clearly states that “[s]exism relates to the use of words that arbitrarily assign roles or characteristics to people on the basis of sex or gender”. Valentine's definition emphasises the arbitrary nature of such assignments, suggesting that they are not based on any inherent differences between men and women, but rather on social and cultural norms and expectations. This definition also highlights the ways in which linguistic sexism can perpetuate gender inequalities by reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting opportunities for individuals based on their sex or gender. Overall, Valentine's definition offers a useful framework for understanding the ways in which language can be used to perpetuate sexism and gender inequalities, and for developing strategies to promote more inclusive and equitable language use.

Language determines who we are, what we can do or say, what represents us or not, depending on the male/female label society assigns us, consequently linguistic variation on SNSs may help boost reform and change. Hellinger and Bußmann (2001:19) maintain that linguistic reform is not just a matter of changing certain terms in favour of 'gender-fair terminology', the real way to bring about any kind of reform should be a revolution in the relationship between sexes:



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Gender-related language reform is a reaction to changes in the relationships between women and men, which have caused overt conflicts on the level of language comprehension and production. Reformed usage symbolises the dissonance between traditional prescriptions such as the use of masculine/male generics and innovative alternatives. In most cases it explicitly articulates its political foundation by emphasising that equal treatment of women and men must also be realised on the level of communication.

Thus, although the use of non-sexist language may be considered the true signal of a reforming and changing behaviour, it might seem overly ambitious and feminist campaigners have been accused of trying to force individuals to change their language use by openly questioning individual freedom of speech. A useful clarification to this slippery concept comes from Italian sociolinguist Vera Gheno (Sulis and Gheno 2022) who aptly defines ‘linguistic sexism’ as:

[...] the linguistic manifestation of the mentality, social behaviours, cultural judgements, and prejudices tinged with, or vitiated by, sexism. Languages cannot be considered intrinsically sexist, although they tend to reflect the androcentric cultures that they stemmed from. What can be sexist is the use we make of a language: sexism does not lie in linguistic structures and mechanisms, but in our choices as speakers. Italian, like other languages, contains all the linguistic tools necessary for a non-sexist use, at least while sticking to the binary view of gender; and where there are no such solutions, it is possible that over time they will be found. After all, the languages we speak vary according to our needs as speakers.

Linguistic sexism, seen as a way of stereotyping women based on the binary, asymmetrical sexual divide, has often been analysed in relation to another important discursive construct, which is prejudice (see among others: Goddard and Patterson, 2000; Coates, 2004). Prejudice underlies the choices we make when we speak, discuss, and comment. An inherent resource of prejudiced language is the ability to ignore or exclude, but also to trivialise with the aim of subjugating the Other.



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Subordination and trivialisation are two key concepts for the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). These notions reinforce the subordination of women when using misogynistic discourses. Trivialisation, in particular, refers to the way in which a specific use of language makes certain concepts invisible, mainly because they are deemed to be unimportant, and their meanings are trivialised; this can be taken as an emblematic instantiation of what happens when language stumbles upon women.

When analysing gender asymmetry from a discursive semiotic perspective, one of the most significant issues remains the low representation of powerful women in the media. The visibility offered to women is, in fact, limited: women in politics, for instance, must deal with a communication system in which male subjects are always privileged and granted centre stage, women are rarely given the room they need to make themselves known, to speak, to share ideas. The effects of exclusion and restrictions on individual initiatives emerging from sexist language are significantly negative for the development of well-being.

Lakoff also reminds us that women are confronted with the old banal belief that men are more comfortable with power than women, and that it is right and natural for men to hold power while it would be odd if power were entrusted to women, since politics remains an activity that the *Manthropocene* characterises as unfeminine and, therefore, dangerous for women. The idea that men were not supposed to cry or express sadness and women were not allowed to express anger has shaped the notion that the expression of grief is an expression of powerlessness, whereas that of anger is one of power. This intensifies male power and female powerlessness, passing on this view even (or especially) into an environment such as the academic or the political one. If this mechanism allows gender stereotypes to keep women out of public and political life, the media appear to openly reserve more space for narratives about the private and domestic sphere of the women in power.



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In *Language and Sexism* (2008), sociolinguist Sarah Mills examines the ways in which language is used to perpetuate sexism and gender inequality in society. She analyses the role of language in reinforcing gender roles and stereotypes, and how it can limit women's opportunities and experiences. Mills also discusses the ways in which language can be used to challenge sexism and promote gender equality. Overall, *Language and Sexism* offers a critical analysis of the relationship between language and gender and provides insights into how language can be used to create a more inclusive and equitable society. Mills states that female political characters are most often depicted via their relationship with others, especially as mothers, daughters, or wives. Powerful women are often reduced to their private role by the media; they are nameless, and they are not narrated for their abilities or positions, they are characters that can only be identified through their relationships with others.

One of the recurring interpersonal meta-functional ploys in the media representation of women in politics is built around the figure of the neglected, resigned husband; other relations are implemented around specific places such as the kitchen – a place where women are often stereotypically consigned – as observed by Esposito and Zollo (2021) when analysing 35,000 sexist tweets addressing the MP Jess Phillips:

Send her back to kitchen to make sandwiches for her long-suffering husband ;)

Miss you have the right to get in the kitchen and cook me some dinner and after that you can drive your ass down to the hospital and have that baby<sup>9</sup>

Sarah Mills (2008) points out that women tend to be described for their appearance in the media, while the description of men revolves more around their personalities. The increased focus on the personal sphere emphasises the non-political aspects of women

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<sup>9</sup> The examples provided here are taken from Esposito and Zollo (2021: 62).



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in politics, which could clearly influence how voters evaluate them as political actors. Mills states that linguistic sexism is part of ‘hate speech’ since sexist language is not “an individual expression” [but] “a means for a dominant group to coalesce as a group” [against the minority]. Therefore, linguistic sexism and violence against women should be treated by the legal system in the same way as other equally brutal crimes.

#### **4. Semiotic violence against women**

The discursive macro category called “violence against women in politics”, identified by political scientist Mona Lena Krook (2019), includes four types of violence addressing women in politics: physical, sexual, psychological violence (already enumerated in 1993 in the UN *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*), and economic violence (mentioned in the 2011 Council of Europe Convention on *Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*). Data from around the world suggest that these four types of violence do not exhaust the spectrum of abusive acts perpetrated against women in the public sphere and even more so in the political sphere. Krook (2020: 187), at this point, feels the need to theorise a fifth type of violence against women: ‘semiotic violence’.

Semiotic violence is recognisable as a form of oppression against women perpetrated through the deployment of several communication resources to harm, discipline and subjugate women to male power. A phenomenon firmly rooted in structural, cultural, and symbolic violence against women, Krook (2019; 2020; 2022) argues that ‘semiotic violence’ is not only a component of a broader range of violent actions, but it typifies its most pervasive, though invisible and underestimated practice. She also contends that ‘semiotic violence’ is deeply rooted in structural,





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cultural, and symbolic violence against women, and is a pervasive and underestimated practice which, through the use of gendered imagery and symbols that reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations, limits women's opportunities and experiences while contributing to a culture that devalues women. In the political sphere, semiotic violence can be used as a tool to deny women's full and equal right to participate in politics, undermining both democracy and gender equality. For example, semiotic violence can take the form of sexist language and stereotypes that undermine women's credibility and authority, or the use of gendered imagery and symbols that reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations. To combat 'semiotic violence', Krook points to a need for increased awareness and education about the ways in which language and symbols can be used to perpetuate gender inequality, as well as the need for concrete measures such as policies and laws that protect women's rights and promote gender equality in politics and society. In the political sphere, semiotic violence serves as a tool to deny women's full and equal right to participate in politics, undermining both democracy and gender equality. The political scientist hypothesises two types of semiotic violence against women: that which renders women in politics invisible, struggling to eradicate the female presence in the public sphere symbolically; and, that which renders women incapable by "emphasising 'role incongruity' between being a woman and being a leader" (Krook 2020, 187). The concept was further developed by Eleonora Esposito (2022: 2) who suitably classifies two other forms of digital visual misogyny: "image manipulation" and "false identity attribution". These discursive ploys are characterized by the fabrication and distribution of "sexually graphic, digitally altered or misattributed images" of women in politics.



#### 4.1 The Finnish 'party gate': A case study of semiotic violence

This section will offer different ways of instantiating the concept of digital semiotic violence against women in politics by briefly analysing a recent case of misogyny involving the first female Prime Minister of Finland, one of the most inclusive European countries. Prime Minister Sanna Mirella Marin, at the age of 34, has become a role model for the many young European women who would like to enter the world of politics and an example of how young women are indispensable in today's political landscape. However, despite her prominent role, Marin too has had to and continues to struggle against prejudices, stereotypes, and misogynist views typical of the *Manthropocene* which manifests itself through the numerous criticisms and judgments reserved for the Prime Minister's harmless behaviour and attitudes. Such a vitriolic practices plainly demonstrate that women in politics have never stopped experiencing the *Manthropocene* in all its many forms.

The "party gate" case under scrutiny here concerns a recent video which features the Finnish Prime Minister participating in a private party and having fun with her friends and other guests. The media around the world have devoted much space to this affair; in particular, the examination of the party gate as a case study of semiotic violence involves the British press and a series of articles that appeared in the online version of *The Daily Mail*, called *MailOnline*, the second largest circulated daily newspaper in Great Britain in its digital version. The first article examined, dated August 19, 2022, reports the following headline<sup>10</sup>:

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<sup>10</sup> The article is available online at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11127073/New-Sanna-Marin-video-leaks-showing-married-Finnish-PM-dancing-mystery-man.html> (last accessed: January 5, 2023).



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1. Finland's Sanna Marin fights for her right to party: Married leader, 36, says 'nothing inappropriate' happens in leaked video of her dancing intimately with pop star at 4am but submits to a drug test as she defends wild night out

The article tells the well-publicised story imbued with misogynistic discourses, making good use of apparently inoffensive linguistic tools which upon closer examination, can be seen to stand as vitriolic instruments for the propagation of 'semiotic violence'. According to the *MailOnline*, Sanna Marin "fights for her right to party". The use of the war metaphor introduced by the verb *to fight* in the newspaper headline is an interesting and powerful semiotic tool which leads the readers to believe that throwing or going to a party is not an acceptable condition for a female politician who should perhaps be fighting for civil rights rather than for her private right to enjoy herself; it follows that a woman must 'fight' in order to obtain what is nothing more than personal freedom, a need common to all individuals regardless of their roles or gender. The *MailOnline* points out that Marin is a 'married leader'. As in any misogynistic narrative, Marin's marital status cannot remain unmentioned. Stressing that Sanna Marin is married in a situation where she is photographed and filmed having fun and dancing with other people semiotically underlines the 'immoral' character of the action. Marin 'said' that nothing inappropriate had happened, but her word stands against that of others (including the reader's). By reporting Marin's exact words in inverted commas, one is left to assume that there is also the possibility that something inappropriate did in fact happen; insinuating this doubt might lead the reader to deem Marin a liar. In this cunningly crafted title, semiotic violence is also construed via adverbs, callous linguistic tools that produce a distorted and sexist narrative; note, for instance, the use of 'intimately'. Marin danced 'intimately' until four in the morning with a man who was not her husband. Her right to party, however, entails consequences and the *MailOnline* points this out in no uncertain terms,



highlighting the fact that, although Marin also had to undergo a drug test, she continues to defend her 'wild night' out.

Another important reference within the interpersonal meta-function structure concerns the leader's relationship with other social actors not involved in this specific event: Sanna Marin is, in fact, also the mother of a girl.

5. Married mother-of-one said her only regret is that videos she thought were private had leaked to the public
6. The mother-of-one was first elected to the City Council of Tampere in 2012
7. When she is not working or out with friends, Marin has motherly duties to attend to with her daughter Emma

The article constantly emphasises Sanna Marin's role as a mother, reiterating not only that the Finnish leader has a daughter, but also that when she forgoes private leisure, her 'duties' as a mother await her. This is certainly one of the aspects that the media repeat the most in their narratives steeped in hatred and semiotic violence. The journalist also informs us about Marin's ability to reconcile her rise to success with her pregnancy and how she made this aspect of her life public:

8. During her rise to success in the political field she charted her pregnancy journey on her Instagram page, sharing selfies of her baby bump and even a candid breastfeeding shot.

The narrative about the role of a mother is inevitably followed by a detailed description of the first minister's physical appearance. Further on, we read:

9. The mother-of-one wore a white dress with pink embroidery in an Aztec-style as she waved rainbow flags and walked through the streets of Helsinki.



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If we read this sentence out of its context, we would not be able to understand who is being talked about since Marin is not referred to by her full name, but she is simply ‘the-mother-of-one’. Moreover, the reference to the rainbow flag is also interesting as it refers to the semiotics of dissolution related to being close to certain political matters (i.e., the LGBTIQ+ rainbow flag). Finally, the phrase ‘through the streets of Helsinki’ also becomes a peculiar element in the hate narrative: a public space becomes an open manifestation of debauchery.

The title of the second article reads<sup>11</sup>:

10. EXCLUSIVE: Finland’s party-loving PM Sanna Marin is forced to apologise after two female pals were pictured TOPLESS and kissing each other in her official residence.

Again, the use of verbs and adjectives is emblematic. The term ‘party-loving’ linked to the name and role of the Prime Minister is intended to deprecate Marin’s professionalism and to emphasise her libertine and ‘over-the-top’ personality. Sanna Marin is also ‘forced to apologise’: she must apologise for what she has done, for having enjoyed herself; it is her moral obligation to apologise for photos and videos that have been published by others without her consent. This is followed by a description of the behaviour of Marin’s friends who were ‘topless’ – written in capitals, needless to say, to visually attract the readers’ attention –this detail relegates women to an erotic and sexual sphere that may attract a discrete male readership while upsetting that audience of bigoted readers who, most likely, will then turn to fabricating macho discourses on social media.

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<sup>11</sup> The article is available online at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11138083/Finnish-PM-forced-apologise-female-pals-seen-TOPLESS-kissing-official-residence.html> (last accessed: January 5, 2023).



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This article re-brands the role of mother, the significance of marital status, provides a detailed description of Sanna Marin's physical appearance, and constantly emphasises the amoral character of her act. The emphasis operates through the use of clickbait adjectives such as 'raunchy video', 'raunchy picture' and again 'cheeky image'. But also, through the addition of elements that are totally superfluous to the narrative and only serve to bring us back to the idea of an unchaste context full of sexual innuendo. An example of this is the description of the drawing room that "features a collection of erotic portraits of naked women on the walls". The article goes on to remind us of the relationship between her gender and professional roles and her questionable actions incompatible with her duties as mother, wife and politician by stating that "Ms Marin was said to have danced with three different men and then sat in the laps of two male companions" or that "she still goes clubbing".

What is being called into question throughout the article are precisely the abilities, intelligence and skills of the Prime Minister herself. Such misogynistic discourse is a clear example of semiotic violence in support of the stereotype that precludes women from significant political positions.

Women in power are perceived as a threat, a sort of incomprehensible danger. The media portrays women politicians as enigmatic, unpredictable, and often brash. Through a cleverly constructed apparatus of violence, the *MailOnline* has been able to create a narrative of amoral, libertine, lying, untrustworthy women and politicians who do not submit to the ideal of womanhood that the *Manthropocene* has progressively forged over time by means of diamesic creativity.



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## Conclusions

This paper, using critical perspectives exclusively from feminist scholars, has explored the role of the *Manthropocene* in perpetuating and reinforcing semiotic violence against women in politics. The study, by presenting a literary review of sexist language, has shown that semiotic gender-based violence can be used as a tool of power and domination, with women in politics often being subjected to violence by means of gendered insults, slurs, negative symbols and other forms of derogatory communication. This practice serves to devalue the contributions of female politicians, to undermine their authority, and to perpetuate gender-based discrimination and violence as has been illustrated in the case of the Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin.

Overall, this study has highlighted the important role that language plays in shaping the experiences of women in politics, both in terms of perpetuating violence and in offering opportunities for resistance and empowerment. By recognising the power of language and the ways in which it can be used to challenge and transform gendered power structures, one can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable political environments for women. This requires a continued commitment to challenging gender-based violence in all its forms, and to promoting the use of language as a tool for positive social change. Addressing and eradicating gender-based violence requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the underlying societal attitudes, cultural norms, and power dynamics that propagate violence. It requires education, awareness-raising, policy and legal reforms, and active efforts to promote gender equality and empower women in all aspects of society. However, since despite the progress made in the fight for gender equality, misogyny and discrimination against women continue to be pervasive in many societies, it is the role of digital platforms together with educational institutions to provide a new avenue for the prevention against the proliferation of misogynistic discourses and hate speech. This



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practice requires a collective effort by all members of society to challenge and reject sexist attitudes and behaviours, including the more invisible ones perpetrated through the diamesic creativeness of the *Manthropocene* across digital platforms. As bell hooks' initial quote reminds us, we must work to break down the barriers that divide us and create a more equitable and just society for all.

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## **Changing Maps: Cyberspace, Global Culture and the Interconnected Wor(1)ds of Geoff Ryman's 253**

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### **Abstract**

The article focuses on the increasingly large and interconnected expanse of cyberspace, which is denoted by such a plurality of sites of cultural exchange and sharing between individuals and communities that it eludes mapping. Electronic literature, and in particular hypertext, with its malleability, interactivity, connectedness, indeterminacy, erosion of boundaries between nations, human and machine, public and private, seems best suited to making sense of our technologically textured and globalised reality. In this light, Geoff Ryman's 253 is analysed as an experimental example of hypertextual and global narration; a locus where the evolving relationships between information technologies and social spaces, places and practices are staged and tested.



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## 1. Introduction

*In an extreme view, the world can be seen as only  
connections, nothing else.*

Tim Berners Lee, *Weaving the web*, 2000

During the memorable Opening Ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics directed by Danny Boyle, a performance called “Frankie and June say... thanks Tim” featured the presence of Tim Berners-Lee, the computer scientist who is credited with the invention of the World Wide Web at the end of the Eighties. In the right centre of the Olympic stadium, the scene staged a family two-storey house, on whose walls, transformed for the occasion into giant screens, shards of high and low, local and global, musical, televisual and cinematic culture were projected. The scene ended with the house taking flight and revealing in its depths Berners-Lee seated at his computer and live-tweeting a message that reminded us that he donated his work to the world. In fact, in addition to appearing on Twitter, the message *This is for everyone* flashed around the stadium, with the letters made up of pixel paddles held by thousands of spectators crowding the stadium bleachers.

In the special features of the Ceremonies’ DVD, in the section dedicated to the filmic design of the scene, Boyle praised the interconnectedness and inclusiveness of the web as a formidable means of (trans)cultural transmission and integration. He did not actually say whether he had meant to portray the house as a tangible icon of the web, with its portals and *homepages*, yet the whole performance seemed to suggest it. The house was represented as more accessible and porous than a private, enclosed place: its screen-walls were definitely more fluid and shifting than bricks and mortar, its structure and perimeter less stable and confining. A number of people that moved in and around the house, frantically accessing and exiting its spaces, seemed to bodily replicate the virtual, real-time interactions in which they were involved in using their smartphones to consume, share and comment on the



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cultural data being broadcast on its walls. However, not only did the scene seemingly evoke the internet-based communication flows and the “actor-networks” formed by the blending of human and technical performances (cfr. Graham 1998, 177-180), it also represented the World Wide Web in the act of sharing culture globally, as the *This is for everyone* tweet reminded us.

Unsurprisingly, among the many wonders projected on its walls, the house did not display anything literary, or written *tout court*. Today’s media ecology is increasingly dominated by performance media; it is an environment in which literature must fight to preserve its relevance in the overall system of communication and expression; that is so say, not to succumb to the challenges of other languages that co-exist, and seek to prevail, in the digital environment<sup>1</sup>. However, even if one of the main instances of e-lit, the literary hypertext, has not received the attention it expected<sup>2</sup>, electronic artworks have long since left their place at the “margin” of literature (Aarseth 1997, 18), making it rather anachronistic to limit the field of the literary to the medium of the printed page. Therefore, Boyle’s choice to exclude even the more performative electronic writing from the screen-walls of the web-house may appear unjustified. The following pages aim to show the reasons why, conversely, electronic creations, and hypertext in particular, should nevertheless have been given a place in a performance dedicated to the globalizing practices of cyberculture. The work on which the following discussion will be focused, Geoff Ryman’s *253, or Tube Theatre: A Novel for the Internet about London Underground in Seven Cars and a Crash* (1996), will indeed

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<sup>1</sup> On this topic, with a particular emphasis on media ecology, see L. Esposito, “La letteratura si salverà dall’estinzione? Sulla sopravvivenza dei libri e delle storie in una prospettiva ecodistopica” (2022).

<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s, in the wake of seminal studies by Jay D. Bolter (1990) and George P. Landow (1992), people began to believe that hypertext would be the (only) future of literature because, with its multiplicity, mutability and fundamental openness, it seemed to fully reflect postmodern thought and sense of identity. Actually, since the 2000s, enthusiasm on the part of both authors and readers has waned significantly. This, of course, has not prevented e-lit from continuing in the most varied forms, from more traditional types of writing – e.g. in blog format – to multimodal texts – such as vlogs and hypermedia – or hybrids based on the languages of Web 2.0 and social networks, such as spoetry, twitter-literature, instanovels, e-mail novels, mobinovels, augmented novels, ARGs, etc.



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be analysed as an apt illustration of the incisive transformations and reconfigurations of spaces, relations and communities taking place both on the world map and in the digital environment. Thanks to its interactive links, the text is much more dynamic and kaleidoscopic than a traditional book; readers are called upon to navigate their way through a space that might be seen to epitomize the “multiplicity of worlds” (Nancy 2000, 185) in which we daily move and come into contact with others, both physically and virtually.

## **2. Ever-shifting configurations: cyberspace and global culture**

As is well known, Berners-Lee’s fortunate intuition gave birth to a distributed hypertext system motivated by the need to provide co-workers at CERN with a space for transmitting and sharing information on the computer network. After a short time, thanks to rapid technological development, that limited working environment would turn into the cybernetic space we know today: a boundless but interconnected universe of communication and cultural interaction, ideally depicted as a constellation by Barret Lyon in his 2003 *Opte Project* (Museum of Modern Art, New York), with its millions of IP addresses and connection nodes. According to one of the most enthusiastic, if not entirely utopian, supporters of the web, the French philosopher Pierre Lévy, a new form and distribution of knowledge has been allowed by the emergence of cyberculture, considered as a set of techniques, habits, ways of thinking and values that develop in connection with the growth of cyberspace. As Lévy wrote at the beginning of the millennium, “cyberspace (also referred to as the “network”) is the new communication environment that is emerging from the global interconnection of computers. The term refers not only to the physical infrastructure of digital communication, but also to the oceanic universe of information it contains and to the human beings who navigate and feed it” (Lévy 1997, 17; my translation).



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The emphasis on the interconnectedness of cyberspace extends as much to the flows and waves of networked information as to the users who surf them from all over the world<sup>3</sup>. However, from this conception emerges a new form of universality, different from the one inaugurated by the system of writing. Print culture, as Lévy reminds us, is based on the separation of receivers and senders and, thus, on the effort to compose messages capable of circulating everywhere independently of their conditions of production; it responds to the desire to embrace a totality through the issuance of globally comprehensible and translatable meanings, containing in themselves, as far as possible, their “reason” or “key to interpretation” (Lévy 1996, 6). Cyberspace, on the contrary, insofar as “the interconnection and real-time dynamism of online memories” make users “share the same context again”, recovers the conditions of oral cultures – “albeit on a different level and orbit” – allowing “universality without totality” (6):

Through computers and networks, the most diverse people can get in touch, hold hands all around the world. Rather than being built on the identity of meaning, the new universal is experienced through immersion. We are all in the same bath, in the same flood of communication. There is therefore no longer a question of semantic closure or totalisation. [...] We can now state [cyberspace’s] central paradox: the more universal (extended, interconnected, interactive), the less totalisable. Each additional connection adds more heterogeneity, new sources of information, new lines of flight, so that the overall meaning is less and less legible, more and more difficult to circumscribe, to close, to master. This universal gives access to an enjoyment of the global [...]. It makes us participate more intensely in living humanity, but without this being contradictory, on the contrary, with the multiplication of singularities and the rise of disorder. (7)

Cyberspace appears from this perspective as a new territory that eludes the orderly work of the map; one whose internal and external boundaries, centre and margins, are constantly being redefined and renegotiated by contacts and interactions that re-configure

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, in order to highlight the shared use of aquatic metaphors by most Internet scholars, that the word “cybernetics”, originally used in the 1940s to identify Wiener’s studies on the recognition of a similar functioning – via feedback – of communication and control in living beings and machines, takes up the Greek κυβερνητική (τέχνη), (kybernetes), whose former meaning was “helmsman, pilot of a ship”.



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meaning in ever-changing ways. Bringing to the fore the extensive use of spatial and territorial metaphors in the field – e.g. information superhighway, virtual communities, electronic neighbourhood, electronic frontiers, web surfers and travellers – Stephen Graham underlines the need to “help make tangible the enormously complex and arcane” technological systems and socio-cultural flows of cyberspace (Graham 1998, 166). Indeed, even though the web is only a part of the contemporary cultural landscape recently described by Jay D. Bolter as a “digital plenitude”, “in which there are many focal points but no single center” (Bolter 2019, 2), it is responsible for setting the conditions for the complexity and non-circumscribability of the overall system, which is a-hierarchical, disseminated, and constantly reshaped by the multicursal connections and exchanges between producers, consumers and texts that take place within it. Unlike the world of writing and printing, in which the book was itself the best evidence that our intellectual heritage could be understood as a comprehensible whole, the digital plenitude is far from showing itself as a coherent, ordered and organic whole or, as Lévy puts it, as a ‘totalising universe’. It is reasonable, therefore, that, beyond the field of possibilities that such an understanding of culture seems to open up, this lack of landmarks can also be perceived as disorienting. Bolter brings up the example of the giant Google, which “built its business on our need to trace threads of order through the plenitude” and has hitherto kept the design of its access page simple and functional in order to give us “the impression that we can gain control over the universe of digital information” (9). Yet, as Bolter firmly asserts, this is an illusion: “The more an individual can master these organizing tools, the larger her sphere of control, but she cannot hope to manage more than a tiny fraction of the ever-expanding web” (9).

Cyberspace, with its countless sites and gaps, unfolds to our perception as a labyrinthine network to be navigated and deciphered; a space where, as prefigured by Michel Foucault as early as 1967, all information is fragmented, distributed, dislocated,





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assembled spatially and relationally<sup>4</sup>. The World Wide Web, which is constantly subjected, in Berthold Schoene's words, to "disruption, dispersal, and ceaseless reconfiguration" (Schoene 2013, 10), appears indeed, just like the world itself in Jean-Luc Nancy's view, as something irreducibly plural: "[t]he unity of a world is not one; it is made of a diversity and even disparity and opposition. [...] [T]he world is a multiplicity of worlds, and its unity is the mutual sharing and exposition to all its worlds – within this world. The sharing of the world is the law of the world" (Nancy 2000, 185). Accordingly, as Graham points out, there is not one single, unified cyberspace; rather, there are multiple, heterogeneous networks", or "an enormously varied 'skein of networks' [...] straddling, linking and weaving through different spaces" (Graham 1998, 178).

Nevertheless, as Steve Mizrach suggests, "[t]here can be (and perhaps must be) a geography of cyberspace"; one which is based not on geometry but on relations and human experience:

It may not be meaningful to 'map' virtual worlds in terms of Cartesian coordinates or latitude and longitude. Still, virtual worlds can contain a multitude of places, each of which are perceived and experienced differently, and thus there must be ways in which we can 'map' cyberspace, however arbitrarily. To do the cultural geography of cyberspace, we must accept the fact that it is not a space that can be measured by simple linear units. Movement from place to place in cyberspace can only be described in terms of *difference of experience*. (Mizrach 1997)

Paradoxically, while cyberspace is basically quantitative, made of numbers (binary bits and digits), people experience it qualitatively, even immersively, just like reality; they have

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault's interest in spatial relations, in the 'continuity' or 'contiguity' between places, was a long way ahead of topological discourses that would fit perfectly the cyberworld. As he wrote in his essay on heterotopias (1984 [1967]), the modern epoch was the epoch of simultaneity, of juxtaposition, of the near and the far, of the side by side, and of the dispersed. Whereas the space that had preceded the early-scientific age had been that of 'localisation', governed by strict relations of hierarchy or opposition between places, the one that had followed the discovery of the infinite universe of Bruno and Galileo had become that of 'extension'. In the twentieth century 'dislocation' had broken in, defined by the relations of proximity between points, and by questions of storage, circulation and classification of information and human elements.



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customised ways of reading cyberspace or navigating its landscapes, “but not in such a solipsistic way as to avoid having contact and interaction with other people” (Mizrach 1997). Indeed, in Mizrach’s opinion, cyberspace can even provide a testing ground for rethinking old assumptions about how social-cultural relations emerge in space and place<sup>5</sup>. To analyse and explain “the new kinds of identities and interactions that emerge in such a new, unforeseen place” may prove even more crucial than “deciding how to do the cartography of a place that is nowhere and everywhere at the same time” (Mizrach 1997).

### 3. Connecting words and places on the (Tube) map of 253

Digital literature can itself be understood, in its various forms, as a practiced and shifting space that, using Michel de Certeau’s words (1984, 117), possesses “none of the univocity or the stability” of a circumscribed location. Just like the environment in which it flourishes, it is characterised by multiplicity, movement, openness, interaction, continuous reference to external dimensions and transformation. With hyperfiction, in particular, the literary text ceases to be an object and becomes an activity carried out in a fluid “performance space” (Moulthrop 1995), which, thanks to hyperlinks, is traversable by the reader/performer – with “nontrivial effort” (Aarseth 1997, 1) – along multiple paths and directions. As an a-sequential trajectory, the text can easily be imagined as a moving labyrinth or rhizome, in which each point is connected to other points, other pages, other images. However, within such spaces, just as in those of the web, one can also easily lose orientation, control, the thread of the story. This explains why, besides innately offering an experience which is,

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<sup>5</sup> In “The End of Geography or the Explosion of Place? Conceptualizing Space, Place and Information Technology” (1998), Graham explores the main theoretical perspectives on the relations between IT technologies, cyberspace and the concepts of space and place. He advocates for a more fully relational view of the links between technology, time, space and sociality, that is, between the electronic space and the human territorial life. He also quotes Doreen Massey’s suggestion to define places as “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” rather than as “areas with boundaries around” (Massey in Graham 1998, 181).



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borrowing Foucault's words, "less that of a great path developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (46; my translation), most hypertexts are specifically focused on issues of location and direction and not infrequently provide geographical indications and classical or digital maps to contain potential anxiety<sup>6</sup>.

Ryman's *253 or Tube Theatre: A Novel for the Internet about London Underground in Seven Cars and a Crash* falls into this category. Created as a website in 1996, then published as a printed book under the title *253: The Print Remix* in 1998<sup>7</sup>, it tells of 253 people travelling on the London Underground between Embankment station and Elephant & Castle on January 11, 1995. Its visual and structural layout overlaps with the Way Finder that Henry Beck invented in 1933 to simplify overly detailed representations of the Tube journey through the city by omitting almost everything but the names of the stations. Ryman performs a similar operation by creating a neat and ordered space, which tries to contain the chaos and bewilderment that we usually associate to hypertexts (and hyperspace): the 'real' space of the Tube map - which, like London itself, is not a homogeneous entity but a cluster of separate spaces demarcated by coloured lines - is articulated with the 'virtual' map of the website; in the same way, the 'real' movement of passengers is articulated with the 'virtual' movement of web travellers. The homepage of the text is expressly meant to reassure us: "You are here! Trust me in this and we may proceed. [...] Simply click on the option of your

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<sup>6</sup> According to many scholars, not least under the influence of digital communication, a range of cultural domains, including the scientific, the sociological or the economic ones, use cartographic metaphors to respond to "that variegated need for orientation that seems to characterise contemporary society", always in search of "systems of [...] decoding the complexity of the world" (Papotti 2012, 77-78; my translation). Marina Guglielmi and Giulio Iacoli (2012: 14-16) point to the frequency with which it is now possible to find literary texts that either include "explicit maps" or otherwise emphatically display a distinct topographical quality by presenting themselves as spaces to be traversed and explored, just like hypertexts or networked novels. Among the latter, *The 21 Steps* by Charles Cummings is worth mentioning here. In it, the navigation skills of web explorers were enhanced with the latest geo-referenced navigation technologies (GPS), which made use of satellites and other digital localisation means to allow users not to get lost in the narrative. (Unfortunately, the text is no longer available on the Penguin Books website).

<sup>7</sup> It was possibly the first-ever Web-site-to-book deal.



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choice. Relax! It's so easy travelling with 253"<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, the layout has an evident mathematical and symmetrical structure: just like in the title, the story is about 253 people, "so that the illusion of an orderly universe can be maintained" (Ryman 1998, 2)<sup>9</sup>, and is composed of 7 macro-sections, each dedicated to one of the 7 carriages composing the train; each section has its own map, that shows where the 36 people travelling on the carriage are sitting, and gives in 3 different subsections – 'Outward appearances', 'Inside information' and 'What he/she is doing or thinking' – which portray each character in exactly 253 words. However, especially through the juxtaposition of the author's outward descriptions of passengers and the more unmediated presentation of what is going through their minds, Ryman dissipates the idea of a single observer/author and point of view, building in fact a fragmented structure based on the stitching together of multiple perspectives and pieces of stories<sup>10</sup>. Transversal micro-dramas involving more than one passenger – such as the quadrilateral formed by four women in four different carriages who are lusting after the same *Big Issue* seller, the American Sam Cruza, who is also present on the train – are also enabled by the links, which break "the illusion of an orderly universe" by giving the story a jigsaw puzzle-like shape.

So strongly focused on space, to the point of stating "in cyberspace, people become places" already on the first page, the work does not follow a chronological order except in the final section, where we are offered the alienating experience of the final crash. As Ryman said in an interview, "[u]sually the primary metaphor for fiction is temporal, the flow of time, although there is a spatial element. Here you're exploring the simultaneity of

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<sup>8</sup> The website <http://www.ryman-novel.com/> still exists, but, unfortunately, the original contents are no longer there.

<sup>9</sup> Since, as the author himself stated, the adaptation for the book fairly closely follows the contents of the hypertext, this quotation and some other following refer to the pages of the novel published in 1998.

<sup>10</sup> As Michael O'Brien says, "[t]he effect of this structure is through the omniscient narrator's negation, enabling the reader to enter the chronotope of the text, allowing them to move around the train, transferring their reading of the text from character to character, continually shifting their perspective on this particular train journey" (2010, 160).



something, mainly spatial” (Ryman in Grossman 1997). Therefore, the work does not construct an actual temporal plot, rather it deconstructs it, freeing the narrative from the linear and sequential constraints of before-after and cause-effect, thus emphasising the different organisation of the story afforded by the hypertextual *mise-en-texte* (cfr. Debeaux 2017). As the introductory notes reveal, “[n]othing happens in this novel” (Ryman 1998, 4); and also “the universe is not held together by cause and effect alone, but by mysterious patterns”, so that all the people involved in the story were included because they “reached and important *point in their lives*” (3; my emphasis). Indeed, as the author highlights, thanks to its spatializing dynamics, the novel “replaces curiosity about time with curiosity about space [...]. The question is not: what happens next? but *where* will we go next?” (Ryman in Grossman 1997; my emphasis).

#### **4. A network of communal and global practices**

The way turning points and destinations are discussed in this Internet novel strongly reminds how, in Chapter IX of his well-known work on *The Practices of Everyday Life* (1984, 115-130), Michel de Certeau described those ‘spatial stories’ that rely more on the ‘tour’ than on the ‘map’. If, according to the French scholar, the stories that follow the map model ignore the element of practice produced by movement and displacement, and thus build a rational and ordered space, the stories modelled on the tour have to do with motion: they tell both the story of someone experiencing a place and the way in which that place is perceived through the movement within it. In fact, all the passenger sections in 253 are purposely designed “to appeal to the Nosey Parker in all of us” (Ryman 1998, 4); to give us the illusion that we can get to know and share the travel experiences and thoughts of all the people on the train (in fact, to “share their London Transport Experience”, 3). Michael O’Brien (2010) focuses on the physical act of commuting depicted in the story and on the imaginative work triggered by both the spatial-temporal void represented by the



underground tunnels and the physical confinement of the commuters in the carriages. During the journey, what Henry Lefebvre (1984) calls “mental space” overlaps with “social space”: it is awoken and becomes apparent to the subjects involved as they feel compelled to escape into the novel they are carrying, to indulge into musings, or to eavesdrop, peep or imagine what the other people sitting next to or opposite them are doing or thinking. In some cases they also end up talking with or touching each other, for example when Ms Danni Jarret (passenger 27) notices that the woman sitting next to her, Miss Flora McCardie (passenger 28), is reading over her shoulder. Danni turns to look at her and, on impulse, pushes her nose like a button. When they both get off, Flora stops the girl and asks her why she did it, then “they begin to speak” (Ryman 1998, 43). People effectively enter into a form of topological relationship – of proximity or distance, openness or closure – with others and with the space they occupy and traverse<sup>11</sup>. Taking up Lefebvre’s words, O’Brien writes that the Underground “is indeed the locus of an unlimited multiplicity [and] unaccountable set of social spaces” that “interpenetrate” or “superimpose one another” (O’Brien 2010, 159); it is located at the intersection of the ‘mysterious patterns’ that constitute the wide array of the collective thoughts and social types that are put on display in 253’s carriages. Thus, what the Tube ostensibly does to Londoners is to make them more aware of one another: “the act of commuting becomes ritualized around memories and impulses connecting individuals to a society which lives its life through the Tube” (164).

If the Tube can be seen as an allegory of cyberspace, the fractured and interconnected micro-dramas of the passengers in it could also be seen as “a metaphor for the ways in which we function in our various communities” (Bolter 2001, 10). Since hyperlinks can be seen as “meeting places” or “crossing points” (Audet-Saint Gelais 2003, 74) capable of disjointing

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<sup>11</sup> In his article on ‘electronic literature as world literature’, Joseph Tabby observes how in digital fiction a topological approach – centred not on Euclidean geometry but on relations such as opening/closing, direction/orientation, distance/vicinity, or on gaps, immersion, dimension, etc. – gives way to a more flexible space of creation, in tune with the very dynamics of the network (2010, 42, 47).



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and uniting at the same time, and of opening perspectives by referencing subsequent information (Debeaux 2017, 4), electronic literature, as Jay D. Bolter postulated in his seminal work on *Writing Space* (1991), might be seen as more adept than the conventional novel at seizing who we are, or aspire to be, as communities in the digital era. Bolter has even identified the new global culture with a vast hypertext. The other way round, as Schoene points out, Ryman's hypertext can be seen as an example of contemporary global narration: "weaving us into one at the same time as setting us free, disclosing both our predilection for affiliation and our capacity to propagate endless dispersion. [...] [T]he new global narration sees the world open up in communal, yet never homogeneous, synchronicity" (Schoene 2013, 8). In fact, "the novel imagines not just the daily circulation of *Massenmenschen* that is contemporary London, but moreover the mass commotion that animates and agitates the world as a whole" (11). London itself represents the vast immensity of the world, and the Underground, which makes this immensity more navigable, transforms its space, in Tobias Döring's words, in "a network of relations without a centre, without clear limits as well as a vast arena for unforeseen, momentary and often singular encounters" (Döring in Schoene, 11).

Indeed, in Ryman's world, people of the most diverse ethnicities, nationalities, religions and social classes – black and white, Christian and Muslim, straight and gay, workers and professors, etc. – meet and interact with each other, mirroring global community and culture. Epitomising this blending, the first character that opens the novel is the driver Tahsin Celikbilekli, a Turkish political scientist with a British wife who teaches at SOAS (London's 'School of Oriental and African Studies') and is also writing a book. Unfortunately, by falling asleep, he will also be responsible for the train crash. Canadian writer Geoff Ryman himself is also included among the cosmopolitan passengers on the train. He is passenger number 96 in carriage number 3, and on the carriage's map his name is ironically accompanied by the words "maps and mistakes" (Ryman 1998, 107). In fact, he



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is described as standing to peer at the Tube map opposite his seat before accidentally sitting, without looking backwards, on top of a passenger, and thus triggering hilarity among those present. In reality, he is part of a company of 'amateur' actors performing the slapstick comedy *Mind the Gap* on the trains. As Ryman writes, "[p]aying customers follow the comedians from station to station as they perform", but this is the first time that "he has taken the lead idiot role" (137). To the metaphor of the web as a cosmopolitan stage is thus added the widely accepted idea of hypertext - with whose 'maps' and 'gaps' the author is 'awkwardly' dealing for the first time - as a collaborative performance. The customers/readers follow the paths from one station to another (from one link to another) traced by the author, but precisely as in a theatrical performance (as suggested by Brenda Laurel in her work on *Computer as Theatre*, 1991), they also provide the work, through their interactive involvement, with the affective dimension that Ryman also pursues through his constant appeals to the reader throughout the text (even asking them to fill in the "customer feedback at the end of the novel" - Ryman 1998, 5). Indeed, the web-travellers are asked to co-produce meanings in an environment in which, despite the abstractness and virtuality of the context, the communal aspect of human communication is not neglected; the human intervention is "connected, sensuous and personal" (Graham 1998, 172); bits meet bodies in a network of emotional attachments.

## 5. Conclusion

*Qu'est-ce que l'universel ?  
C'est la présence (virtuelle) à soi-même de l'humanité.  
Pierre Lévy, Essai sur la cyberculture, 1996*





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Considering that Ryman wrote *253* when electronic literature had just come onto the scene, the text can be considered as an early attempt to fathom how computer technologies and cyberspace relate to the real world, but more importantly how the simultaneity, juxtaposition and topological relations of the web can help to better understand the way people connect to the environment and to each other. A statement included in the printed version of the novel supports this view. In the book's "useful links appendix" aimed at bringing readers "all the ease and convenience of the original interactive novel" (Ryman 1998, 353), Ryman emphasises how "linking people because they were gay, black or Asian seemed pointless", so much so that he preferred to group them under semantic labels – such as Beatles, Canada, Cats, Football, Painting, Arts, SOAS, Margaret Thatcher, Weightlifting, etc. – that answered more fundamental questions such as "What do the characters have in common? Do they interact personally?, Do they share a common employer or locale?, Do they share other interesting or novel characteristics?" (353).

Being an exploratory survey of the constraints and affordances of digital environments and narrations, *253* does indeed seem to convey the idea that "cyberspace is not a particular technical telecommunication infrastructure but a certain way of using existing infrastructures", and that "by means of any physical links, it aims at a particular kind of relationship between people" (Lévy 1997, 145; my translation). However, with its simultaneously fragmented and interconnected layout, in which the spaces of the London Underground and those of the web overlap, the text is also an ideal place for reflection on the changing configurations of local and online communities, as well as on the supposed capacity of Internet spaces to both mirror and embody the new "contact zones" where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (Pratt 1991, 33). Indeed, as an instance of contemporary global narrative, *253* also probes the new forms of cosmopolitanism and communal living favoured by the web. Given the constant articulation of local and global allowed by the bi-focal structure of the text, Ryman seems to antedate Kwame Anthony



Appiah's view of the modern cosmopolitan citizenship as a connection to both the particular place we live in and the global tribe that we have become. In Appiah's words (2006, 11), what Ryman's narrative eventually demonstrates is that "the worldwide web of information [...] means not only that we can affect lives everywhere, but that we can learn about life anywhere too", not least in the (hyper)space of the Tube.

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## Crossing borders, pushing margins:

### Being Italian (*im*)migrants in the UK and Its Implications<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

Until recently, relatively little explicit attention has been paid to the Italian migration to the UK, which has received less popularity in the years compared to more well-known waves of migration towards other countries, such as the US, Australia, and South America, for instance. Moreover, not much consideration has been given to a comparison among old and new waves of migration from Italy to the UK and the role paid by more recent events, such as Brexit and the pandemic. Mobility in contemporary history presents fascinating elements which deserve to be explored. Hall (2006) claims that the way we project ourselves into our cultural identities has become increasingly problematic and pulls in multiple directions, consciously shifting from one identity to another, becoming multiple people in multiple places, sometimes performing overlapping identities (Byrd Clark 2007; 2009) according to the context and social interactions with different interlocutors (Guzzo 2010). This therefore leads to a line of questioning into the complexities of *self* and *other* identification and a sense of belonging as members of a heritage community in the UK. In this paper, we will specifically discuss how post-Second World War and post-2008 Italian migrants in the UK challenge the margins of their identity(ies) through a re-conceptualisation of the term *immigrant*.

Our analysis begins with the presentation of preliminary data from the research project *Migrant food, languages, and identities in the dawn of the post-Brexit and Covid-19 era*, funded by the University of Westminster, in London, that investigates how post-2008 migrants who work in Italian food and hospitality businesses use their linguistic repertoires to construct

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their social identity. From the audio recordings of three dinners with post-2008 Italian migrants in London, we extracted narratives wherein participants explore their migratory trajectories, ideologies, and practices. The comparison of these migrants' narratives with those of post-war migrants based in Bedford (Guzzo 2014) shows that these two generations of Italian migrants conceptualise their migratory experience in diverse ways, establish different types of networks and construct divergent identities.

Our paper concludes with a comparative and contrastive analysis of the discourses of post-2008 and post-war migrants, where we highlight differences and point of connections within the re-framing of the word *immigrant*, by focusing on the elements and factors that affect the challenge or acceptance of such term.



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## 1. Introduction

Migration is per its definition a crossing of margins, as mobility implies a push of physical, social, economic, cultural, and linguistic borders. Studies on contemporary mobility show how migrants' lives and migratory trajectories are deeply affected by elements as hypermobility and transnationalism - virtual and physical (Pustułka 2015; Tedeschi et al. 2022) - and how these impact on the perception, construction, and public presentation of themselves. In this paper, we reflect on the concept of margins seen according to several different perspectives, interpreted as identity margins, social margins, passing of physical borders, through a qualitative sociolinguistic analysis of data collected during two research projects. After discussing our theoretical and methodological approach, we present extracts of the data to reflect on the sociolinguistic practices used by past and contemporary Italian migrants in the UK to construct, de-construct, and re-construct their migratory identities.

## 2. Challenging the fixity of margins in post-modern Europe and in the post-Brexit era

In the literature, the term *margins* is often identified with the idea of periphery, and thus it evokes the dualistic approach 'centre vs periphery', often used in sociolinguistic (Czajka and Suchland 2017). However, post-modern studies invite us to abandon such dualism, to challenge such binary distinctions by exploring migrants' experiences (Blommaert et al. 2017). The migrants involved in the projects we present in this paper show how the concept of *margins* plays a role in the construction of contemporary migrants' transnational and mobile identities. In reflecting on the concept of *margins*, discerning from physical and psychosociological margins is inevitable. However, we observe how the two are linked and intertwined in the mind of migrants, who pass physical borders - marked more fiercely after Brexit - hence acquiring their new migratory identity, but who then push the psychological



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margins of such identities to adapt to the mobility and fluidity of their post-modern life. As Simmel (1997) argued, borders cannot be seen only as spatial facts with sociological effects but should be understood as sociological entities which take a spatial form (quoted in Acuto 2008). Border studies literature has convincingly ascertained that the stability, rigidity, and fixity evidently recalled by the concept of *border* should be challenged (Acuto 2008) above all if we focus our attention on the sociocultural and geographical reality of Europe, even more in relation to events, as Brexit, aimed at reinforcing the notion of national borders in contrast to the principles of freedom of movement promoted by the EU. Already in the 2000s, transnational studies started to challenge the simplification and reification of complex realities “along national and/ or ethnic lines – denounced as “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2003) and the “ethnic lens” (Glick Schiller 2007), respectively” (Blommaert et al. 2017, 349). As Blommaert et al. (2017) claim, the uncertainty that this emergent perspective highlights pushes us towards linguistic ethnography, with researchers going “out to find how sociolinguistic systems operate rather than to project a priori characteristics onto them” (Blommaert 2015, 84). It appears clear that the idea of static or permanent migration cannot be applied anymore as it cannot be related to our contemporary society, in which circular and transnational mobility takes place regularly, and ethnography becomes fundamental to explore such complexity.

Migration can never be viewed as unidimensional, and it is always an unfinished process. New forms of mobility started in the post-modern era opened the discussion on the essence of a migrant, or, simplifying the issue, on who counts as a ‘real’ migrant (Anderson and Blinder 2015). As De Haas (2021) maintains, most migration theories elaborated so far neglect to consider the complexity of mobility, often relying on dualistic systems. Undoubtedly, the understanding and interpretation of the word *migrant* - which represents our key variable under investigation - depends on several socio-political and historical factors, as also demonstrated in the extracts we are going to present. Our analysis is based





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on two crucial elements. Firstly, the presentation of post-2008 migration as an elite and lifestyle migration (Maddaloni and Moffa 2018), which deeply impacted on the (lack of) labelling of these people as true migrants since the political debate often addresses as migrants only low skilled people who enter the UK with the intention of permanently settling in the country (Anderson and Blinder 2015). Secondly, we cannot neglect the history of Italian migration and the recent decades shift Italy underwent, because of which Italy went from being a country of emigration to a country of immigration (Bonifazi et al. 2009). However, Italian post-crisis emigration to the UK is not an isolated phenomenon but it needs to be inserted in a broader system of mobility. Studies on post-2008 European mobility describe contemporary migrations as liquid, to conceptualise “the particularities of legally almost unconstrained intra-European migration, which is characterised by: temporariness, labour migration, legal residential status, unpredictability, individualisation” (Bygnes and Bivand Erdal 2017, 103).

This conceptualisation lays on Bauman’s work on liquid modernity (2000, 2007) and liquid lives (2005), which led to an understanding of post-2008 European migration as adventurous and free, but also as fragmented, solitary, and individualistic (Favell 2008a). In this paper, we will show how Italian migrants in the UK experience such fluidity and uncertainty - and absence of it for the post-WWII wave - to shape their migratory identity.

### 3. Context of research and methodology

The purposes behind our investigation are numerous. Firstly, we aim at providing some initial results regarding the reconceptualization of the term *migrant* in a post-modern context (post-2008 migration in London). Secondly, we will analyse contemporary migrants’ (re)construction of identity and (re)define an appropriate methodology to apply to further steps. By adopting a comparative approach then, we aim at verifying if and to what extent there is variation among migrants still living in the UK since the 1950s and new post-2008



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migrants. After four decades of low emigration, Italian mass migration to the UK has restarted in the last decade, generating a new wave - the post-2008 crisis wave. In September 2021, around 470,000 Italians were officially declared to live in the UK, although, as affirmed by the Italian Consulate, providing the precise number of Italians living in London and in the UK is almost impossible. In 2019, the Italian Consulate suggested that more than 700.000 Italians could live in the UK, most of them in the capital.

While post-WWII Italian migrants mainly moved to small industrial towns, as Bedford and Peterborough, due to the migration agreement between Italy and the UK in the 1950s and 1960s (Guzzo 2007, 2010, 2014; Guzzo and Gallo 2014, 2019), London is the post-2008 crisis migrants' most chosen destination, due to its proximity to Italy, its well-functioning job market (Tintori and Romei 2017), and to the role the English language plays in the global linguistic market (Pennycook 2007).

Migration suffered a serious setback at the beginning of WWII (Stubbs 1985). Italian migration started again after WWII, and it was principally fostered by an agreement between the Italian and the English governments (Colpi 1991; Guzzo 2007). Subsequently, a chain of migration started, mainly from Southern Italy (largely from Campania, Calabria, Apulia and Sicily), with migrants being chiefly employed in agriculture and in the brick-making industry, but some years later also in the catering business (restaurants, cafés, pizzerias and take-aways) (Stubbs 1985; Guzzo 2007, 2011). The majority of Italian immigrants - around 250-300.000 people - settled in the South-East, hosting around 60% of Britalians (as Palmer defined them in 1982, in Tubito and King 1996). A great many Italians settled in the East of England in particular, both in Bedford (Bedfordshire, South Midlands) and Peterborough (Cambridgeshire, East Midlands). In the 2011 Census of people of foreign origin in the East of England, Italians were in 5th place. Bedford had a population of about 160,800 inhabitants, more than 30% of whom are of foreign origin, and it is one of the most important examples of multi-ethnic cohabitation in England. The wave of Italian migration



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started between the 1950s and 60s, bringing about 10,000 Italians there and forming the Bedford Italian Community (see figure 1.). It is the most numerous and tight-knit Italian community in Great Britain and consists of about 42,261 members according to the 2001 national census (Guzzo 2007). It is essential to consider the different regions of origin of Italian community members due to linguistic and cultural regional variability within Italy itself (LMP, in Stubbs, 1985; Cervi 1991; Guzzo 2011). Most migrants reaching England after WWII had a very basic level of education and their mother tongue was not even Standard Italian, but rather their regional dialect (Guzzo 2007, 2010; Di Salvo 2012).

Figure 1. The Post-WW2 migration wave Map



Although the post-WWII generation preferred small industrial towns, some Italians moved to London as well. The Italian community in London had its centre in the



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Clerkenwell area, close to Farringdon Station, and its heart is St. Peter Church (Fortier 2006). This area started to be the core of the Italian community in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fortier 2006) and continued to be a place of belonging and perpetuation of Italian traditions and culture after WWII. However, when post-2008 migrants arrive in London, they do not search for the historical Italian community since they do not recognise the traditional community as their own community. The migrants show an individualistic attitude, which informs their migratory experience, and that leads to the challenge of the existence to the community itself (Pepe 2022).

On the contrary, until now, Italian contemporary migration to London has been seen as an elite migration, and the flow is generally described by the Italian media and some scholars (Conti 2012; McKay 2015; Sacco 2013; Sanfilippo 2017; Scotto 2015) as a *brain drain*, since it appeared to be mainly formed of highly educated people who left Italy in search of better career and life-style prospects, neglecting to consider the economical post-crisis scenario and the endemic issues of the Italian job market that led to a mass migration. In fact, the brain drain narrative presents some flaws. After 15 years since the re-start of Italian mass migration, we wonder whether the description provided in the last decade is still close to reality. Post-crisis migrants' socio-cultural linguistic profile is more complex now. Ethnographic observation shows us that not all the post-2008 crisis migrants can be described as highly educated people (Pepe 2021; 2022). The Italian community in London shows a great diversity, being formed now of highly educated migrants, mainly employed in the financial and business sectors, and of migrants who only hold vocational high school diplomas and generally work in the hospitality sector. Despite the initial tendency to consider post-crisis migrants as bilingual at their arrival (Vedovelli 2015), it has been observed that even highly educated migrants most of the time do not have a satisfactory competence in English. This translates in their acceptance of menial jobs while they improve their linguistic skills. While in the past, post-WWII migrants came mainly from southern



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Italian regions, the post-crisis wave is formed of people arriving from all the Italian peninsula (Italian Consulate Statistic Data 2021). Thus, they speak different varieties of regional Italian – which only present phonetic and semantic differences but rare morpho-syntactic ones and which are close to standard Italian – and their own dialects.

### ***3.1. The Bedford project and the Migrant food, languages, and identities in the dawn of the post-Brexit and Covid-19 era project***

The preliminary data analysed and discussed in this paper are part of two much larger research participatory projects: the *Bedford project* (Guzzo 2007, 2014), referring to the post-WWII migrants, and the *Migrant food, languages, and identities in the dawn of the post-Brexit and Covid-19 era project*, referring to the post-2008 ones. The two corpora have been compared to throw light on potential analogies and/or differences.

The *Bedford project* drew data from long-term participant observations in Bedford (2004 and from 2006 to 2007) aiming to study language variation among minorities of Italian origin who migrated to the UK following WWII during the 1950s and 1960s when the British Ministry of Labour signed an intergovernmental agreement with the Italian government to encourage immigration from Italy in order to bolster the British labour workforce (Colpi 1991; Guzzo 2007; Sponza 1993, 2011). The methodology adopted by Guzzo in her study (2007, 2014) drew upon both quantitative and qualitative methods, specifically aiming at identifying the linguistic features which characterise the speech of Bedford Italian speakers in the workplace context of restaurants and service encounters as well as verifying whether their local cultural heritage and linguistic identity were likely to find expression and reflection in the speakers' use of English and Italian. In order to explore the language of (Anglo)Italians at work, her investigation was carried out following two main methods: 1) an ethnographic approach as applied by sociolinguists to the study of language (Blom and



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Gumperz 1972, Milroy 1987, and Li Wei 1994) for which the methodology is based on a combination of participant observation and ethnographic data collection through the means of audio recordings of spontaneous conversations in the workplace, and 2) two related approaches of accommodation theory (Giles 1973; Giles and Powesland 1975) and audience design, as a confirmation of Bell's (1984, 2001) model. As Britain claims (2007), most of the studies carried out to date have provided more quantitative analyses of phonological rather than grammatical variations in British English. Phonological studies have extensively investigated sound variation, and collections of larger corpora have helped systematic analyses in the field of morphology. Nonetheless, very little has been said about Italian immigrants in the United Kingdom with reference to their phonology or morphosyntax in the context of the workplace, and Guzzo has fulfilled that gap eventually. Moreover, as Scotton (1986) suggests, to carry out the analysis of individual language behaviour, an informant's verbal acts need to be contextualised within an analysis of the norms ruling the speech community in which the individuals live. In order to do so, Guzzo's Bedford Project presents an accurate and detailed examination of the language behaviour of speakers of Italian origin across three generations. First, second, and third generation Bedford Italians, and Peterborough Italians later, were studied focusing primarily on the speakers' choices of language style with different interlocutors in three specific workplace contexts. Based on the data collection carried out by Guzzo in Bedford in 2006 (2011), levels of accommodation do not seem to be particularly high among 1<sup>st</sup> generation migrants, whereas significant levels of use were found among 2<sup>nd</sup> generation informants who tend to use their workplace language to accommodate the audience, adopting native-like pronunciation of Italian lexis while interacting with Italians, and English pronunciation while addressing the British. As a result, in the workplace, the informants consciously or unconsciously seem to strategically adopt British pronunciation with British interlocutors who are more likely to prefer a British form of address and vice versa Italian pronunciation with Italian or BI interlocutors.



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Adapting and adjusting their language with regard to the situation (i.e., a service encounter context) and the purpose (i.e., selling, as well as accommodating the addressees), their style appears to shift according to their specific business aims. Interestingly, someone belonging to the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation may feel the need to assert themselves and their identity through a departure from what represents Britishness resulting in the adoption of some non-British as well as non-standard features of English, accommodating British interlocutors much less than 2<sup>nd</sup> generation BIs, therefore marking their 'non-Britishness'. The style shift of 3<sup>rd</sup> generation informants, in this case, is displayed through a reflection of identity more than marking a precise group identity, as the age and generation of informants becomes more distant from that of their grandparents of 1<sup>st</sup> generation. These linguistic features operate as ethnic identity markers, sometimes helping them assert and confirm their Italian heritage.

On the other hand, the *Migrant food, languages, and identities in the dawn of the post-Brexit and Covid-19 era* pilots a participatory sensory ethnography which aims at exploring how migrants who work in Greek and Italian food and hospitality businesses use the languages they speak, the knowledge they have about Greek and Italian food, and their social networks to respond to the challenges created by Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodological framework of sensory ethnography places the whole experiencing body at its core and innovatively rethinks participatory and collaborative ethnographic research techniques in terms of sensory perception, categories, meaning and values, ways of knowing, and everyday practices. In this project, sensory ethnography is both researcher- and participant-led in that research materials is co-produced by both researchers and participants<sup>2</sup>. Participants' recruitment started from the researchers' social networks; then,

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<sup>2</sup> The project was funded by University of Westminster, London. The research team included Petros Karatsareas (University of Westminster, PI), Anna Charalambidou (Middlesex University, Co-PI), Siria Guzzo (University of Salerno, Co-PI), Vally Lytra (Goldsmiths University, Co-PI) Christina Flora and Giulia Pepe (University of Westminster, PDRAs). More information on the project can be found at:



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confirmed participants involved their acquaintances, starting to take an active, participatory, role in the shaping of the research. During the three dinners held in different London Italian restaurants, five participants had the possibility to lead the conversation in diverse directions, exploring the topics they considered relevant. Nevertheless, also researchers actively participated in the conversation, co-constructing data with the participants. From the recording of those dinners, we extracted narratives wherein participants explore linguistic practices and discuss aspects of their daily life as hospitality workers.

The post-modern era saw new forms of mobility and the European context is the perfect context for exploration of these new migration fluid patterns. We now reflect on these new forms of mobility – and migrants’ exploitation of such forms – in relation to the reconceptualization of participants’ migratory status. In starting a discussion on the term ‘migrant’, we cannot avoid highlighting that the ideologies and attitude towards migration expressed in the migrants’ country of origin deeply affect participants’ migratory identity construction. As mentioned earlier, in the recent decades Italy went from being a country of emigration to a country of immigration (Bonifazi et al. 2009). This element has an undeniable role in the participants’ discussion on their status as migrants and in the formation of their personal social identities and, eventually, of group social identities. As a methodological clarification, during the dinners, we mostly opted for the word *immigrato/a* – immigrant (masculine and feminine) – over the term ‘migrant’ since Italians are more accustomed to the use of this term. In addition, with the term ‘immigrant’, we implicitly shift attention to their experiences as people hosted in a new country, since the prefix ‘i-’ implies the idea of reception of migrants into a new sociocultural system. On the contrary, the term emigrants, *emigrante* in Italian, evokes the origin country, and would have pictured the participants as

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<https://www.westminster.ac.uk/research/groups-and-centres/westminster-forum-for-language-and-linguistics/projects/migrant-food-languages-and-identities-in-the-dawn-of-the-post-brexit-and-covid-19-era>.





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people who left. This lexical choice implied a reflection, although not always explicitly expressed, on the indexical load carried by this word as a result of Italian heavily political and media debate on immigration and emigration (Colucci 2017; Maneri 2009; Solano 2014).

#### **4. Data analysis: Reconceptualising the term ‘migrant’**

Our analysis begins with the identification of three themes revolving around the conceptualisation of the variant *migrant*: ‘immigrants and culture’, ‘immigrants and mobility’, and ‘immigrants and London’. We also provide a comparative qualitative analysis, by exploring how a different wave of Italian migrants in the UK, the post-WWII generation, constructed and phrased its migratory identity.

##### **4.1. Theme 1: ‘immigrants and culture’**

Studies on migration status identified one feature that seems to define the lives of immigrants: the scarcity, and in some cases the absence, of political rights and representation (Fanning et al. 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising that our participants, when prompted to reflect on their status, begin their discussion with references to politics and vote rights, as we read in the following extracts, then shifting to culture-oriented observations, with reference to the concept of food. In the first extract shown below, Giulia, the researcher, introduces the topic with an open and broad question to give participants the possibility to explore freely the link between their experience and their migratory status. This discussion was recorded at the end of the third dinner, when participants had already reached a higher level of intimacy and seemed to feel comfortable expressing their opinions.

##### **Extract 1. Post-2008 migrant**



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Giulia: vi faccio l'ultima domanda di stasera <.> cosa significa la parola immigrato per voi?

Alberto: ma qua siamo fuori tema

Davide: eh qui siamo fuori tema davvero andiamo nel politico <.> vai fai andare prima i nazisti poi quelli di destra e poi:

#### Translation

Giulia: I am going to ask the last question of the evening <.> what does the word immigrant mean to you?

Alberto: but this is off-topic

Davide: eh this off-topic for real we go into politics <.> let's go let the Nazis go first then right wing people and then:

This extract shows how the term *immigrato* is strongly indexical of political views. While Alberto tries to avoid the question, pointing out that the research project aims at exploring the link between languages and Italian hospitality, Davide mentions Nazi and right-wing people. Davide not only links the term with politics, but he also highlights a connection between the word *immigrato* and a certain type of political views. With such connection, Davide recognises that the discussion on migration is often shaped by right-wing parties that affect the understanding of this term and connote it with indexical meanings. It is particularly interesting to notice that the connection between the word 'immigrate' and 'political views' happens immediately after the researcher asks the question. The attribution of political ideologies to this word, and per extension to this social identity category, offers the participants a possibility to position themselves as distant from this identity, to challenge it.

#### Extract 2. Post-2008 migrant

Giovanni: no no ma io non parlo di questo <.> il fatto che <.> Londra e' di chi vota non puo' essere tua <.> ora non parliamo di razzismo pero' allora Foggia e' degli africani? Avete il 10% della popolazione che e' immigrata l'altro ieri quindi e' loro? Ah no loro non votano quindi in



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quel caso funziona tu torni dopo dieci anni e voti e tu sei di Foggia quello lì che c'è stato 15 anni non lo è'

### Translation

Giovanni: no no but I'm not talking about that <.> the thing is <.> London belongs to those who vote it can't be yours <.> now I'm not talking about racism but then Foggia belongs to Africans? You have 10% of the population that has immigrated the day before yesterday thus it [the city] is theirs? Ah no they don't vote so in that case it works like this you go back after ten years and vote and you are from Foggia the person who stayed there for 15 years is not from there

The link between the term and politics spurs reflections on immigrants' lack of political rights. In his narrative, Giovanni underscores a feature that determines the lives of immigrants: the imbalance between the hosting population and the migrants in terms of political rights and representation (Fanning et al. 2021). Giovanni draws a comparison between London and Foggia, the city from which one of the participants comes from. He claims that belonging for migrants is impossible as they do not have voting rights, although they might be living in a place for many years. On the contrary, he points out how those who left Italy, emigrants like themselves, keep their rights in the homeland despite their lack of involvement with their hometown for a long period. This extract marks the connection Italian migrants in London feel with those who migrate to Italy, starting to introduce a connection that for many years has been fiercely avoided by Italian media and scholars. Nevertheless, Italian migrants in London recognise their legal status of immigrant, especially in the post-Brexit era. This element is crucial, if we consider that, after Brexit, European migrants in the UK experienced the loss of rights guaranteed by the EU law and this contributed to the increase of sense of displacement, lack of integration and sense of alienation from the host society. Political events like Brexit reinforce the separation between the host country population and the migrant population. As we see in the following extract, the separation between 'they', the English people, and 'us', the Italians, was strong already



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in the narratives of post-WWII Italian migrants in Bedford and affects the way these participants shape their migratory identity.

**Extract 3. The Post-WWII migrant (from 'The Bedford Project')**

Federico: basta? Che dici?

Gerardo: eh mitti i spaghetti e vidi roppo mitti i spaghetti e te ne accordi roppo <.>

Adelina: guarda che l'inglese mangia tutto

Gerardo: eh si infatti e schifezze se mangia <.> nun è mica n'emigrato ca vine dall'Italia vera comm' a noje.

**Translation**

Federico: enough? What do you think?

Gerardo: ehm first put the spaghetti and then you see, add the spaghetti and you fix it later <.>

Adelina: look that the Brits eat everything

Gerardo: oh yes they eat just junk food <.> they are not emigrants who come from 'real Italy' as we do

In this segment, we note that the English society is pictured in negative cultural terms in opposition to Italian migrants who are accustomed to high quality tastes since they come from a country where food traditions are crucial and highly valued. In contrast with the post-2008 migrants' observations, our post-WWII Italian migrants show to use the term 'immigrant' or 'emigrant' without being afraid of being associated with something negative, with a loaded term. In the example taken from Guzzo's 2004-2007 corpus, Gerardo, a young participant in his late twenties, same age of Davide and Alberto of our recent 2022 corpus, while working in the kitchen of a restaurant used the label *emigrato* positively showing more positive connotations. An immigrant in this case is seen as the person who comes from Italy



and knows about food, someone who has tastes and would never eat *schifezze* (junk food) as the Brits. In this case, Gerardo entails that being an 'immigrant' is rewarding, showing skills, an immigrant is a smart person, as they are immigrants and are proud to be so. No political nor negative connotations are related to the term in the extract taken from the *Bedford project*.

#### 4.2. Theme 2: 'Immigrants and mobility'

In framing their migratory identity, migrants of both waves use elements that were relevant in their migration trajectories and that contributed to the formation of such identity. In the following segment, we notice how migrants can distance themselves from the migratory identity, contrasting their status with those of 'real immigrants' who do not have freedom of movement. The following extract shows how Italian migrants absorbed the Italian debate on migration and how this leads to the difficulty for post-2008 Italian migrants in London to accept their migrant social identity (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998).

##### Extract 4. Post-2008 migrant

Nino: secondo me viaggiare secondo me siamo arrivati al punto che non voglio dire che non c'è piu' terra di nessuno ma piu' o meno ci stiamo muovendo in quella cosa li' che mi sembra giusta piu' o meno con il tempo e' vero che magari prima era un concetto molto piu' difficile da elaborare perche' fare un viaggio era molto piu' difficile era piu' complesso le tempistiche il prezzo di quello che poteva costare un volo adesso se mi dici che un ragazzo prende un volo dall'Italia a dieci *pound* va a Londra e ci sta tre anni <.> e' immigrato? Cioe' dieci *pound* torni a casa comunque

Giulia: quello non e' un immigrato?

Nino: si no dopo dipende pero' non credo che il termine immigrato sia un termine che debba ancora essere usato

Davide: secondo me da quando ci sta questa forte influenza [affluenza?] di immigrazione illegale dall'Africa non ci consideriamo piu' forse noi immigrati noi che possiamo muoverci liberamente perche' accostiamo il nome a quel tipo di persona



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Siria: immigrato quindi dipende dal paese di partenza?

Davide: forse perché si sente parlare molto di immigrati immigrati che noi non ci sentiamo più perché essendo liberi di muoverci come vogliamo.

### Translation

Nino: in my opinion travelling in my opinion we reached the point that I don't want to say the land belongs to no one but more or less we are going towards that thing and I think it's right more or less with time it is true that before maybe it was a concept harder to elaborate because travelling was very difficult it was more complex the timings the price of flights now if you tell me that a guy who takes a ten *pounds* plane from Italy he goes to London and he stays there three years <.> is he an immigrant? I mean with ten *pounds* you can go back home anyway

Giulia: that is not an immigrant?

Nino: yes no then it depends but I don't think that the term immigrant is a term we should still use

Davide: in my opinion since there is strong influx of illegal immigration from Africa we don't consider ourselves anymore immigrants as we can move freely because we link this word to that type of person

Siria: immigrant then depends on the country of origin?

Davide: maybe because we hear talking a lot about immigrants immigrants while we don't feel like that anymore because we are free to move as we want

With his words, Nino uses one term of comparison to construct his migratory identity: the previous wave of migrants. Noticing that he belongs to the generation of migrants who can benefit from high mobility – reified here through concrete elements, as fast transport means and economic flights – Nino acknowledges the difficulties of identifying himself as a traditional migrant. As we already explained at the beginning of the paper, the post-crisis Italian migration, and more in general the post-2008 European migration, has been defined as “liquid” (Bygnes and Bivand Erdal 2017,102) and Nino's words seem to align with such definition.



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In the discussion then another term of comparison is introduced to determine the disaffiliation of this type of migrants with the migratory identity. The ‘immigrants immigrants’, the one who reach Italy illegally, by boat or hidden in trucks, are those who society and Italian population perceive as real immigrant, while the post-2008 crisis migration does not present the characteristics ideologically commonly attributed to ‘real’ migration. In this extract, we see how migrants internalised their freedom of movement and the hypermobility to challenge their migratory identity. In contrast with immigrants that arrive to Italy and with past waves of Italian migrants that experienced lack of mobility, contemporary post-2008 Italian migrants struggle to see themselves as real migrants. The social identity attributed to them by their experience (the move from one country to another) is therefore challenged. Here we understand how transnationalism promotes a new understanding of *social identities* and provides the possibility to reconstruct identities.

### 4.3. Theme 3: ‘Immigrants and London’

As the post-2008 wave chose London as its favourite destination, we cannot avoid taking into consideration the city as a variable which shapes participants’ migration experiences and, consequently, the framing of their migratory identity.

#### Extract 5. Post-2008 migrant

Alberto: secondo me in maniera storica prima era una necessita’ immigrare perche’ alla fine proprio non c’era proprio il modo di vivere nel proprio paese adesso diciamo che e’ piu’ una scelta perche’ alla fine dici vado pero’ e’ anche una questione del paese in cui vai perche’ qua non si sente tanto perche’ comunque in Inghilterra diciamo vieni accolto abbastanza bene diciamo che adesso un po’ meno comunque rispetto a dieci anni fa la **Brexit** ha interrotto quel flusso di gente

Giulia: la differenza la fa l’accoglienza? L’integrazione? Che passi da essere immigrato a non esserlo?

Alberto: secondo me si’



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Daniela: [secondo me si'

Alberto: [se hai un concetto di essere cittadino del mondo senza confini

Nino: secondo me pero' questo e' un concetto che si applica in una paese grande come Londra perche' comunque e' un *mix di everything* <.> un mio amico e' andato a lavorare in uno stellato a quattro ore fuori Londra pieno countryside e' stato trattato malissimo ah sei italiano anche i clienti che comunque erano tutti settantenni ottantenni capito mi ha detto sono stato trattato malissimo <.> qui la mentalita' che c'e' anche la *Brexit* e' stata votata tutta fuori Londra quindi noi non abbiamo sentito il fatto di essere immigrati perche' comunque siamo capitati in un posto in cui c'erano piu' francesi tedeschi

Alberto: Londra appartiene a tutti tranne che agli inglesi.

#### Translation

Alberto: in my opinion before from an historical point of view migrating was a necessity because there were not ways of living in your own country now let's say it's more a choice because at the end of day you say let's go but it is also a matter of the country you go to because here you don't experience it a lot because let's say in England anyway you are welcomed well maybe nowadays a bit less compared to ten years ago Brexit has stopped this flux of people

Giulia: the welcome makes a difference? Integration? In this way you go from being an immigrant to not being it?

Alberto: I think so

Daniela: [I think so

Alberto: [if you have an idea of world citizen without borders

Nino: I think this is a concept you apply to a big country like London because it is anyway a *mix of everything* <.> a friend of mine went to work in a Michelin star restaurant four hours away from London he was treated very badly ah you are Italian even the customers who were anyway all in their seventies and eighties you understand he told me I have been treated <.> here the mindset is that Brexit was voted outside London so we did not feel the fact of being immigrants because we ended up in a place where there were more French people Germans

Alberto: London belongs to everybody except to English people

The extract begins with a reflection of Alberto on the reasons for migrating. Alberto represents migration as a choice, and this dismantles/deconstruct the principles on which the image of the migrant is traditionally constructed, since migrants were traditionally





described as people who are forced to leave their own country due to socio-economic reasons.

In these lines, we also see the impact of decades of mainstream debates on immigration in western societies on individuals (Solano 2014). The participants are the result of the Italian socio-cultural and political contexts, and this emerges in their characterisation of the migrant social identity. Immigrants are people who arrive in a new country as unwanted, sometimes illegally, and often the debate on migration revolves around solutions to stop and punish (illegal) immigration. It is important to specify that these participants started their migratory journey in the pre-Brexit era. As a matter of fact, they acknowledge that Brexit has changed the attitude towards migrants and migrants' perception of being welcome. Suffice to remember the political debate on migration during the Brexit referendum campaign, when some European populations were targeted as cause of UK economic problems and as unwelcome (Burnett 2017; Fox 2018; Rzepnikowska 2019; Virdee and McGeever 2018). Nevertheless, in these lines we see that London is pictured as a place where the migratory status can be contested more easily than in other parts of the UK, as we understand from Nino's narrative. Nino's conclusive line introduces the idea that London is "the most linguistically diverse city in the world" (Burck 2005, 1) and the most multicultural in Europe (Block 2006) and as a consequence migrants' perception of self is definitely different than in other geographical contexts. The co-existence of hundreds of ethnic, national, and religious communities shape the self-perception of migrants and affect their positioning within the host society.

In extracts 4 and 5, we reflected on the variables that support post-2008 migrants' lack of identification with their migratory self. On the other hand, post-WWII migrants experienced migration in a more static way and in a different socio-geographical context. The absence of easily accessible transnational means (e.g., cheap flights and technology) and their destination of migration, Bedford, a small industrial town where the host society was



definitely prevalent, determined their understanding of themselves as migrants, and reinforced their acceptance of such social identity. This is also reflected in the way they settled in Bedford for instance, creating a small Italian enclave and a close-knit community, in contrast with post-2008 migrants in London who refuse to be seen as members of a community (Pepe 2021) and refuse community forms of aggregation on a large scale.

## 5. Discussion: two waves of Italian migrants in the UK

As Table 1 shows, both differences and similarities between the two waves of migration do exist. Some variables show a close similarity between the two (e.g., employment in hospitality and the average age upon arrival). Nevertheless, the substantial difference stands in the heterogeneity of the post-2008 wave against the homogeneity of the post-WWII wave.

Table 1. Two waves of Italian migrants in the UK

	Post-WWII wave	Post-2008 wave
<b>Arrival in the UK</b>	1950s-1960s	Mainly between 2012-2015
<b>Migratory trajectory</b>	From small villages in Southern Italy to industrial towns in the UK	From everywhere in Italy to London
<b>Age upon arrival</b>	18-25	20-25
<b>Age at the time of research</b>	Three generations of migrants, thus different ages	30
<b>Linguistic repertoires at the time of migration</b>	L1= dialect L2 = regional Italian L3 = English	L1= regional Italian L2= dialect (mainly Southern Italian and those who come from rural areas) L3= English (only indexically used in interactions with other migrants)
<b>English upon arrival</b>	Low	Medium
<b>Profession</b>	Hospitality and retail sector	Hospitality and retail or finance, business, and fashion sectors
<b>Level of education</b>	Low	High, medium and low



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The two waves of Italian migrants have brought to the UK labour forces not necessarily well-prepared nor always competent. Their level of education upon arrival shows to be quite heterogeneous, being the post-WWII mostly illiterate and coming from poorer regions compared to the post-2008 migrants who more consciously left Italy with higher levels of education. In both cases though, their level of English, despite some wrong misbelief, is quite inconsistent and aims for some improvement.

Moreover, the differences on migratory destination (i.e., industrial towns against London) reflect on the different way these generations express their sense of community. While post-WWII migrants created close communities, post-2008 deny their belonging to the Italian community. The absence of sense of belonging and identification with a community and with community practices, associated with the change of status of Italy (from emigration to immigration country), has a strong impact on the acceptance and challenge of their migratory status represent a difference from the two waves.

## 6. Conclusions and further steps

This paper shows how post-2008 Italian migrants refer to Italy migration past to shape and challenge their migratory social identity. In presenting themselves as mobile, transnational and welcome migrants, the participants from the post-2008 wave take the distance from those types of migrants who could not be described by these elements. The term of comparison for post-2008 migrants are two: immigrants in Italy and past Italian migrants to the UK.

In this paper, we introduce some preliminary results of a pilot participatory project which will be further developed in the near future, and we start to explore the relation between the previous wave of Italian mass migration to the UK and the contemporary one. We shall further focus our attention on the participants' way of living their migratory experience in a context of hyperconnected transnationalism, which consequently leads to



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paying attention to forms of virtual transnationalism. Language variation exists, and further quantitative analysis will be carried out to comparatively verify variation within the two waves of migrants. In addition, a questionnaire survey based on Guzzo (2004) will be distributed to elicit more statistics as far as identity perception and cultural heritage are concerned, since our initial results seem promising in terms of new perspectives about migrants.

We can preliminarily conclude that transnational (physical and virtual) mobility is a key paradigm to explore the constructionist identity process suggested by participants in in-group speech. In the post-modern era we cannot see migration as a stable phenomenon and migrants' trajectories and future aspirations need to be further studied and interpreted with a different approach. Mobility does play a key role in the understanding and reconceptualisation of the term *migrant*, as the migrants' hybrid identity is confirmed and reinforced by a new form of reconstruction due to repositioning and recontextualisation.

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## Lo spazio liminale tra narrativa del soprannaturale e folklore digitale

Francesco Corigliano

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### Abstract

Il presente articolo parte esamina il concetto di spazio liminale nella narrativa del soprannaturale. Dopo una premessa sulla definizione di “spazio-soglia”, se ne propone un’analisi nei romanzi *House of Leaves* (2000) di Mark Z. Danielewski e *Piranesi* (2020) di Susanna Clarke. Il primo è un esempio di letteratura ergodica incentrato su una casa infestata non da fantasmi ma da dimensioni impossibili; nel secondo invece la soglia stessa assurge a una funzione totalizzante tramite la rappresentazione di una casa-mondo infinita. In seguito si prenderà in analisi una terza forma di spazio-soglia: il fenomeno culturale delle ‘Backrooms’, a metà tra leggenda popolare e narrazione collettiva online, che su internet e sui social ha definito un nuovo modo di intendere e fruire gli spazi liminali.

La letteratura del soprannaturale è un campo cangiante e magmatico, molto influenzato dai contesti di produzione e di ricezione. È un settore vasto, la cui concezione più ampia porta a includervi tutti quei testi che rappresentano al proprio interno, in un modo o in un altro, la realtà di qualcosa che è usualmente reputato soprannaturale o impossibile. Questa delimitazione deve necessariamente appoggiarsi all’individuazione di altre caratteristiche, quali espedienti formali o questioni tematiche, che permettano di suddividere ulteriormente una categoria altrimenti troppo ampia. Tra queste caratteristiche è utile considerare il ricorso a precise soluzioni di localizzazione spaziale: dai racconti di streghe di Plinio il giovane sino ai romanzi di Stephen King, la narrativa del soprannaturale lega gli elementi ultraterreni ad uno spazio delimitato, un luogo nel quale l’impossibile si manifesta o ha origine, la cui qualità e familiarità varia nel corso del tempo.

Il passaggio da un mondo senza soprannaturale a uno con ha un valore spesso metaforico, e la soglia tra una dimensione e l’altra assurge a simbolo delle categorie valoriali che una società adotta per capire e influenzare il mondo.

Da questa prospettiva si può apprezzare come lo “spazio liminale” abbia preso sempre più forza nella dimensione narrativa. La cultura occidentale contemporanea si confronta continuamente con gli spazi liminali, aree-soglia percepite come punto di



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transizione, di contatto tra mondi, materializzazioni del senso di attesa e di vuoto: le sale d'attesa, le stazioni di servizio, le fermate della metropolitana e così via. Da margine definito e chiuso, lo spazio-soglia può diventare – soprattutto nella letteratura del soprannaturale – una dimensione a sé stante, un luogo-altro nel quale entità e concetti perdono definizione e nel quale le identità si sovrappongono. Uno scenario che può assumere connotati inquietanti, nel quale aleggia quel senso di volontà incombente che Mark Fisher individua nella modalità estetica dell' 'eerie'.

In questo articolo tenterò di dimostrare che la narrativa del soprannaturale prodotta nella società contemporanea – nella quale il senso di liminalità è sempre più comune e condiviso – tende a rappresentare la soglia come uno spazio esteso, attraversabile e abitabile. Per farlo prenderò in analisi due testi di letteratura del soprannaturale, *House of Leaves* (2000) di Mark Z. Danielewski e *Piranesi* (2020) di Susanna Clarke, e in un fenomeno culturale di internet, le 'Backrooms'.



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## 1. Lo spazio del soprannaturale in letteratura

Secondo il critico Francesco Orlando la localizzazione nella narrativa del soprannaturale non soltanto muta nel corso delle epoche storiche, ma è talmente rilevante da figurare tra gli elementi di discriminazione per una classificazione della letteratura stessa. Nel suo studio *Il soprannaturale letterario*, Orlando individua infatti diverse categorie narrative, basandosi sia sul credito che viene accordato al paranormale nel testo, sia sulle regole che esso esplicita; le regole sono legate agli spazi in cui il soprannaturale trova manifestazione, e la localizzazione del soprannaturale duecentesco nella *Divina Commedia* (Orlando 2016, 9) sarà molto diversa da quella del Cinquecento di Ariosto (Orlando 2016, 33).

Con l'evolversi storico di questo genere, la letteratura ci ha consegnato una varietà di spazi specifici del soprannaturale: si è passati dal maniero gotico alle antiche rovine, poi dalla casa abbandonata all'appartamento borghese, andando a preferire sempre più gli ambienti quotidiani nella letteratura del Novecento.

Tuttavia, una caratteristica fondamentale di questi spazi deputati del soprannaturale è che tra essi e il resto del mondo esista una delimitazione. Varcare la soglia del luogo fantastico è un atto dalle potenti implicazioni metaforiche, ma anche un gesto pratico, che in campo puramente narrativo dà l'avvio allo svolgersi delle azioni.

L'importanza della soglia nella letteratura del soprannaturale è stata rimarcata da Remo Ceserani, che nel suo studio *Il fantastico* ha affermato:

Abbiamo spesso incontrato, nei racconti fantastici che abbiamo letto, esempi di passaggio dalla dimensione del quotidiano, del familiare e del consueto a quello dell'inesplicabile e del perturbante: passaggi di soglia, per esempio, dalla dimensione della realtà a quella del sogno, dell'incubo, o della follia. Il personaggio-protagonista si trova d'improvviso come dentro due dimensioni diverse, con codici diversi a disposizione per orientarsi e capire. (Ceserani 1996, 80)



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Anche Lucio Lugnani ha evidenziato la peculiarità del ruolo della soglia:

La soglia fra una dimensione ed un'altra, fra identico ed altro, è anche in fin dei conti la soglia fra ciò che è codificato e ciò che non è (non è ancora o non è più) codificato. I segnali di soglia intervengono là dove un certo codice culturale li impone a propria salvaguardia (nella fiaba il codice non li prevede) e a garanzia della propria tenuta. (Lugnani 1983, 196-196)

Nonostante il fantastico propriamente detto sia soltanto una parte del più ampio campo della letteratura del soprannaturale, queste osservazioni sulla soglia sembrano applicabili a tutte le narrazioni incentrate sul soprannaturale stesso (o perlomeno quelle che adottino una rappresentazione verosimile della nostra realtà e degli effetti dell'irruzione del metafisico in essa).

Ad esempio, la *ghost story* vittoriana si fonda precisamente sul superamento della soglia e sull'accesso al luogo-altro. Solitamente il fantasma è relegato all'interno di una casa o di una stanza che è necessario penetrare affinché si manifesti il soprannaturale, così come d'altra parte si vede in esempi classici quali *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) di Henry James, in cui manifestazioni fantasmatiche sono legate agli ambienti e ai giardini di Bly Manor. D'altra parte, si può dire che in *Dracula* (1897) di Bram Stoker la narrazione trovi il proprio inizio nel momento in cui il protagonista entra nel castello del vampiro, e subisca un ulteriore rivolgimento quando il conte varca lo spazio urbano di Londra, in quella che David Punter ha indicato come "una furiosa e involontaria parodia dell'imperialismo" (Punter 2006, 236). La soglia detta il via agli eventi.

Dal momento che la localizzazione del soprannaturale si è trasformata nel corso del tempo, ci si può chiedere se sia giunta a mettere in discussione il concetto stesso di soglia, soprattutto considerando la storia culturale del Novecento e dei primi anni Duemila e la sempre maggiore importanza della liminalità. Cosa accade se la soglia smette di essere una sezione introduttiva allo spazio del soprannaturale? Può la soglia stessa divenire lo scenario dell'impossibile?



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Per procedere, è necessario proprio partire dal concetto di spazio-soglia: un luogo temporaneo, liminale, al contempo fondamentale per uno scopo specifico ma marginale nel resto dell'esperienza quotidiana. È la stazione di servizio, il centro commerciale, l'aeroporto, il luogo di passaggio che viene attraversato e fruito senza instaurare un rapporto con l'individuo, necessario all'assolvimento di una specifica funzione.

Sono spazi dell'impermanenza, e che non presentano né cercano un autentico legame storico o culturale con lo spazio circostante, tanto da poter essere riproducibili *ad libitum* mantenendo dei simboli e dei richiami che troveremo sempre riconoscibili. Si fondano dunque su un paradosso: sono luoghi pensati per l'umano ma, al contempo, non prevedono un rapporto a lungo termine con l'umano stesso. Da qui il senso di disagio che suscitano gli spazi liminali vuoti e desolati, laddove sono totalmente assenti le persone: una commistione di familiarità e inquietudine che richiama l'*unheimlich* freudiano, e che negli ultimi anni ha suscitato un grande interesse su internet, specialmente su social come Twitter e Reddit.

Come riporta Valentina Tanni in un articolo dedicato agli spazi liminali su internet, essi sono:

luoghi di transizione tra due altri luoghi, o tra due stati dell'essere. Di solito sono abbandonati, e spesso vuoti - un centro commerciale alle quattro del mattino, oppure l'atrio di una scuola durante il periodo estivo, ad esempio. Per questo appaiono come congelati e lievemente inquietanti, ma anche familiari per la nostra mente. (Tanni 2022)

L'idea di spazio-soglia è riconducibile al concetto di "nonluoghi" dell'antropologo Marc Augé, sviluppato nel saggio del 1992 *Nonluoghi. Introduzione a una antropologia della surmodernità*. Per Augé, questi spazi sono replicabili ovunque e immediatamente riconoscibili, e la loro collocazione fisica ha un valore quasi secondario, tanto che "se un luogo può definirsi come identitario, relazionale, storico, uno spazio che non può definirsi identitario, relazionale e storico definirà un nonluogo" (Augé 2009, 57). Luoghi



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di transizione, “i nonluoghi sono tanto le installazioni necessarie per la circolazione accelerata delle persone e dei beni - strade a scorrimento veloce, svincoli, aeroporti - quanto i mezzi di trasporto stessi o i grandi centri commerciali o, ancora, i campi profughi dove sono parcheggiati i rifugiati del pianeta” (Augé 2009, 35). Istituiscono un particolare rapporto tra l’Io e il mondo: “Luogo e nonluogo sono piuttosto delle polarità sfuggenti: il primo non è mai completamente cancellato e il secondo non si compie mai totalmente; palinsesti in cui si reinscrive incessantemente il gioco misto dell'identità e della relazione” (Augé 2009, 57).

Nonluogo, spazio-soglia o spazio liminale indicano con sfumature diverse una relazione precaria tra l’individuo e lo scenario: sono il palcoscenico dell’esitazione, della temporaneità, il margine di passaggio tra uno stato e un altro, il posto dove sta per accadere qualcosa. Su questi spazi aleggia la percezione di un’agentività latente, lo spettro dell’artefice assente che pervade lo spazio stesso e che lo condiziona, instaurando tra luogo e fruitore un rapporto complesso. L’ospite è benvenuto soltanto entro certi termini, secondo i meccanismi di un’ospitalità potenzialmente ostile, ambigua, che ricorda l’“hostipitality” analizzata da Derrida (Derrida 2000).

Naturalmente simili caratteristiche di liminalità riguardano anche lo spazio mentale, come già sostenne l’antropologo Arnold van Gennep nello studio *Les rites de passage* del 1909 parlando proprio di liminalità. E d’altra parte il soprannaturale letterario si fonda spesso sulla sovrapposizione tra materia e psiche, tra regno fisico e regno mentale, giocando sulla sospensione tra reale irreali, tra possibile e impossibile. Per questo tipo di narrativa, la soglia è talmente importante da essere stata eletta a elemento di discriminazione critica, come nel caso dello studio di Tzvetan Todorov sulla letteratura fantastica, la quale sarebbe riconoscibile proprio per il focus sull’esitazione, davanti a un fatto inspiegabile, tra una spiegazione razionale e una irrazionale (Todorov 2011, 34).





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Estendendo il discorso al più ampio campo della letteratura del soprannaturale, la rappresentazione dello spazio-soglia non si limita dunque a ribaltare aspetti rassicuranti o introdurre mostri e spettri, ma interviene sugli elementi messi in gioco dal nostro rapporto con lo spazio e con il tempo - e cioè sui meccanismi della presenza e dell'assenza.

## 2. Spazio infestante in *House of Leaves*

Un ottimo esempio di liminalità nella letteratura del soprannaturale è il romanzo *House of Leaves* (2000) di Mark Z. Danielewski. Questo libro è conosciuto principalmente per essere un importante esempio di narrativa ergodica, cioè quella letteratura che preveda un'esplorazione "materiale" del testo e uno sforzo dinamico da parte del lettore, come esposto in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997) di Espen J. J. Aarseth. In *House of Leaves* il lettore è costretto a muoversi di continuo tra capitoli e pagine, quasi come se si trattasse di un ipertesto: "Formally, the novel is structured as a hypertext, a system of interconnected narratives woven together through hundreds of footnotes. Every appearance of the word "house" is blue, the color of an active hyperlink on the Internet" (Pressman 2006, 108).

*House of Leaves* è costruito su vari livelli narrativi: quello principale racconta del protagonista Johnny Truant, il quale si trasferisce in un nuovo appartamento dove trova il testo di un saggio accademico; il secondo livello è il saggio accademico stesso, che commenta un documentario, *The Navidson Record*; abbiamo poi descrizioni dettagliate del documentario, e poi ancora commenti e annotazioni del protagonista, insieme a interviste e lettere. *House of Leaves* è un libro da esplorare, e si propone come un'architettura narrativa attraverso la quale il lettore deve muoversi.

Questo aspetto formale si riflette anche nel tema trattato. Il documentario *The Navidson Record* tratta infatti dell'esplorazione della casa di Will Navidson, autore del



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documentario stesso, il quale un giorno si rende conto che l'abitazione è più grande all'interno che all'esterno. Misurando le distanze da parete a parete, Navidson appura che l'ambiente interno della casa si va espandendo di giorno in giorno, mentre l'esterno resta immutato. Infine nel salotto di casa appare dal nulla una porta: Navidson decide di entrarvi, trovando un lungo corridoio - molto più grande di quanto sarebbe permesso dall'architettura della casa - che conduce a una sorta di colossale labirinto.

Naturalmente *House of Leaves* presenta inevitabili rimandi alla storia della narrativa soprannaturale. L'idea di un'espansione dello spazio domestico è ricorrente nell'Ottocento, con il caso più evidente rappresentato da *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871) di Lewis Carroll. D'altra parte, anche la *weird fiction* offre esempi di trasformazione dello spazio domestico in spazio-soglia soprannaturale che permette l'accesso ad altri mondi, come si vede in *The Dreams in the Witch House* (1933) di H. P. Lovecraft o in *The House on the Borderland* (1908) di W. H. Hodgson<sup>1</sup>.

D'altra parte, l'intera costruzione di Danielewski invita a uno studio orientato alla prospettiva psicanalitica, che tenga conto dell'apparato teoretico alla base del romanzo (Bemong 2003).

Ciò ci interessa in questa sede è però la *qualità* dello spazio scoperto in *House of Leaves*. A differenza di quanto accade in buona parte degli antecedenti letterari, infatti, lo spazio soprannaturale è del tutto vuoto. La lunga serie di corridoi, rampe e scale che sembra dipanarsi all'infinito è assolutamente priva di oggetti, decorazioni o entità di qualsiasi tipo. Si tratta di spazi di passaggio che sembrano fatti solo per condurre ad altri passaggi, immersi nel buio più assoluto. Viene suggerito che qualcosa di minaccioso si

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<sup>1</sup> In entrambi i testi, gli spazi familiari divengono letteralmente porte di accesso ad altre realtà, adattandosi bene alle premesse teoriche di questo articolo. In *The Dreams in the Witch House* il protagonista Walter Gilman alloggia in una soffitta che, grazie a una precisa conformazione geometrica, può penetrare il tempo e lo spazio. In *The House on the Borderland* invece la casa del protagonista senza nome è presente contemporaneamente sia nella nostra realtà che in uno spazio (o tempo) lontanissimo, funzionando come un vero e proprio luogo di passaggio.



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nasconda in questo labirinto, forse un mostro che lascia segni di artigli e che ringhia, ma in verità questa entità non si manifesta mai chiaramente e sembra quasi doversi connaturare necessariamente all'ambiente, come un labirinto che non possa esistere senza un minotauro<sup>2</sup>.

In *The Navidson Record* l'aspetto dei corridoi viene descritto in modo suggestivo:

La torcia e la videocamera scorrono velocemente tra soffitto e pavimento, disarmoniche tra loro, frugando tanti piccoli ambienti, nicchie, o spazi che potrebbero ricordare dei guardaroba, anche se non ci sono abiti appesi. E per quanto in là si spinga lungo questo corridoio, Navidson non arriva mai a toccare con la sua torcia il punto di fuga che dovrebbe darsi all'intersezione delle linee prospettiche, che invece scivolano avanti e ancora avanti, generando uno spazio dopo l'altro, un flusso costante di angoli e muri, tutti indecifrabili e lisci.

Infine si ferma di fronte a un ingresso molto più ampio degli altri, che s'inarca alto sopra la sua testa, spalancandosi in una inviolata oscurità. La luce riesce a illuminare il pavimento ma non i muri e, per la prima volta, non ci permette di vedere il soffitto. È solo allora che iniziamo a renderei conto di quanto sia grande la casa di Navidson. (Danielewski 2019, 112)

Man mano che l'esplorazione procede, gli spazi diventano sempre più colossali e ampi, rivelando proporzioni non umane, al di là del comprensibile e totalmente angoscianti. "In *House of Leaves*, it is precisely the characteristic of endlessness that frightens the men to death" (Bemong 2003), un tipo di orrore che si contorce su sé stesso e che entra in contatto con il divino, tanto che i personaggi possono dire:

Credi in Dio? Mi sa che non te l'ho mai chiesta, questa cosa. Io adesso sì. Ma il mio Dio non ha varietà, non è il tuo cattolico o mormone o giudeo o battista o avventista del Settimo giorno o cos'altro / chi altro.

Nessun cespuglio in fiamme, né angeli, né croce. Dio è una casa. Che non è come dire che la nostra casa è la casa di Dio o una casa di Dio. Quel che voglio dire è che la nostra casa è Dio. (Danielewski 2019, 408)

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<sup>2</sup> In diversi passaggi del romanzo si allude alla leggenda del Minotauro e del labirinto, equiparando la figura dei lettori (sia quelli intradiegetici che quelli extradiegetici) alla figura di Teseo che esplora l'antro del mostro.



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Lo spazio di *House of Leaves* si presenta come liminale anche nella sua stessa genesi. Vi si accede attraverso una soglia che non dovrebbe esserci, e che si va ricavando da sola attraverso spazi ritagliati alla fisica e alla razionalità. Inoltre “The intrusion of the uncanny deprives the Navidsons ‘of any existing cohesion’ and undermines the attempt at reconciliation which the war photographer Navidson and his partner Karen were planning to undertake by moving into this new house” (Bemong 2003); il soprannaturale distrugge il senso di protezione connaturato all’idea di casa e i tentativi di riconciliazione tra Navidson e la moglie, estendendo anche la fase liminale del loro rapporto, che li sta portando vicino al divorzio. Il luogo che dovrebbe essere sicuro inverte i rapporti tra interno ed esterno, tra proprietari e ospiti, tra soggetti e oggetti, ancora richiamando la “hostipitality”:

Karen and Will, alternately Minotaur and Theseus figures trapped and powerless or exploring to conquer, also embody the duality of guest/enemy in a house that seems to welcome and then almost destroys them. This conflict is partially a result of the ways in which Will and Karen approach protection and safety. They are nearsighted or blindsided by the ideals of protection and safety that they invest in the house, even while nurturing the hostile sides of hospitality in their relations with each other, their guests, and their home. (Bida 2012, 58)

In *House of Leaves* troviamo dunque un’espansione all’infinito della soglia, e di conseguenza del senso di sospensione che vi si accompagna e che si lega all’impressione di una volontà estranea osservante e agente.

Il concetto di *agency* esterna e latente, d’altra parte, è spesso al centro della narrativa del soprannaturale. Nel suo saggio *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), Mark Fisher ha individuato un preciso tipo di soluzione stilistica presente in scenari narrativi, con un effetto di allerta paragonabile a quello che vediamo in *House of Leaves*. Si tratta dell’*erie*, una modalità estetica che crea un profondo e disturbante senso di sospensione basandosi su due meccanismi precisi: il fallimento di presenza e il fallimento di assenza.



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L'erie riguarda le più fondamentali domande metafisiche che si possano porre, domande che riguardano l'esistenza e la non esistenza: *Perché qui c'è qualcosa quando non dovrebbe esserci niente? Perché qui non c'è niente quando dovrebbe esserci qualcosa?* Gli occhi spenti di un morto, lo sguardo smarrito di un individuo colpito da amnesia – tutti elementi che generano un senso di erie, esattamente come un villaggio abbandonato o un antico cerchio di pietre. (Fisher 2018, 12)

Il fallimento di presenza si manifesta quando ci imbattiamo in qualcosa che c'è e non dovrebbe esserci. Nel caso di *House of Leaves*, è rintracciabile nelle dimensioni interne ampliate e poi nella nuova porta, una soglia prima non c'era e che con la sua apparizione minaccia la famiglia Navidson con una sovrabbondanza di spazio, per quanto esso stesso sia vuoto.

Infatti, il secondo meccanismo è il fallimento di assenza: manca qualcosa che dovrebbe esserci. E non si tratta soltanto, banalmente, dell'assenza di una spiegazione al perché dell'evento soprannaturale (spiegazione che, peraltro, di solito è facilmente rintracciabile nella narrativa fantastica ottocentesca). Qui l'assenza si manifesta soprattutto nel vuoto degli spazi, nell'illogica estensione del vuoto stesso. Non soltanto nel salotto si è aperta una porta sull'infinito, ma questo infinito è anche totalmente deserto. Pure la misteriosa e minacciosa entità che infesterebbe questo luogo non si manifesta mai direttamente, se non tramite un ruggito o un ringhio.

Questa combinazione restituisce un senso di un senso di agentività latente non dissimile da quello individuato da Fisher a proposito dell'erie:

L'enigma di fondo dietro ogni manifestazione dell'erie concerne la questione dell'agentività (agency). Nel caso del fallimento di assenza, il problema riguarda l'esistenza stessa di un'agentività. Esiste davvero qui un soggetto deliberativo? Non saremo forse osservati da un'entità che non si è ancora rivelata? Nel caso del fallimento di presenza, il problema riguarda invece la particolare natura dell'agente che opera. (Fisher 2018, 57)

Nello spazio liminale soprannaturale si avverte il senso di un intento, la necessità di una funzione, l'imminenza di un passaggio. Ma questa sospensione non si risolve mai,



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estremizzando il concetto di spazio-soglia e rendendo le sue possibilità infinite una prospettiva minacciosa e inquietante.

Una diretta conseguenza è che questo tipo di spazio liminale soprannaturale appare sostanzialmente incompatibile con la presenza umana. Lo scenario sembra essere concepito per esistere senza essere visto o vissuto, e la presenza di un osservatore che lo attraversa mette in evidenza tutta la problematicità, anche laddove lo spazio mantenga un senso di riconoscibilità.

### **3. Spazi anti-umani in *Piranesi***

La combinazione di familiarità ed estraneità nello spazio-soglia si manifesta chiaramente nel romanzo *Piranesi* (2020) di Susanna Clarke. La storia ci catapulta subito in un mondo bizzarro: il narratore Piranesi è l'unico abitante della Casa, una successione apparentemente infinita di saloni, vestiboli e scale. Ogni salone è decorato con una serie di statue di marmo, tutte diverse tra loro e con vari soggetti umani e animali intenti nelle più disparate attività. La Casa, con un'architettura monumentale in stile classico, è struttura su tre piani: quello centrale, abitato dal protagonista; quello inferiore, invaso dall'oceano che ogni tanto risale in temporanee maree; e quello superiore, occupato da grandi banchi di nuvole. La luce entra dalle finestre dei saloni, e permette la crescita di alghe e la vita di uccelli e pesci. Il protagonista vive qui dentro da sempre, e ha viaggiato per chilometri e chilometri trovando sempre e soltanto saloni. L'unica traccia di altri esseri umani sono alcuni scheletri di cui Piranesi si prende cura, pulendone le ossa, e l'Altro, un personaggio misterioso che appare solo in certe giornate.

La Casa si presenterà come un luogo insieme umano e anti-umano: a malapena garantisce la sopravvivenza di un singolo individuo in costante solitudine, esibendo i segni della deperibilità umana nella forma dei resti dei defunti.



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Eppure, per Piranesi – almeno nella prima parte della narrazione – la Casa non è soltanto il luogo migliore in cui abitare, ma è sostanzialmente *l'unico* luogo. Per lui la Casa coincide col mondo:

Sono deciso a esplorare tutto il Mondo che mi sarà possibile finché sono in vita. A questo scopo, ho viaggiato verso ovest fino al Novecentosessantesimo Salone, verso nord fino all'Ottocentonovantesimo Salone e verso sud fino al Settecentosessantottesimo Salone. [Mi sono arrampicato fino ai Saloni Superiori dove le Nuvole si spostano in una lenta processione e le Statue appaiono all'improvviso dalla Nebbia. Ho esplorato i Saloni Sommersi dove le Acque Scure sono ricoperte da un tappeto di ninfee. Ho visto i Saloni Abbandonati dell'Est dove i Soffitti, i Pavimenti – a volte persino le Pareti! – sono crollati e la penombra è squarciata da raggi di Luce grigia.]

In tutti questi luoghi, mi sono fermato sulla Soglia e ho guardato avanti. Non ho mai visto alcuna indicazione che suggerisse che il Mondo stesse arrivando a un Confine, ma soltanto il regolare susseguirsi di Saloni e Corridoi a Perdita d'Occhio. (Clarke 2020, 2)

Il punto di vista scelto dall'autrice ci porterebbe a tentare di normalizzare lo spazio della Casa. Per Piranesi, questi infiniti saloni sono l'unica realtà conosciuta e ad essi sarebbe effettivamente difficile applicare l'etichetta di spazio liminale; sono il luogo in cui risiede, non quelli che attraversa o in cui sosta per breve tempo.

Ma ben presto nella narrazione emergono indizi inquietanti sull'esistenza di un altro mondo, il nostro, che entra in contatto con quello di Piranesi; e così, nel dipanarsi della trama, si chiarisce che quella serie infinita di stanze e di statue è in effetti uno spazio-soglia al quale si accede tramite riti soprannaturali, uno scenario virtualmente infinito, una sequenza senza fine di saloni e corridoi e statue. È un mondo da attraversare, non concepito perché vi si risieda dentro – precisamente come una soglia non è pensata per sostarvi sopra. Ben presto questo luogo sospeso prende a manifestare delle minacce per il protagonista: prima i segni del passaggio di un intruso, e poi il pericolo rappresentato dal personaggio dell'Altro. Quest'ultimo si scopre essere non un semplice visitatore della Casa, ma un carceriere che vi ha costretto dentro Piranesi: come in *House of Leaves* si mette in discussione il concetto di casa quale luogo confortevole e, ancora con Derrida, si



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assottiglia il confine tra l'*hostis* inteso ora quale ospite, ora quale nemico (Derrida 2000, 15).

D'altra parte, la reale funzione della Casa-mondo di Piranesi è in ultima analisi inafferrabile. Sembra un museo, ma non ha né inizio né fine – se non, forse, in una sala centrale che ospita statue di minotauri. Le sue proporzioni sbagliate, con saloni colossali lunghi centinaia di metri, e le stesse scalinate per i piani superiori o inferiori sono troppo alte. La Casa è un gigantesco museo per non-esseri umani, una serie di corridoi da percorrere per sempre, disseminata di statue che sembrano simbolizzare idea e valori, quale la Forza - incarnata, per il protagonista, da una statua di un gorilla. Come una sorta di galleria iperuranica, la Casa di Piranesi è uno spazio accogliente che vuole racchiudere ogni idea e ogni cosa, che anzi è ogni cosa, un eterno passaggio chiuso e aperto insieme. Uno spazio liminale nel quale il soprannaturale si manifesta, come in *House of Leaves*, nell'impossibilità delle proporzioni, e nel quale si aggiunge un profondo senso di mistero allusivo, grazie alle statue che evocano l'idea di un artefice e di un pubblico, tanto che il protagonista Piranesi può dire:

Sono convinto che il Mondo (o, se preferite, la Casa, dal momento che i due sono, in definitiva, la stessa cosa) desideri avere un Abitante perché sia testimone della sua Bellezza e beneficiario delle sue Benedizioni. (Clarke 2020, 12)

Eppure – per tornare di nuovo a Fisher – in *Piranesi* si manifestano ancora una volta il fallimento d'assenza e il fallimento di presenza associati agli spazi liminali soprannaturali. Nella Casa mancano le altre persone, mancano i creatori dei saloni, mentre un oceano impossibile occupa l'interezza dei piani inferiori. E in un certo senso il fallimento di presenza si manifesta proprio nel protagonista Piranesi, che davvero non dovrebbe essere presente in quello spazio che non è concepito per esseri umani. Come





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anticipato, la componente umana e anti-umana si mescolano in una dimensione perturbante che richiama ancora l'*unheimlich*, familiare e repellente insieme.

#### 4. Un caso di liminalità digitale: le 'Backrooms'

Questa componente è ancora più smaccatamente marcata in un'iterazione dello spazio liminale soprannaturale non propriamente letteraria. Si tratta delle 'Backrooms', un fenomeno culturale nato e cresciuto su internet a partire da forum e da piattaforme dedicate allo scambio di immagini disturbanti, e che recentemente si è sviluppato soprattutto su Youtube. A metà tra scherzo e leggenda metropolitana, le 'Backrooms' sono diventate una parte importante del folklore online, e non si presentano come una narrazione unitaria, bensì come una costruzione collettiva sparsa tra testi, montaggi di foto e video, musiche ambientali e videogiochi. Un esempio di narrazione transmediale, nella quale "ciascun medium coinvolto è chiamato in causa per quello che sa fare meglio - cosicché una storia può essere raccontata da un film e in seguito diffusa da televisione, libri e fumetti" (Jenkins 2007, 84), senza una direzione unitaria e che bensì si sviluppa in modo collaborativo.

Secondo questa narrazione collettiva le 'Backrooms' sarebbero uno spazio parallelo al nostro mondo, costituito da una serie ciclopica di corridoi e stanze. Questi corridoi sono coperti da carta da parati gialla, illuminati da luci al neon sparse, e si estenderebbero per seicento milioni di miglia quadrate. Vi si accede attraversando la realtà per sbaglio (il termine originario è "Noclip", che nel linguaggio videoludico indica il passare attraverso i muri) e una volta dentro non c'è un modo sicuro per uscirne. Chi vi entra è condannato a vagare senza meta per spazi asettici, caratterizzati da un senso di familiarità - sembrano i corridoi di un albergo - ma anche da una profonda sensazione di disagio, mentre qua e là si ha la sensazione che qualcuno o qualcosa stia osservando.



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La comunità di internet ha iniziato ad espandere le 'Backrooms', inventando nuovi livelli su cui sono strutturate. Ecco allora il piano costituito da piscine, quello ingombro di giochi per bambini, quello costituito da un impossibile supermarket senza merce in vendita, e così via.

La sovrapposizione di dettagli nel tempo è stata costante, e le 'Backrooms' del 2023 sono diverse da quelle narrate nel 2019, alla loro prima apparizione online. Le caratteristiche che le hanno inizialmente rese così affascinanti per il pubblico, però, non spiccano tanto per le specificità materiali degli spazi narrati – come il fatto di essere infiniti e monotoni – quanto per la loro forte carica simbolica, atte a renderle una metafora del mondo intero (Riesgo 2022, 129).

I corridoi infiniti delle 'Backrooms' ripropongono e attualizzano il tema del labirinto, lo interpretano secondo la sensibilità contemporanea, echeggiano della stessa angosciante ricorsività degli anditi de "La Biblioteca de Babel", peraltro mostrando una singolarità affinità con gli spazi narrati nel racconto di Borges (Riesgo 2022, 135) che potrebbe tradire un'ispirazione diretta. Tuttavia, tra le tante fonti che hanno portato alla sintesi di questo fenomeno culturale, si potrà certo annoverare proprio *House of Leaves*, cui le 'Backrooms' si avvicinano anche per una questione formale, se si considerano i rapporti tra ipertesto e letteratura ergodica (Aarseth 1997, 12).

Come nel romanzo di Danielewski e in *Piranesi*, anche nelle 'Backrooms' lo spazio coincide totalmente con la soglia:

Quando il concetto di soglia incontra quello di noclip, tuttavia, può succedere che una semplice linea di confine diventi un luogo abitabile. Che la soglia, glitchando, si allunghi fino a generare uno spazio, e che questo spazio, da momento di transito diventi una prigione permanente. *Le Backrooms sono il risultato di una soglia che ha glitchato e continua ad autogenerarsi, in un loop che sembra inarrestabile.* (Tanni 2022)



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Bloccate in un passato stantio, infilate tra gli spazi della realtà e della nostra memoria, le 'Backrooms' incarnano una sospensione perenne, la tensione al ricordo di un angolo già visto, di un corridoio già percorso, alla sensazione di *déjà vu* che si applica alla realtà intera.

La nostalgia per un posto già visto, familiare e al contempo disturbante, ci rimanda ancora a Fisher. Riprendendo il concetto di *hauntology* da Derrida e riformulandolo in vari scritti raccolti in *Ghosts of my life* (2014), Fisher lo ha articolato come un senso di sospensione e di stasi, la percezione dell'infestazione di un futuro che poteva essere e che non sarà mai:

Tornando alla distinzione introdotta da Hägglund tra il non più e il non ancora, possiamo distinguere provvisoriamente due direzioni dell'hauntologia. La prima si riferisce a ciò che (nella realtà) non è più, ma che rimane efficace sotto forma di virtualità (la «coazione a ripetere» traumatica, un modello fatale). Il secondo senso dell'hauntologia si riferisce a ciò che (nella realtà) non è ancora avvenuto, ma che è già efficace nella sfera virtuale (un attrattore, un'aspettativa che modella il comportamento attuale). (Fisher 2019, 60)

Recentemente su Youtube sono apparsi dei *mockumentary*, nei quali si mettono in scena delle finte riprese registrate all'interno delle 'Backrooms'. Questi video hanno riscosso un grande successo, soprattutto quelli del giovane regista Kane Parsons, il quale ha creato attorno alla leggenda delle 'Backrooms' un intero sistema narrativo che fa riferimento a tropi e luoghi comuni degli anni Novanta. Nei documentari viene ricreato l'effetto sgranato della registrazione video su nastro, l'estetica di fine millennio, persino il linguaggio delle aziende multinazionali che fanno marketing pubblicizzando la scoperta e lo sfruttamento commerciale delle 'Backrooms'. Si evoca un'epoca perduta che *non è più*, ma la cui eco spirituale – sintetizzata un ottimismo totale, che pretende di governare l'ingovernabile – infesta come un fantasma il nostro presente di società occidentale, percorsa da un senso di impotenza verso un mondo sempre più incomprensibile. E il



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sensu di una minaccia incombente, che *non è ancora avvenuta*, prende già oggi le nostre individualità, come se fossimo fermi su un'eterna soglia.

Forse è proprio questo che rende così efficaci le 'Backrooms': la loro capacità, attraverso una semplice foto, di evocare in noi ricordi di posti già visti, posti già vissuti, dei quali ci resta appena qualche traccia sopita e che sembrano al contempo vicini e impalpabili. La hall di un albergo, un parco giochi, una stazione di servizio: posti così transitori da non farci quasi più caso nel momento in cui li viviamo. Quando però ci fermiamo a registrare i dettagli, a concepire la loro organizzazione e la loro funzione, in noi si attiva un senso di disagio – il disagio di un'attesa che non si conclude mai, della frammentarietà dell'individuo, della relazione sempre più difficile e impossibile con i luoghi.

## 5. Conclusioni

Se *House of Leaves*, *Piranesi* e le 'Backrooms' ci affasciano e insieme ci inquietano, è perché fanno leva su un tasto dolente della nostra interiorità. La consapevolezza, sempre meno latente, che lo stile di vita occidentale impone una sospensione perenne, un passaggio continuo, un'estensione totalizzante della soglia. Colpiti soprattutto dal senso di fallimento dell'assenza, ci muoviamo attraverso luoghi che sembrano voler diventare autonomi, automatici, per i quali l'umanità è poco più che un'intrusa; e la letteratura del soprannaturale, da sempre usa a colpirci nei nostri punti deboli, ha fatto di quei luoghi un limbo infinito, una soglia eterna, la liminalità eretta a dimensione. Quei corridoi vuoti, quelle statue senza artista, quelle stanze male illuminate dai neon hanno forse davvero un unico creatore: noi, il nostro senso di precarietà del mondo, il timore che ciò che ci sopravviverà sarà soltanto una stanza vuota.



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**“Another side of the picture”:  
Analyzing the Outsider’s Perspective  
in Virginia Woolf’s *A Passionate Apprentice***

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**Abstract**

The fact that the diary form includes more genres and mixes the public aspect with the private one has meant that it is considered a "minor" genre compared to the more canonical ones. Over time its alleged lack of rules and its hybrid and elusive nature has led critics to associate the diary with traditional women's literature. Women's diaries are therefore doubly marginal within the literary tradition. This marginality, however, has not prevented the diary from becoming a means of free expression and emancipation of the woman writer. *A Passionate Apprentice* is the collection of Virginia Stephen's youth diaries from which the author's spontaneous decision to write from the margin emerges. It is a space that Virginia herself shapes and allows her to analyze and challenge social hypocrisy and family pretensions. In an extreme rejection of Victorian society and its masculine tradition, Woolf tries not to succumb to the "cogwheels" of patriarchal power by using the diary as the personal space of an outsider. The choice to write from the margin is conscious though painful, but the author's voice becomes more convinced precisely when – in pursuit of her aesthetic quest – Virginia crosses new boundaries and finds her own vision as a professional writer. The first part of the paper – after a brief introduction to the diary genre – focuses on the 1897 diary and Virginia's creation of the fictional character of Miss Jan. The second part focuses on the 1903 diary and the observations of Victorian society and its mechanisms from a marginal perspective that allows Woolf to grasp deeper meanings.





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## 1. The Diary genre

In *On Diary*, Philippe Lejeune analyzes the diary, a genre little considered for many years and sometimes snobbishly traced back to para literature, therefore marginal compared to more traditional genres. According to Lejeune "A diary is not only a text: it is a behaviour, a way of life, of which the text is merely a trace or by-product. [The diary] is the point where life and literature meet" (Lejeune 2009, 262). As a "hybrid form", it is not possible to trace its boundaries within a single gender. According to Lejeune, the diary occupies an intermediate zone (in between) between two opposite poles (Lejeune 2009, 94) and focuses on a space *between* the monologue and the dialogue. It partly escapes the definition of monologue because the author addresses someone, but it cannot be defined as a dialogue because this someone turns out to be the author himself. By virtue of the fact that the diary includes several genres and mixes the private aspect with the public one, the diary form has always been accused of a lack of rigour and rules, in open contrast with canonical literature. The second part of the collection – *The Diary on Trial* – reports a series of attributes that over time have traditionally been associated with the genre: for Ernest Renan, the diary is dangerous and unhealthy (Renan in Lejeune 2009, 148); In *The Book to Come*, Maurice Blanchot defines the diary as a useless genre that exasperates nothingness, a hybrid whose only value is its insignificance (Blanchot 2003,185). Beatrice Didier writes that the passivity and randomness typical of the diary underline a certain femininity (Didiere in Lejeune 2009, 150). The elusive nature of the diary, the difficulty in placing it in a predetermined category, and the apparent lack of rules led to its association with traditional women's literature. This is because the diary was one of the few literary forms available to women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The type of writing that the diary receives is perceived by critics as too personal or emotional. More men than women wrote diaries until the mid-nineteenth century and, until then, both male and female diaries were public documents. After that period the diaries became more private and were written more frequently by women, increasing



considerably towards the end of the nineteenth century. Detractors of the diary brand its writing as feminine even though most of the diaries were written by men.

Feminist critics have pointed out that the diary has been an important means of expression for women in many cultural, economic, and ethnic contexts. In *Gender and the Journal*, Cinthia Gannett writes that the term diary, when it was coined, did not have the negative meaning of excessive sentimentality, or femininity that it has for many; on the contrary, *diary* was used as a synonym for *journal* for hundreds of years and referred to a wide range of writings both public and private. Over time, the term *diary*, unlike *journal*, was increasingly approached to women's writing. Gannett points out the imbalance present in the literary tradition, which counts almost exclusively men among the great diarists of history but also points out the fact that those who dictated the canon were exclusively men. Criticism of the diary consists of a chorus of male voices, which almost always evaluate works written by men while female diarists are excluded or not given much attention (Gannett 1992, 111). In *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women*, Judy Simons writes that the reason for the secondary importance attributed to the diary was the awareness – on the part of the purely male critics – that it was a powerful medium, capable of extending the limits of female creativity and able to give the authors the opportunity to treat, without any censorship, topics strictly forbidden elsewhere (Simons 1990, 18). At a time when silence and modesty were generally considered feminine virtues, it was to the diary that women turned to when other means of written expression were precluded for them. For many eighteenth and nineteenth-century women, personal diaries turned into an indirect means of resisting codes of behavior with which they did not feel comfortable, allowing them to release feelings and opinions that had no other outlet.

## 2. “Poor Miss Jan is bewildered”

Woolf's early diaries were published under the title *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals* edited by Mitchell A. Leaska. What emerges from the diaries is a vivid portrait of



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the life of a teenager and then of a girl from a good family in Victorian society, in the period from 1897 to 1909. The diary is the account of the apprenticeship that the young author undertakes through writing but also the account of the life of a young woman who approaches maturity and adulthood in a life full of pain and loss – among all, those of her beloved mother Julia – and who tries to come to terms with family and social expectations; its pages offer a space free from constraints, which she carves out herself: the space of an outsider, from which she observes the reality in which she lives and creates. The feeling of being an outsider – which accompanied Virginia throughout her life – would later find a more mature expression in *The Three Guineas*, a political pamphlet written in 1937, in which Woolf denounced the connection between the war and the treatment of women and theorised a “Society of Outsiders” made up entirely of women. In *Three Guineas* Virginia urged her readers to embrace and defend their difference – taking advantage of the outsider's perspective – to think with an autonomous and free mind, to generate bright thoughts, inspired by the principles of justice, equality and freedom: “The questions that we have to ask and to answer [...] are so important that they may well change the lives of all men and women forever [...] Think we must [...] let us never cease from thinking--what is this ‘civilization’ in which we find ourselves?” (Woolf 2020, 949). The assertion of the importance of freedom of thought is central both in *Three Guineas* and in the diary. Keeping a journal was a way young Virginia slowly learned to respect herself as a thinking being endowed with a will of her own, by which she tried to give meaning to her life (DeSalvo 1991, 236). 1897 was the year of her recovery after a nervous breakdown, as well as the year in which her father and doctors had decided that she was not stable enough to receive lessons or go to school. Therefore, she was the only one in the family to keep a diary when in fact she was also the only one of the Stephen siblings who was not taught anything. The diary served young Virginia to defy the judgment of uselessness that had been expressed about her by Leslie Stephen and the doctors, but it also served her to win that place in history, even if history had ordinarily deprived women of a place in its pages and recorded



only the lives of the "great" men (DeSalvo 1991, 236). On February 3, Virginia writes desperately: "Ida [Milman] has asked us to tea there tomorrow - no way of it" (Woolf 1992, 29). Exasperation due to Victorian rituals that were repeated every day is evident in this passage but also the anguish caused by growing social pressure. The next day Virginia writes her impressions of the visit to the Milmans: "Had a long dreary tea with the Milmans, dances were discussed afterwards, in which Miss Jan did not take much interest" (Woolf 1992, 29). The Miss Jan mentioned in the diary is none other than Virginia herself who very often – only in the diary and letters of the first months of 1897 – speaks of herself in the third person, giving life to a fictitious projection to which she gives the name of Miss Jan. According to Mitchell Leaska, the name derives from "January", the month of Virginia's birth (Woolf 1992, 5). This literary alter ego appears in the first entry of the diary and then continues to appear throughout the year 1897. Always portrayed in a comically vulnerable position, Miss Jan is used by Virginia to express opinions and judgments but also to describe herself in different contexts, almost all of them social. Miss Jan – but especially the writing of the diary – serves Virginia to distance herself from events, to observe them from a more marginal perspective, and to shake off the anguish arising from the social expectations of others. The creation of this character allows Woolf to perform and simultaneously observe her bewilderment and embarrassment from the outside. In February, on the occasion of the visit to Stilman writes: "Poor Miss Jan utterly lost her wits, dropped her umbrella, answered at random, talked nonsense and grew as red as turkey cock. Only rescued from this by S. [Stella] proposing to go away. So, we left, I with the conviction that whatever talent Miss Jan may have, she does not possess the one qualifying her to shine good in society" (Woolf 1992, 67). In this passage, Miss Jan is depicted as a compassion-inspiring, socially clumsy, and disorganized character. Starting from the assumption that the first diaries represent the formation of the Victorian female self – a necessary process for all women who wanted to integrate into society – to discipline herself Virginia had to distance herself from her feelings by attributing certain emotions to Miss Jan (DeSalvo 1991, 112). During 1897 it was much



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easier for Woolf to write "as Miss Jan says" – pouring emotions on her fictional character – than to face the feelings she herself felt. In other words, if there was an emotion particularly difficult to express verbally, that same emotion was transposed to the character Miss Jan, in the diary and – less often – in letters. The perspective of Miss Jan allowed adolescent Virginia to explore thoughts and ideas of a theological nature that if spoken in the home of her father – the agnostic Sir Leslie Stephen – would sound like heresy. In Virginia's diaries, DeSalvo sees the attempt of a young woman to "find her own voice"; an accusation against a society that demanded female silence: "for women as everyone knows are not supposed to have a voice of their own" (DeSalvo 1991, 98). On the first day of February, Virginia writes an entry that makes the power dynamics within the Stephen family clear:

A terrible idea started that Stella and I should take lodgings at Eastbourne or some such place, where Jack is going next week – Impossible to be alone with those two creatures, yet if I do not go, Stella will not, and Jack particularly wishes her to – The question is, whether Nessa will be allowed to come too – If so, it would be better – but goodness knows how we shall come out of this quandary as Vanessa calls it. [...] I have been in a dreadful temper all day long, poor creature – and lead Stella and Vanessa a life – Cannot protest too strongly against going (though I do) or else S will have to give it up, and her poor young man would be miserable – but think of going! If we go, we should start next Monday, and stay away till Saturday. This is a dreadful fix – Poor Miss Jan is bewildered. (Woolf 1992, 27)

The imposition by her father Leslie to act as chaperone to her half-sister Stella and accompany her to Eastbourne fills Woolf with an enormous sense of helplessness, which results in anger and disappointment. Predicting that she would be held responsible for the couple's behaviour, Virginia immediately expresses her bad mood – "A terrible idea" – and realizing that her opinion and her voice would not be taken into account, Virginia remarks her anger – "I have been in a dreadful temper all day long" – then dissociates from herself by adding "poor creatures". When such feelings are called into question, Virginia evokes Miss Jan who helps her dissociate from her own identity. On February 19, after a visit to the Stilman, Virginia again offers empathy to her alter ego: "Poor Miss Jan utterly lost her wits dropped her umbrella, answered at random talked nonsense [...] (Woolf 1992, 39). The episode strengthens Virginia's awareness of her social clumsiness and leads her to admit:



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“[...] whatever talents Miss Jan may have; she does not possess the one qualifying her to shine in good society” (Woolf 1990, 39). The use of "poor Miss Jan" leads Virginia to deny herself the right to feel dejected as an unheard voice, as well as to internalize feelings such as anger that did not suit a Victorian young lady (DeSalvo 1991, 228). Only through the fictitious identity of Miss Jan, Virginia allows herself to express her legitimate feelings of bewilderment in the face of situations she could not control, both as a teenager and as a woman. Lounsberry, on the other hand, believes that Miss Jan's primary function is to gain understanding and attention from others and above all sympathy (Lounsberry 2014, 35). Coinciding with the untimely death of Stella, Miss Jan disappears from the pages of her diary and letters without being mentioned again. The use of this fictitious character during a difficult year like 1897 allowed Virginia to create the basis for her intellectual identity but above all, it was the first and most provocative act of her adolescence, perpetrated however from a socially acceptable perspective (DeSalvo 1991, 237).

### **3. “A Stoic with a heart”**

The social events of London society become the focus of the diary of 1903, with the euphoria and glitter of the ballrooms. The diary of 1903 portrays Virginia's debut in society where – forced by her half-brother George Duckworth – she began to attend the high society of London receptions. George had taken it upon himself to introduce Virginia to society and have her attend countless parties where she felt painfully out of place. The pages of the diary and letters of 1903 are not written by the hand of a teenager but are the result of the work of a young writer – Virginia is twenty-one years old – who begins to have very clear ideas about her life and her inclinations. It is clear to her, above all what she does not want: she does not like to attend parties, does not like to dance, and she cannot immerse herself in a world that seems full of appearances and emptiness. The clash between the eternal natural world and the ephemeral, artificial, and sometimes destructive world of London parties and dances emerges from the pages. The look assumed by young Virginia is that of the outsider



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who, despite being in the middle of a dance, is not dazzled by lights or seduced by music. Although the feeling of being an outsider links the pages of the diary to those of *Three Guineas*, the author's attitude differs greatly over the years. The curiosity and critical interest that animate young Virginia's social observations gave way to the "clear, rational and ironic prose" (Fusini 2021, 283) that distinguishes the political pamphlet in which – with cool logic and biting humour – Virginia tied together women's rights (or, rather, their denial) with patriarchy, Nazism and fascism. The rigid division of the world into public and private "services" (Woolf 2020, 815), associated respectively with the male and female spheres, is also present in the diary. In the 1903 diary, London is constantly compared to the countryside: the city represents culture, male literary tradition, and even (social) death (Lounsberry 2014, 54). The country, on the other hand, is configured as a symbol of nature, femininity, the unconscious, and freedom from constraints. The first entries contain very critical episodes of Victorian social life written from the marginal perspective from which Virginia felt she had to observe the reality in which she was immersed. The young author takes a step back, not only metaphorically – she remains distant and isolated at every party she finds herself attending – and observes the social dynamics in action, at the very moment in which they are revealed, learning to observe in the way a professional writer observes. In *A Sketch of the Past*, autobiographical writing of 1939, Virginia recalls that she attended the social evenings with the detachment of the professional writer, although slightly fascinated by the gossip of society at the height of its performance: "There was a spectator in me who, even while I squirmed and obeyed, remained observant, note taking for some future revision" (Woolf 2018, 11717). While admitting that at times some social rituals fascinate her, in general, Virginia does not understand them or – if she does – cannot take part in them. Very often the bleak perception of the emptiness of the situations she is witnessing becomes acute in her soul, but beyond the sparkling façade made of silk clothes and frivolities underlie deeper dynamics, which deviate from the alleged superficiality of the scene.



On June 29, Woolf writes a piece entitled *A Dance in Queens Gate*, in which she describes a garden party she witnessed from her bedroom window, a recurring element in Virginia's future production<sup>1</sup>. In this regard, Mancini writes that the urban landscape is observed from inside the house or through a window, a purely feminine perspective: "grazie a [le finestre] si può respirare un refolo d'aria pura e di libertà, assistere non visti allo svolgersi degli eventi che avvengono al di fuori, comunicare con chi sta oltre quelle mura, meditare sulle proprie emozioni e sulla condotta altrui, oppure sognare di poter evadere un giorno dalle oppressive mura domestiche e dalle delimitazioni sociali e morali" (Mancini 2020, 2954). The gaze that sweeps out of the window gives Virginia the opportunity to meditate – in observing it – on a world in which she was asked to be part but which she preferred to observe from the outside, safe in the intimate space of her room:

About two hours ago, when I went to bed, I heard what I took to be signs of merry making in the mews. A violin squeaked, there was a noise of loud voices & laughter. [...] my critical mind when awake enough to think at all about it, decided that the fiddle squeaking &c. was token of a ball – not in our street – but in Queens Gate – the tall row of houses that makes a background to the mews. The music grew so loud, so rhythmic – as the night drew on & the London roar lessened, that I threw up my window, leant out into the cool air, & saw the illuminations which told surely from what house the music came. (Woolf 1992, 164)

The sound of violins, laughter, and chattering attracts Virginia who for a moment feels euphoric, overwhelmed by the urge to dance, stripped of all inhibitions: "The music has begun again - oh dear – the swing & the lilt of that waltz makes me almost feel as though I could jump from my bed & dance it too. [...] you [...] yield to that strange passion which sends you madly whirling around the room – oblivious of everything save that you must keep swaying with the music" (Woolf 1992, 165). The spectacle of the night sky highlights the littleness and transience of those men and women intent on dancing among trampled

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<sup>1</sup> In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), returning from a conference in Oxbridge, Virginia looks out a window as she begins to think about what to write on the subject of "women and the novel." In *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (1924), the window becomes a literary medium that Woolf uses to critique Edwardian style. At the window Clarissa Dalloway takes a moment from her party and ponders the tragic death of Septimus Warren Smith, in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).





flowers and crumpled silks: "I am looking into the awful night sky – It is so thick tonight that not a star shows – The same sky stretches round the world, I think – But the music again! Brave little mortals fiddling & dancing beneath it!" (Woolf 1992,165). The outsider's gaze sweeps over the entire scene and compares the natural world with London's ephemeral, artificial receptions. At this point, Virginia notices a large tree silently and quietly silhouetted against the chatter of the party, epitome of the clash between the natural world and the city that – in Virginia's words – sees the former win on the latter: "[...] from my bed I see the leaves of a tree outlined against it. I don't know why it is, but this incongruity – the artificial lights, the music – the talk – & then the quiet tree standing out there, is fantastic & attracts me considerably" (Woolf 1992, 165 -166). The seeming lightheartedness of the scene begins to be cracked by small touches that Virginia scatters throughout the narrative, dissonant notes that alter the apparent serenity of the moment by making the whole scene mournful. The fiddlers appear stout and pale, sitting in the same corner playing – with little conviction – always the same music, looking around with exhausted and disillusioned eyes: "I can no longer dance in spirit - nor I fancy do the fiddlers fiddle with that gaiety with which they started. After all they are not inspired Gods, calling men to a more joyous & passionate existence, a dance which shall last through life & into eternity - they are pale, perhaps stout men, who fiddle thus every night of the week" (Woolf 1992, 166). The scene becomes increasingly bleak and dreamlike as the dance turns into a vision of ghostly (self)destruction and the music takes full control of the dancers: "Nobody is dancing in time to it, now I am sure – or they dance as pale phantoms because so long as the music sounds they must dance – no help for them." (Woolf 1992, 166). In a moment the music regains strength and spares none of those present, sucked into a relentless whirlpool. But something suddenly changes and the sky has a different hue, deathly pale but alive. The dawn breaks in. In the end, only the intervention of the natural world and the triumph of dawn restores order, illuminating the birth of a new day and putting an end to the dance: "The dawn is folding the world in its pure morning kiss of salutation. No lamplight can burn



in the radiance of that whiteness - no music can sound in the pause of that awful silence. The Dance is over" (Woolf 1992,167).

*A Garden Dance* describes another party at which Virginia finds herself pushed "into a thick knot of human beings" (Woolf 1992, 170). The room is packed with people shaking hands, introducing themselves, and then heading to the centre of the room: "A small centre [...] in a state of circular motion". The circular movement recalls the whirlpool that swallows up the dancers in *A Dance in Queens Gate*. If the waltz attracts everyone into the whirlpool at the centre of the room, Virginia moves away, crosses the room, and from the window observes the scene with the necessary, cynical detachment: "Here we stopped & looked about us, with the cynical coolness of youth just a little excited, & determined not to show its agitation." (Woolf 1992, 170) Interestingly even more than thirty years later, Virginia uses the term whirlpool several times in *A Sketch of the Past* to describe the exhausting inevitability of the duties demanded by Society: [...] we [Virginia and Vanessa] realized that we had to make a place for ourselves in this bewildering, frustrating whirlpool (Woolf 2018, 11805). The marginal perspective from which she observes the frenzied dance provides bleak details, in portraying the unequal struggle of the smaller against larger forces, a theme Virginia also addresses in *The Death of The Moth*, published posthumously in 1942: "[...] from a small distance the dancers looked painfully like flies struggling in a dish of sticky liquid" (Woolf 1992, 170). The physical space Virginia places between herself and the anonymous crowd of dancers allows her to feel "pleasantly detached, & able to criticize the antics of my companions from a cold distance (Woolf 19942, 170). The spectacle that unfolds before her – despite the frenzy, the music, and the lights – exerts no attraction in the young woman's eyes: "No sight in the world is so ugly and depressing as a room full of people who do not know each other. One concludes at once that they are extraordinarily ugly or extraordinarily dull or extraordinarily badly dressed" (Woolf 1992, 170). Fancy clothes mark a change in "social demeanor"; once worn "I will be ready to talk about the floor, the weather and other frivolities, which I consider trivialities in a nightgown". It is not surprising then that Woolf



prefers the authenticity of her nightgown to the artificiality of ball gowns: "A nice dress makes you artificial – ready for lights and music – ready to accept that artificial vision of life that is presented to one in a ballroom – life as seen by electric light and washed down by champagne" (Woolf 1992, 169) Just as in *A Dance in Queens Gate*, Nature and Society meet and the comparison creates an illusory effect: "Once again I noticed that strange fusion of the two lights: the pale light of the sky and the yellow light of the lamps and candles, illuminating together the green leaves and the grass. It creates a curious unreal effect" (Woolf 1992, 171).

The July 15 entry, *Thoughts Upon Social Success*, sees Virginia deeply pondering the mechanisms of social success at work at a ball to which she was invited. First of all, she admits that she does not possess the gift of social success, that she feels alienated from events and therefore more inclined to savour her role as an outsider: "We always seem to be outsiders where everybody else is intimate" (Woolf 1992, 167). In acknowledging that she does not possess any social peculiarities, Virginia reflects on the female gender and admits that there is one thing that consoles her, that unites all the women of the world: "we are equally at home everywhere – (not at all, that is to say) & we are confined to no one set in particular". On such evenings Virginia rarely exchanges a word with anyone, preferring to observe social mechanisms from the outside at the very moment in which they manifest themselves: "All the same I can sit and watch with pure delight those who are adept at the game" (Woolf 1992,170). In *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf recalls one of the few occasions when – during a reception at the Chamberlains', she joined the conversation with a party guest and then regretted it almost immediately: "And then on I plunged, and told him – the words come back – that snobbishness, that money making, deserved imprisonment as well as theft and murder. But I had plunged too deep; the glue stuck to my quivering feet" (Woolf 2018, 11719). Woolf's attitude moves between the euphoria, the excitement of novelty, and the emotional detachment of the writer who – in attending a show – reflects on what words she will then use to best describe it, once at home safe in her private space: "I recall that the good



friend who is with me still, upheld me; that sense of the spectacle; the dispassionate separate sense that I am seeing what will be useful later; I could even find the words for the scene as I stood there (Woolf 2018, 11719). The artificiality of Victorian upper bourgeois society gives contrasting sensations: if on the one hand, Woolf is dazzled and fascinated by the pure conventionality of the receptions she attends, on the other hand, the sense of unreality that pervades her is acute: "If it was unreal, there was a thrill in that unreality "(Woolf 2018, 11720). The "social gift" does not belong to her, not because it is out of her reach but because she does not want to waste time pursuing it, unlike the girls of her age who instead make it the ultimate goal of their lives. The reflection on young women of her age leads Woolf to call them "social flowers", sleeping during the day and active only when the clock strikes eight o'clock. The bell brings them back to existence, and requires them from the darkness in which they live to finally bloom in the living room as "hyacinths in June". The association with flowers is taken to the extreme when Virginia struggles to recognize them as human beings: "Has she a stalk or a body – is she clothed in silk or gauze or are they flower petals that shine on her?" (Woolf 1992, 168). Despite realizing the total falsity of the Victorian social ideal, Virginia tells herself and her diary to admire these fragments of society "even though I myself take no part in it". The social game requires enormous skills but the fundamental elements are clothes, strictly silk, and perfect ornaments to mask problems and sorrows:

You must consciously try to carry out in your conduct what is implied by your clothes; they are silken – of the very best make – only to be worn with the greatest care, on occasions such as these. They are meant to please the eyes of others – to make you something more brilliant than you are by day. This seems to me a good ideal. You come to a party meaning to give pleasure; therefore you leave your sorrows & worries at home – for the moment, remember, we are all dressed in silk – without sorrow or bother that is – more than that, you must be prepared to be actively happy: if you talk it must be at least to express pleasure at something; better still if you can, say something amusing: seriousness is just as much out of place here as an old serge skirt. (Woolf 1992, 168)

For two or three hours, therefore, the participants in the game decide to show their "silk façade", without ever digging dangerously deeper, without challenging the sophisticated social mechanisms in action. Efficient mechanisms, as well as cruel and ruthless, designed



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to extinguish any artistic inspiration of young women: "Society in those days was a perfectly competent, perfectly complacent, ruthless machine. A girl had no chance against its fangs. No other desires – say to paint, or to write – could be taken seriously" (Woolf 2018, 11721). One might then think that the men and women who populate these events are only empty shells, wedged between the gears of the Victorian social "machine": "it is easy to conclude that society is hollow – that the men & women who make it are heartless" (Woolf 1992, 169) Actually beyond the surface there is what Virginia calls "another side of the picture". The apparent superficiality of the scene hides the miseries and sorrows of men and women in elegant clothes who courageously try to move forward, and react to social forces of enormous magnitude thanks to the power of laughter: "There is nothing really so desperately difficult, I am sure, as laughter. The whole pressure of the world is to make you take things seriously (Woolf 1992, 169). To achieve social success and survive the masquerade "one wants the courage of a hero". In the eyes of twenty-one-year-old Virginia, not only courage is the fundamental weapon to shine in society, but also a certain amount of nobility of soul: "[...] to be successful I think one must be a Stoic with a heart" (Woolf 1992,169).

#### 4. Conclusions

Despite being accused of inconclusiveness, lack of rigour and rules, and therefore marginalized as a secondary genre with little academic value, the diary has proved to be a powerful means of rediscovery of the self, thanks to which light has been shed on "moments of being" of which otherwise there would be no trace if we relied exclusively on the most traditional genres. A doubly marginal genre as a diary – as intimate practice and as a genre associated with female writing – turns out to be doubly important for the rediscovery of a world hidden from view and on constructions of femininity that very often deviated from the conventional image perpetrated by the literature of the period. In Virginia Woolf's case, the margin itself is consciously chosen as a new perspective – that of the outsider – from



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which to look at the world, in the discovery that words were her most powerful weapon for dealing with reality and social pressures. Behind the shyness and social awkwardness of her youth, there was a constructive force at work, an impulse towards writing and towards a profound analysis of reality and society that found its expression in the pages of the diary, in the awareness that being an outsider, being outside the swirling centre, allowed a vision that those on the inside do not always manage to grasp.

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### **Bio-bibliographical note**

**Serena Ammendola** earned a master's degree in *Modern Languages and Literatures* from the University of Calabria with the thesis entitled *Becoming Virginia Woolf: the Diaries and Letters*. During her studies, with the publishing house Mimesis and the Center for Women's Studies "Milly Villa" (University of Calabria, IT), she published an essay – in the volume *Migrazioni: Percorsi interdisciplinari* – entitled "The voice of silence: complicity, assimilation and resistance in *Wide Sargasso Sea*". Her interest in the studies of Woolf led her to become a member of the Italian Virginia Woolf Society.

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**Patricia García, *The Urban Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century European Literature: City Fissures* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2021)**

Recensione di Francesco Corigliano  
(Università della Calabria, IT)

*The Urban Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century European Literature: City Fissures* è l'ultimo lavoro di García, attenta studiosa della letteratura fantastica che ha già pubblicato il notevole *Space and the Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary Literature: The Architectural Void* (2015).

*The Urban Fantastic* offre una prospettiva particolare sul tema del fantastico. In questo volume García si occupa della relazione tra narrativa fantastica e contesto urbano, esaminando la rappresentazione della città nella narrativa del soprannaturale di lingua inglese, spagnola e francese a cavallo tra XIX e XX secolo. Dopo un'introduzione che delinea l'impostazione teorica e il metodo di selezione dei testi, il volume si divide in tre parti: la prima è dedicata all'architettura urbana e al fantastico in relazione allo spazio-edificio; la seconda è relativa alle persone e all'importanza degli incontri nell'ambito dello scenario cittadino; la terza si concentra sul concetto di ritmo applicato alla città. Seguono un epilogo – che tratta l'argomento del fantastico urbano nella letteratura contemporanea – e un'utile cronologia dei testi analizzati.

La decisione di affrontare l'argomento per sfere tematiche piuttosto che secondo una ripartizione linguistica permette all'autrice di evidenziare ulteriormente le costanti del





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fantastico riconoscibili in contesti culturali differenti, e anche di concentrarsi su elementi peculiari che, pur presenti in molta della produzione del genere, non sempre sono stati affrontati nella loro specificità. In effetti, la prospettiva adottata da *The Urban Fantastic* rende questo testo un buon esempio di come sia possibile affrontare oggi un argomento già profondamente dibattuto, quale quello della letteratura fantastica. García non si sofferma a lungo sulla complessa questione inerente alla natura del fantastico, e si discosta da un approccio eccessivamente teso alla categorizzazione preferendo delineare in modo più ampio il proprio campo di studi. Nello scegliere i testi di cui occuparsi, l'autrice ha inteso il fantastico come una branca della narrativa del soprannaturale (8), caratterizzata da un elemento ricorrente: "The supernatural element that features in the selected texts is instead problematized as a logical breach and an ontological impossibility. It is not integrated within the logic and laws of its narrative world (as in the marvelous or fantasy)" (9). E anche se esclude dalla propria prospettiva i testi utopici e distopici, García chiarisce comunque che "In the fantastic as understood in this book there is no attempt to distance the storyworld from the world of the reader's lived experience. Indeed, the opposite is true" (9). Per l'autrice è chiaro come un'analisi dell'impatto della modernità sulla storia letteraria non possa prescindere da una concezione di fantastico basata sulla sua tendenza all'esperienza quotidiana e sull'intento di dire qualcosa sul nostro mondo: "The idea of a 'modern fantastic' is tautological, since the fantastic is inherently modern" (11). Queste dichiarazioni nell'introduzione fungono da breve manifesto teorico e da esplicitazione del discrimine usato per selezionare i testi, stabilendo quali possano rientrare nella prospettiva dello studio.

Un plauso particolare andrebbe rivolto proprio al lavoro sulle fonti, un'impresa meticolosa che la studiosa ha condotto su un numero notevole di pubblicazioni in lingua inglese, spagnola e francese, spaziando tra antologie nazionali e periodici - come, nel caso



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della narrativa anglosassone, le riviste ottocentesche *Household Words*, *All the Year Round* e *Dublin University Magazine*. Il lavoro sulle fonti basterebbe a rendere utile *The Urban Fantastic* allo studioso del fantastico, anche soltanto come esempio di metodo; a ciò si aggiunge la non scontata proposta dei testi, alcuni dei quali costituiscono dei recuperi interessantissimi, soprattutto nel terzo capitolo.

Passando alle sezioni di analisi vera e propria, la prima parte di *The Urban Fantastic* si distingue in due capitoli che, pur essendo dedicati al tema dell'architettura urbana nel fantastico, si focalizzano su aspetti diversi. Il primo tratta del *topos* del negozio che vende oggetti antichi, spesso dotati di proprietà soprannaturali; il secondo dell'appartamento infestato. La struttura teorica di questa sezione risulta particolarmente convincente, partendo dai lavori di Philippe Hamon e Anthony Vidler sul rapporto tra razionalità e architettura e illustrando in modo chiaro lo spostamento della localizzazione del soprannaturale dalla narrativa gotica a quella fantastica. Se nel gotico l'elemento perturbante si situava in luoghi lontani nello spazio e nel tempo, con la tendenza alla rappresentazione di luoghi esotici o antichi, nel fantastico l'*uncanny* si manifesta negli ambienti conosciuti, nella città o nella casa. L'intrusione del soprannaturale si palesa attraverso oggetti o presenze. I primi usualmente sono ritrovati nel negozio di oggetti antichi, come accade in "Le pied de momie" di Théophile Gautier, analizzato nel primo capitolo e comparato in modo particolarmente efficace a "La peau de chagrin" di Honoré de Balzac. Le seconde, e cioè i fantasmi, appaiono nella *comfort-zone* per eccellenza, la casa, come ben esplicitato nell'analisi di "The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth" di Rhoda Broughton. "Both tropes work as fissures through which the fantastic penetrates into the rational foundations of the modern city (40); vale a dire che il fantastico si insinua nelle radici della stessa contemporaneità, basata su un ambiente organizzato e strutturato come quello cittadino.



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La seconda parte del libro affronta il contesto urbano come luogo sociale e come scenario dell'inaspettato. La sezione si articola in due capitoli, dedicati rispettivamente agli incontri con personaggi femminili fantasmatici e ai luoghi in cui si verificano questo genere di intrusioni. Se la narrazione della città passa attraverso la narrazione degli individui che vi si relazionano, e se questo processo serve a rendere "the city a legible milieu and helped reduce the vastness of urban life into classifiable categories of city personalities" (93), è inevitabile che esso coinvolga anche i personaggi di stampo soprannaturali. Non soltanto i fantasmi si sono spostati dai castelli agli appartamenti vittoriani, ma hanno anche cambiato approccio alla vita (e alla non-vita) mutando la propria rappresentazione letteraria. Così i personaggi possono chiedersi perché gli spettri non abbiano di meglio da fare che apparire alle sedute dei medium, come nel caso di "The Man of Science" di Jerome K. Jerome (95), o addirittura possiamo assistere alle vicende di fantasmi che commettono errori perseguitando la persona sbagliata, come in "Vision" di Charles Flor O'Squarr (97). L'autrice affronta la modernità degli spettri in modo originale, soprattutto nel capitolo dedicato alle figure femminili: qui il *topos* della donna non-morta ghigliottinata durante la Rivoluzione francese viene analizzato in una prospettiva che tiene conto dell'aspetto psicologico e dell'erotismo.

La terza parte di *The Urban Fantastic* costituisce una riflessione sul senso del ritmo e della sensorialità nella città "fantastica". L'autrice prosegue nel delineare la città come un habitat umano in precisa evoluzione, influenzato da una modernità sempre più ingombrante e invadente che detta le cadenze della vita umana. Dopo aver alterato i rapporti tra gli spazi e le persone, è naturale che il fantastico - la provocazione per eccellenza - vada a interrompere o trasformare anche il senso del movimento e del ritmo. Dopo aver trattato la città come ambiente e come complesso di relazioni umane, l'autrice si concentra allora sull'urbanità come luogo di collisione di dinamismi, "arguing that rhythm is essential in configuring



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familiarity with urban space – an assumed familiarity that the fantastic event then transgresses” (159). Questo argomento è articolato in due capitoli, dedicati rispettivamente al fantastico urbano in relazione al ritmo dei mezzi di trasporto e al ritmo sonoro. Un pregio particolare di questa sezione – ma che in effetti appartiene a tutto il libro – è quello dell’aver selezionato i testi senza volersi attaccare troppo al topos del fantasma. Sono sì presenti i fantasmi, specialmente nel capitolo dedicato ai mezzi di trasporto, ma questa sezione dà il meglio quando si trasferisce il discorso sul fantastico ‘ambientale’, cosa che avviene specificamente nella sezione dedicata al ritmo come suono. L’intenzione di non concentrarsi sulla ‘creatura fantastica’ in sé ma sul suo effetto sull’ambiente era stata già espressa nell’introduzione (23), ma in questi capitoli particolarmente felice, affrontando il soprannaturale come un elemento onnipervasivo e dinamico, alla base delle fondamenta stesse della società. Particolarmente interessante, poi, il discorso sul senso del tempo e sulla ciclicità che emerge dalle analisi condotte sui racconti “Un viaje a la eternidad” (di autore anonimo), “A Narrative of Extraordinary Suffering” e “The Ghosts of the Mail”, entrambi di Dickens. Il tempo ciclico del passato si oppone al tempo orizzontale contemporaneo: la ciclicità spaventa la modernità, rappresentando uno stop al progresso e al contempo un ritorno ad una concezione premoderna. Il viaggio che torna su sé stesso e il viaggio interminabile incarnano due minacce alla fiducia positivista, perché rappresentano sia un freno alla fiducia nel futuro, sia un minaccioso ritorno a epoche nel quale l’individuo non poteva esercitare un’*agency* così influente sull’ambiente esterno – cioè epoche nelle quali la borghesia non era ancora emersa come centro della società. D’altra parte, in *The Urban Fantastic* il lavoro di analisi si conduce soprattutto su storie di paure e sentimenti borghesi, e non semplicemente paure umane. Certo è chiaro che il fantastico sia implicitamente borghese, ma l’idea del ritmo interrotto da una forza superiore e sconosciuta dice molto sul senso della



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precisione – commerciale e affaristica – di una classe sociale sì dominante, ma sempre perseguitata dal terrore di perdere la posizione raggiunta. “Ships go by steam now-a-days, and so do ghosts” (174) viene detto in “The latest thing in ghosts” di autore anonimo; nel giocare con le proprie paure, la borghesia se le porta dietro nella marcia verso il progresso, inscenando un perturbante che convive con la tecnologia o che addirittura si confonde con essa. In questo senso García propone un testo molto interessante, “Un inventeur” di Rodenbach, nel quale il protagonista inventa una macchina anti-suono pur di ritrovare quel silenzio che la vita in città gli ha ormai precluso.

Il discorso teorico impostato da García prosegue anche oltre il XIX secolo: l’epilogo del libro offre infatti una selezione di esempi contemporanei di fantastico urbano, sia in ambito cinematografico che strettamente letterario. Quest’appendice consente di apprezzare il valore degli assunti di *The Urban Fantastic* anche al di fuori del campo di studio scelto dall’autrice, rivelando ancora una volta la profondità dell’analisi. In conclusione, *The Urban Fantastic* è un utile approfondimento per chi abbia già avviato un proprio percorso di studi nell’ambito del fantastico, andando a offrire uno sguardo diverso su temi già ampiamente trattati ma che, qui, vengono posti sotto una luce che ne evidenzia aspetti nascosti.



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**Francesco Corigliano** è docente di scuola secondaria di primo grado. Nel 2013 si è laureato in Filologia Moderna con una tesi dedicata ai racconti del terrore, e nel 2019 ha conseguito un Dottorato di Ricerca con un lavoro sulla letteratura *weird*. Ha pubblicato diversi articoli di critica letteraria dedicati al fantastico in raccolte e riviste specializzate, occupandosi di autori quali Eraldo Baldini, Giovanni Magherini-Graziani e Thomas Ligotti. Ha pubblicato il saggio *La letteratura weird. Narrare l'impensabile* (Mimesis, 2020) incentrato sulla narrativa *weird* e sulle opere di H. P. Lovecraft, S. Grabinski e J. Ray. È autore di narrativa e ha pubblicato racconti su riviste e antologie, in Italia e all'estero.

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**Nadia Fusini, *Maestre d'amore: Giulietta, Ofelia, Desdemona e le altre*  
(Einaudi, 2021)**

Recensione di Francesco Di Perna

(Sapienza Università di Roma, IT)

“Questo libro è una danza”: è così che si legge nell’incipit della quarta di copertina di *Maestre d'amore*, uno degli ultimi lavori di Nadia Fusini, edito da Einaudi nel 2021. Ed è immediatamente chiaro al lettore, sin dal titolo, l’intento dell’autrice, la quale mira ad attribuire alle figure femminili delle più appassionanti tragedie e commedie shakespeariane un ruolo da indiscusse protagoniste. Tutte coloro che erano solite essere considerate subordinate o all’ombra di uomini incumbenti, acquistano in questo libro un valore esclusivo e trainante, e per i loro sentimenti, e per le loro avvincenti storie d’amore. Tutte quelle donne marginate ed e-marginate da funzioni e convenzioni culturali tutt’altro che paritarie. Un capovolgimento letterario, quello che avviene nella monografia in questione, che risulta possibile grazie all’abilità senza eguali di Fusini, che accoglie il lettore e lo accompagna, fianco a fianco, in una dettagliata esplorazione di sentieri solo apparentemente già battuti.

Apripista della sequenza di protagoniste è Giulietta, appartenente a quella che è, forse, la più celebre e diffusa tragedia di Shakespeare. Non si fa tardi ad individuare la sovversione del canone tradizionale tra le pagine. Giulietta “sa guidare con mano ferma il giovane amante all’esperienza di un amore mondano” (8), afferma l’autrice. E si riesce a cogliere perfettamente la modernità di questa giovane protagonista, appena quattordicenne, che riesce a condurre, quasi totalmente con le sue potenzialità, un amore senza precedenti e probabilmente senza neanche successivi nella storia della letteratura inglese. Romeo, d’altro



canto, asseconda la sua amante, e riesce in questo solamente abbandonandosi alla guida di lei, rendendo possibile un capovolgimento che darà la luce ad una fusione-scambio tra i due personaggi: “Via le maschere, via le insegne, via gli emblemi, via insomma tutti i segni sociali, convenzionali” (9).

La sezione dedicata alle donne nelle tragedie shakespeariane procede e si conclude con la figura di Cleopatra, nella sua storia d’amore con Antonio, molto vicina ad una fusione tra i due protagonisti. Tra di loro ogni margine, ogni limite viene abbattuto dalla fluidità dei loro scambi amorosi: “Non a caso uno dei giochi preferiti di Antonio e Cleopatra è il travestitismo [...]. Eros non classifica, né separa il mondo in maschi e femmine, semmai tramuta, confonde, esaspera, minaccia quella differenza” (34). È immediatamente chiara, tra queste poche righe, la rappresentazione di un tutt’uno tra gli amanti, che si fa strada sotto gli occhi del lettore. E il margine che separa, solitamente, un corpo da un altro, una persona dall’altra, è del tutto inesistente e superato, e porta in superficie un connubio di identità che si mescolano, fino a confondersi.

Il sipario della prima delle due sezioni dal titolo “L’Amore in Commedia” si apre con la descrizione di una “nuova concezione dell’amore” (59) che caratterizza l’inizio del periodo *early modern* in Inghilterra. Esattamente come si poteva notare con la storia di Antonio e Cleopatra, allo stesso modo nelle prime commedie di Shakespeare sono individuabili mescolamenti di generi, di ruoli e di pensieri, tanto da affermare “che io attore-uomo posso fare la donna, come io-plebeo il re” (62).

È il *Sogno di una notte di mezza estate* la prima commedia ad essere esaminata, con la sua atmosfera folkloristica che fa da scenario alle vicissitudini amorose che i personaggi vivranno. E la prima parola del titolo è estremamente emblematica: il sogno, inteso oggi come discostamento dalla realtà, come un desiderio a cui si aspira, è un concetto che muta e si evolve nel corso della commedia. Nonostante l’atmosfera onirica che potrebbe trasparire, questo lavoro di Shakespeare è vitalizzato da molteplici accezioni di significato.





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Elena è la prima protagonista che avvicina l'idea di 'sogno' all'idea di 'amore', unendole quasi indistintamente. Visione che sarà sostenuta anche da altri personaggi, ma che non sarà la sola dell'opera.

Ma è importante non perdere di vista il filo conduttore dell'intero libro: l'amore. Il sentimento universale ottiene un nuovo modo di essere pensato, nel periodo *early modern*. E la chiave di lettura per entrare nel profondo di questa idea è il matrimonio. Vengono abbandonate tutte le visioni amorose precedenti, in favore di una sola ed unica risoluzione, a lieto fine, di una storia d'amore. Il matrimonio diviene elemento salvifico, in grado di sollevare la condizione di una donna e donare un *happy ending* alla storia. Esempio lampante di questa concezione appena descritta si può ritrovare in *Tutto è bene quel che finisce bene*, commedia shakespeariana composta e messa in scena tra il 1602 e il 1603, influenzata ed ispirata, tra gli altri, da Giovanni Boccaccio. Scomponendo il titolo dell'opera, la protagonista, Elena, mette fine alle sue sofferenze e 'tribolazioni' solamente con le nozze: "Il matrimonio risolverà in lieto fine le peregrinazioni dell'amante" (73), scrive Fusini in questa sezione del libro.

Ovviamente la condizione femminile non è del tutto rosea, e riflette quella che è stata, per lunghissimo tempo, una situazione di imparità e subordinazione della donna. In particolar modo il silenzio di una donna costituiva la sua personalità, se così può chiamarsi oggi. Tanto più una donna era silenziosa, tanto più era ben considerata. Ed era un aspetto che andava di gran lunga oltre la bellezza estetica. Shakespeare, d'altro canto, non fatica a creare un personaggio che vada contro queste norme convenzionali, ed è in questo modo che Caterina, protagonista de *La bisbetica domata*, si insedia come personaggio controcorrente. Caterina è l'esatto opposto della maggioranza delle donne a lei contemporanee. Caterina parla, fin troppo. Caterina inveisce contro uomini, e anche donne. Caterina picchia, specialmente sua sorella. Caterina è più simile ad un uomo che ad una donna, per carattere. E per questo motivo 'va domata'. E sarà un uomo, Petruccio, ad avere



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il dovere – quasi morale – di riavvicinare la donna al canone femminile di questo tempo. Sarà davvero così? Riuscirà Petruccio a ‘domare’ Caterina?

Nell’ultima sezione, “L’amore in Commedia II”, Fusini insiste ancora una volta sull’aspetto innovativo di Shakespeare a proposito dell’amore, di cui si occupa anche all’interno della sezione precedente. Il fenomeno del *cross-dressing*, ai giorni nostri ormai naturale, è una pratica che in età elisabettiana, specialmente per il teatro, era assai diffusa ma al contempo molto rivoluzionaria. Sappiamo come attori uomini, nel teatro elisabettiano, dovessero e potessero interpretare personaggi femminili solo attraverso il *cross-dressing*, almeno finché non iniziò a farsi spazio per le donne la possibilità di recitare. Questo fenomeno era però diffuso anche per le donne, per le quali “se non altro, portare i calzoni dava più libertà” (131). Ma questa libertà costava alle donne dure punizioni, in quanto questo fenomeno per noi usuale e comune, veniva considerato un vero e proprio reato. Essere donne, insomma, ed essere libere, era un pericolo ed una sofferenza, soprattutto esserlo a proprio modo. Il teatro è il punto cardine di questa ultima porzione del libro. E l’autrice ne descrive le principali sfumature: dalla funzione prettamente sociale che sviluppa nel periodo elisabettiano all’intreccio del teatro con la vita, giungendo al ruolo che occupa l’amore, ovviamente.

Interessante è il personaggio di Isabella, protagonista femminile della commedia *Misura per misura*, a cui Nadia Fusini dedica diverse pagine della sezione conclusiva del libro. Isabella è una giovane donna che decide di dedicare la sua vita alla religione, prendendo i voti. Almeno finché non verrà chiamata ad intercedere per evitare la morte a suo fratello, Claudio. Isabella si avvale della retorica, del linguaggio diretto e spietato per persuadere Angelo, il giudice pronto a decapitare Claudio. La donna è disposta a tutto pur di tentare di salvare suo fratello, anche a confondere la mente del giudice scambiando idealmente le posizioni dei due uomini, tentando di far mettere l’uno nei panni dell’altro. Inizia così una generale confusione che porta a non distinguere i personaggi: “Non si sa più



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*Who's who*" (161), scrive l'autrice. La particolarità di Isabella risiede esattamente nel suo utilizzo del linguaggio e del ragionamento, ed è questo l'aspetto che distingue questa donna da tutte le altre che abbiamo incontrato sinora. È una donna capace di capovolgere l'equilibrio di un'intera commedia con la sua *ars oratoria*, ed essendo lei una donna, la rende ancor più innovativa e convincente.

L'ultima sottosezione dell'intero libro, dal titolo "La Felicità", racchiude probabilmente l'intero messaggio che Fusini cerca di distribuire nel corso dei vari frammenti di questo libro, che appare, nel complesso, un colorato e armonioso mosaico. Una tela ricca di personaggi, di pensieri, di stralci shakespeariani che risultano più vivi che mai, riletti e ripensati sotto una chiave inedita che sembrava neanche esistere, se ci si sofferma soltanto alle tragedie e alle commedie originali.

L'amore, e la sofferenza per tale, è ciò che ha animato e continua ad animare le relazioni umane, da sempre. Perché se l'amore abilmente tramandato da Shakespeare completa, arricchisce e rende felici uomini e donne, il rovescio della medaglia è un sentimento di nostalgia, di vuoto per aspetti negativi che l'amore è in grado di trascurare, ma non cancellare: "Perché forse l'amore salva, ma non guarisce. E in quanto amanti, donne e uomini resteranno sempre e per sempre esposti alla propria vulnerabilità" (182).

Chiudendo l'ultima pagina di questo movimentato e danzante libro, si può contemplare a posteriori l'abilità unica di Nadia Fusini nel catturare chi legge con passione e coinvolgimento. La visione che regala attraverso *Maestre d'amore* è complessa ma complessiva allo stesso tempo, è uno scorrere incessante di eventi e personaggi che si alternano, si susseguono e si tengono per mano pur appartenendo a tragedie e commedie del tutto differenti tra loro. E avere una vastità tale di personaggi ideati da Shakespeare, racchiusi in un unico libro, è già di per sé un prezioso dettaglio da non trascurare. L'autrice non si sofferma, però, alla semplice descrizione apparente, anzi. Sceglie il filo conduttore che possa unire tutte le donne di questo libro, ed è l'amore. Mai immagine fu più



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appropriata di quella di una 'danza' per entrare a pieno nello spirito di questo libro. Perché i personaggi danzano a ritmo delle loro storie, mentre l'autrice danza sviscerando le loro identità, riscrivendo alcuni tratti delle loro personalità. Nadia Fusini è in grado, in questo libro, di sfumare ogni limite tra due visioni divergenti, in particolar modo eliminando il margine canonico di donne contrapposte a uomini. Le donne di questo libro danzando insieme agli uomini, acquistando lo stesso potere, compiendo le stesse azioni. Non esistono distinzioni nette. Per ultimo è il lettore a danzare, entrando come protagonista attivo e partecipe, non accusando minimamente l'estraneità ai fatti, ma l'esatto opposto: alzando la testa dal libro, a fine lettura, si resta quasi delusi dalla realtà circostante, che non è quella da cui si è stati catturati.



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**Francesco Di Perna** frequenta il corso di laurea magistrale in *English and Anglo American Studies* presso “Sapienza” Università di Roma. Si occupa attualmente di letteratura inglese e soggettività. Nel 2021 ha conseguito la laurea triennale in *Lingue, Culture, Letterature, Traduzione* presso “Sapienza” Università di Roma, discutendo una tesi dal titolo *Judith Butler e Virginia Woolf: due prospettive di genere*.

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**Franco Moretti, *Un paese lontano: cinque lezioni sulla cultura americana*  
(Einaudi, 2019)**

Recensione di Virginia Pellegrini

(Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata", IT)

Publicato nel 2019 da Einaudi, il volume di Franco Moretti, *Un paese lontano: cinque lezioni sulla cultura americana* si propone – come il titolo sottende – di ridurre le distanze da un’America percepita spesso in contrasto con le espressioni culturali della sponda opposta dell’Atlantico. Quest’intento viene realizzato attraverso la strutturazione di un confronto eterogeneo tra Europa e Stati Uniti, inclusivo di diverse realtà artistiche ed epoche storiche. L’arte statunitense diviene così, alternativamente, termine di paragone e di convergenza con le istanze del vecchio continente, perdendo quel sentimento di estraneità con cui veniva osservata e facendosi vicina al nostro sentire. I confini in arte esistono per annullarsi, e la critica di Moretti registra e sfrutta questa propizia incapacità di alzare barriere per costruire punti di incontro su cui organizza la sua discussione.

Il testo consta di un’introduzione e cinque brevi capitoli, in cui l’autore converte e adatta in forma scritta il flusso argomentativo di alcune lezioni tenute in aula, alla Stanford University della California. Nel comprimere e riprogettare i suoi interventi, Moretti conserva tra le pagine alcuni tratti della spontaneità improvvisata di una esposizione orale. Il risultato è una prosa ragionata, ma vivace e immediata, capace di catturare l’attenzione del lettore, che tra le righe ritrova il gusto della frequenza ai corsi universitari, quando in cattedra si è guidati da un professore appassionato che coinvolge l’uditorio.



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Le premesse alla stesura di questa piccola raccolta di saggi sono contenute nella corposa parte introduttiva, in cui l'autore illustra la genesi dell'opera, radicata nell'incontro di due esperienze di docenza, a Salerno e Standford, e nella necessità che le accumuna: colmare le lacune tra gli studenti, relative alla Storia della letteratura. È da questo imperativo accademico che nasce il corso di *Literary History*, da cui questo volume è tratto: un ciclo di lezioni con lo scopo di introdurre dieci secoli di letteratura, riversandone gli aspetti determinanti in poche ore di spiegazione, secondo un modello di analisi focalizzato sulla forma e rispondente alla prassi comparativa. Così, ogni lezione – e quindi ciascun capitolo – prende le mosse dalla volontà di esplorare i caratteri della forma letteraria, nelle tre dimensioni interconnesse che la caratterizzano: l'uso del linguaggio e della retorica; il contesto storico; il tipo di piacere estetico sperimentato dai contemporanei (7). Da questi presupposti si delinea la natura di una riflessione articolata, che ben presto ricalibra la propria attenzione dall'ambiente letterario ai più diversi ambiti dell'arte e della cultura, che spaziano dalla pittura al cinema. Il fulcro che tiene insieme il discorso è, paradossalmente, il dissidio, lo strappo, l'opposizione costante tra i termini della comparazione, che nasconde similarità inattese, tra le differenze. È secondo tale principio di osservazione che è possibile trovare accostati, ad esempio, Whitman e Baudelaire, il western e il noir, Vermeer e Hopper. A oliare gli ingranaggi del meccanismo critico è poi "l'insofferenza verso il 'presentismo' dell'università americana" (10), che fiacca l'interesse nei confronti del passato. Per questa ragione, ogni riflessione posta in atto nelle pagine a seguire viene sostenuta dalla tradizione del pensiero filosofico e letterario occidentale: tra gli altri, Weber, Simmel, Lukàcs, il formalismo russo, Benjamin, Spitzer e Adorno, le cui posizioni sono coinvolte nel dibattito.

Nel primo capitolo, lo studioso pone in parallelo la lirica concreta di Walt Whitman con i versi enigmatici e dissonanti di Charles Baudelaire. In particolare, Moretti si sofferma inizialmente su alcuni passaggi di *Foglie d'erba*, per individuare le specificità innovative nel linguaggio del primo poeta nazionale americano. Viene affrontata, in questo modo, l'estetica



della grandezza e dell'abbondanza, declinata al plurale e senza l'impiego della rima, per liberare la versificazione dalle costrizioni limitanti della metrica, inadatte a un'America straripante di sé stessa. Whitman sceglie di cantare l'eroismo dell'uomo comune, rendendone epica la quotidianità mediante il massiccio utilizzo degli elenchi e una struttura sintattica elementare ed efficace, costituita dalla sequenza di soggetto, verbo, oggetto o fine e modo di azione, imprimendo così dinamicità e autonomia al singolo verso, che ogni volta sta in piedi da solo a contenere il mondo (30-35). Si tratta di un lavoro di attenta maestria tecnica, che si confonde nell'apparente semplicità risultante. A fare da contraltare alla trasparente linearità whitmaniana è Charles Baudelaire: il poeta delle complessità e dell'ignoto, votato all'irrepetibilità del gesto poetico. La poesia di Baudelaire ci viene descritta avvolta da fitte nebbie che le conferiscono un'aura spettrale, come le figure che la popolano. C'è inquietudine nei suoi versi, lì dove in Whitman si trovava fiducia e incontenibile entusiasmo. Ma è sul piano linguistico che le distanze si fanno incolmabili, a partire dall'uso dell'aggettivo. In Walt Whitman esso è posto a rafforzare il nucleo del verso, rappresentato dal sostantivo. In Baudelaire, al contrario, i due elementi stridono producendo incongruità semantiche che intenzionalmente non vengono risolte, abbandonando il lettore a interrogarsi su un significato che sfugge continuamente. Viene, dunque, rilevato da una parte il tentativo di democratizzare la lirica per renderla fruibile e popolare, volgendosi in avanti, dall'altra la ricerca di prestigio che la eleva a prodotto elitario ed esclusivo, guardando indietro. Oltre i contrasti segnalati, questi due modi di intendere la poesia sono risposta alla medesima vertigine storica: la modernità. Il fatto che Moretti abbia scelto per questo confronto un poeta americano e uno europeo sembrerebbe indicare che le reazioni dei due artisti siano influenzate geograficamente. Questo denuncerebbe un'opposizione ulteriore, tra un'Europa vecchia, appesantita dai propri secoli di Storia, che si ripiega su sé stessa incerta nel suo rapporto con l'avvenire, contro un'America giovane, che ammette solo il futuro come unico orizzonte concettuale, e che





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vede nella modernità il terreno più florido per la sua espressione. Il critico, infine, a conclusione del capitolo, sembra voler rispondere al quesito racchiuso nel titolo – *Walt Whitman o Charles Baudelaire?*, a suggerire, appunto, una scelta da compiere – propendendo per l'intelligibilità rivoluzionaria del poeta americano.

La seconda sezione del volume approfondisce la tecnica dell'iceberg – marca costitutiva della scrittura di Ernest Hemingway – partendo dall'analisi linguistica del racconto *Grande fiume dai due cuori* e relazionandola all'esempio di Gertrude Stein, sua mentore. Moretti, con un argomentare scorrevole e ricco di spunti, combina i traumi vissuti dall'autore al fronte con il racconto che ne evoca le atmosfere, riferendo la bilanciata essenzialità della sua prosa – costituita prevalentemente dal non detto e da misurate ripetizioni – all'afasia che colpiva i reduci di guerra (50-51). A questo punto si erige il confronto con Stein, modello letterario di Hemingway. Sebbene, infatti, Hemingway tragga la sua pratica descrittiva per la maggior parte dalle indicazioni di Gertrude Stein, l'allievo riesce a far meglio del maestro. Dove la Stein ripete fino alla ridondanza, Hemingway trova un suo equilibrio e assume "posizioni [...] più 'medie'" (57) rispetto alla scrittrice, tutelando la continuità sulla pagina e l'integrità semantica che ne deriva. Ancora una volta si tratta di un confronto che protende verso un 'vincitore'. Aver rifiutato l'estremismo stilistico di Stein è una scelta calcolata, dipesa, secondo Moretti, dalla necessità di controllo narrativo che l'autore oppone all'imponderabilità caotica del campo di battaglia. Lo studioso è qui molto arguto nel rimarcare il rapporto intimo che lega la scrittura del romanziere statunitense con il proprio difficile e doloroso vissuto: una ferita emotiva legata agli eventi di Fossalta, che Hemingway tendeva a tacere, ma che emerge chiara tra le parole, sospese tra il bisogno di comunicare e l'incapacità di farlo.

Nel capitolo successivo, il critico si allontana dall'ambiente letterario in senso stretto e arditamente pone in essere un accostamento tra due generi cinematografici, il western e il noir: America ed Europa che si scrutano attraverso la lente di una cinepresa. Qui Moretti



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sembra acquistare ancor più agio nel trasferire i propri ragionamenti alle immagini, alle inquadrature, che raccontano due mondi in antitesi, nelle narrazioni visive che ne sono espressione. Nel western domina l'utilizzo del 'campo aperto', che si rivolge alla vastità della frontiera, sui cui sentieri, in lontananza, si scorgono in cammino carovane di cowboy, ridotti a piccoli puntini mobili, quasi indistinguibili all'osservatore. Ma questa difficoltà di messa a fuoco non produce mai ambiguità, la distinzione è netta: o si vede o non si vede. A prevalere è comunque sempre la luce, che rischiarava o abbaglia il paesaggio. Il western richiama, inoltre, la magniloquenza del mito di fondazione; è portavoce di un'epica collettiva, dove la carovana si fa nazione nel corso della sua missione di conquista, e la giustizia è regolata da leali duelli tra le strade polverose di qualche cittadina remota. Nel noir, al contrario, a governare è il primo piano, che stringe l'obiettivo sullo spazio stretto: è l'intimità ad emergere. Una vicinanza esasperata che, però, non aiuta a capire. Le scene sono immerse in una penombra che altera la percezione di quel che accade e tutto viene avvolto da un'atmosfera equivoca, che distorce l'interpretazione. Nel noir, oltretutto, si uccide tanto quanto nel western, ma in modo confuso, non lineare, spesso immettendo un elemento di sorpresa nell'azione o nella premeditazione (è il caso dello scambio di omicidi ne *L'altro uomo*). Nulla è mai definito. Le differenze tra i due poli dell'opposizione si fanno enormi, è evidente. Forse l'unico punto di contatto tra questi prodotti artistici altrimenti così agli antipodi è allora la dimensione temporale - entrambi insistono sullo stesso periodo, il secondo dopoguerra - che però subisce ancora l'influsso delle coordinate geografiche, che portano i due continenti a reagire secondo modalità tanto diverse alle medesime sollecitazioni storiche. Sul finale Moretti chiarisce nuovamente le ragioni del prevalere di uno dei due elementi del confronto appena discusso. Il western, meglio del noir, riuscirà a raccogliere successo anche in Europa, perché in grado di offrire una soluzione estetica al problema, grandemente sentito, della violenza sofferta in guerra. Un trauma europeo trova risposta in una forma americana, come già accaduto con Hemingway (92).



Proseguendo, il quarto saggio si addentra nell'opera di Arthur Miller, *Morte di un commesso viaggiatore*, approfondendone gli aspetti narrativi, linguistici e sociali. Nel far questo, l'attenzione viene indirizzata tutta sulla scena considerata da Moretti svolta decisiva dell'intreccio: il licenziamento del protagonista dal suo lavoro di *salesman*, incorniciata da dettagli che veicolano il grande senso di umiliazione di cui è vittima il personaggio, come i toni estremamente colloquiali impiegati dal proprio capo nel comunicargli la perdita del suo impiego o la mancanza di pathos dell'intero dialogo. Willy Loman appartiene a un'epoca tramontata, in cui il rapporto personale con i clienti era ancora possibile e un commesso viaggiatore poteva garantire benessere alla famiglia. Si tratta di una realtà scomparsa a causa delle trasformazioni commerciali del dopoguerra, che rendono il commesso obsoleto, già morto prima che Willy muoia realmente in un incidente stradale, causato comunque dalla spossatezza fisica delle sue condizioni di lavoro. Un sentore di morte così presente nel testo che per Moretti il suo richiamo nel titolo può essere riferito a una condizione duratura più che all'evento puntuale rappresentato dall'incidente automobilistico. Il capitolo, infine, si chiude decretando una rottura strutturale con la consuetudine critica tenuta fin qui. Si rimane, infatti, in attesa di un secondo termine a completare il confronto, ma Miller rimarrà invece l'unico destinatario delle riflessioni dello studioso in questa sezione.

Nel quinto saggio – contributo conclusivo dell'opera – la prassi comparativa torna in auge, fin dal titolo: *Amsterdam, New Amsterdam*. L'autore, in questo caso, trasferisce la discussione sul piano pittorico e sceglie un confronto molteplice, articolato intorno a diverse epoche e stili: Vermeer e Hopper; Rembrandt e Wharol.

Roland Barthes, in *Introduzione all'analisi strutturale dei racconti*, opera una distinzione tra i 'nuclei' di un racconto, cioè gli episodi che imprimono nuova direzione alla storia, e i cosiddetti 'riempitivi', che mantengono vivo l'intreccio tra un 'nucleo' e quello successivo (109). Secondo Moretti, i quadri di Vermeer si legano a questa seconda categoria, sono la



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“quintessenza del riempitivo” (109). Ritratti sulla tela, infatti, troviamo frammenti costituiti del romanzo della vita, ma che non ne determinano il corso. Si tratta di scene evocative dell’esistenza borghese, che comunicano tranquillità attraverso toni caldi e avvolgenti. A proseguire sulla scia di Vermeer, rovesciandone i presupposti, è Edward Hopper. Anche in questo caso a essere ritratta è la quotidianità, ma precipitata nella desolazione mesta di uno spazio incolore, nel quale all’azione dei quadri di Vermeer viene sostituita la totale immobilità di personaggi cristallizzati sulla tela. Anche Hopper dipinge ‘riempitivi’, ma riempiti di nulla. A proseguire, è il turno di Rembrandt e Warhol. Nell’ultimo confronto tracciato da Moretti, vengono analizzate le loro gradazioni di colore, il cui impiego cambia nel tempo, ed evidenziato il contrasto tra l’unicità dei dipinti di Rembrandt e la standardizzazione artistica delle opere di Warhol.

Al termine della lettura di questo piccolo volume di saggi, si rimane stimolati da un percorso pieno di accostamenti audaci e traiettorie inconsuete da cui prendono corpo discussioni illuminanti, sostenute dalle doti espositive di Franco Moretti che, con i suoi interventi, riesce a dare conferma di come la letteratura – e l’arte in genere – siano in grado di intrecciare incontri, e di quanto ancora risulti necessario occuparsene. L’ispirazione di fondo, che anima la conversione di un corso accademico in pubblicazione, è che valga la pena studiare letteratura, anche oggi che l’esperienza universitaria è ridotta a prodotto di consumo rivolto a fruitori esigenti. Questo volume potrebbe allora essere percepito come un tentativo di rivendicare il valore della dimensione accademica e la sua missione intellettuale.



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### **Profilo bio-bibliografico**

**Virginia Pellegrini** ha conseguito una laurea magistrale con lode e dignità di stampa presso l'Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata", con una tesi in Letteratura americana sulla figura di Ernest Hemingway. Attualmente è iscritta al dottorato in *Studi Comparati* presso la medesima università, con un progetto dedicato all'analisi di *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* e *The Old Man and the Sea* attraverso il filtro della *Trauma Theory* e l'esperienza del conflitto vissuta dall'autore. Tra i suoi interessi di ricerca si segnalano Ernest Hemingway, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, i Roaring Twenties e la Lost Generation.

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**Sunita Sinha (ed.), *Marginalized Voices in American Literature: Margins and Fringes* (Atlantic, 2020)**

Recensione di Francesca Scaccia

(Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata", IT)

Il volume *Marginalized Voices in American Literature*, a cura di Sunita Sinha, si compone di undici saggi in cui, come suggerisce il sottotitolo *Margins and Fringes*, viene posto al centro dell'attenzione critica lo spazio liminale. L'esplorazione della dimensione marginale non si limita alla sola ricognizione delle opere di giganti della letteratura americana del secolo scorso – tra cui William Faulkner, Toni Morrison e J.D. Salinger, solo per citarne alcuni –, ma anche della produzione di autori più distanti nel tempo, o contemporanei, come Phillis Wheatley e Khaled Hosseini: rispettivamente una poetessa schiava afroamericana – istruita – che visse nella seconda metà del diciottesimo secolo e lo scrittore statunitense di origine afghana venuto alla ribalta all'inizio del nuovo millennio con il best-seller mondiale *The Kite Runner* (2003). In questo senso, la raccolta di saggi si configura come un'antologia del margine in America, in cui è possibile ripercorrere il percorso di emancipazione di molte figure di *outsider*, che sembrano essere accomunati tanto dal trauma di una costante "in betweenness", quanto dallo sviluppo di una resiliente e adattiva "multifaceted identity" (v).

In primo luogo, c'è da mettere in evidenza una caratteristica che accomuna tutti i vari saggi della raccolta, ossia la scelta della prospettiva d'analisi utilizzata, che consiste nel mantenere un costante focus sul personaggio che vive in prima persona l'esperienza della liminalità: l'*outsider*; che dal margine in cui la società l'ha relegato, riveste ora una posizione privilegiata nell'indagine critica. Di fatto, se si vuole realmente prendere coscienza di quella



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zona marginale, che nelle parole di Sunita Sinha prende la forma di un “elsewhere-within- here” (iv), un luogo allo stesso tempo ignorato e inglobato nella cultura dominante americana, allora si deve necessariamente prendere coscienza anche della cultura, dei condizionamenti e della sensibilità di coloro che abitano questo spazio – teorico quando reale – in prima persona. Risulta dunque palese il comune intento degli autori di voler conferire dignità e valore all’esperienza evolutiva di quei personaggi che, volendo utilizzare le parole di Antonio Gramsci, sarebbe possibile definire ‘subalterni’, svincolando dunque l’analisi di testi, personaggi e autori da una logica paternalistica e patriarcale. Donne, specialmente afroamericane e indiane, bambini migranti costretti ad abbandonare un presente instabile in cambio di un futuro altrettanto incerto, ragazzi che non vogliono rinunciare all’idillio dell’adolescenza, o ancora, autori che gravitano nel margine poiché la loro sensibilità li spinge ad addentarsi nell’esplorazione delle caotiche periferie sociali. Tutti loro sono accomunati dall’esperienza della migrazione, da un processo di allontanamento – fisico o ideale – da luoghi reputati familiari, conosciuti, sicuri, talvolta soffocanti, ma che sempre trasmettono una sensazione di ‘casa’; a questo, si accompagna la condivisa difficoltà di un decentramento culturale, che espone l’outsider a un percorso ancora più impegnativo, di discesa nelle viscere della propria interiorità che farà emergere la vera identità del singolo, libera da ogni definizione aprioristicamente attribuita. L’archetipico cammino di ‘morte’ e rinascita per giungere ad un’autonoma consapevolezza di sé sembra dunque accomunare tutti gli emarginati; tuttavia, non si limita al singolo e nello specifico caso di Faulkner e il suo *That Evening Sun* (1931) trascende anche la categoria individuale, espandendosi a investire un’intera comunità, quella di un prostrato Sud post-guerra civile travolto da una profonda crisi identitaria al termine dei combattimenti. Parimenti, i tratti di uno scrittore socialmente impegnato e profondamente consapevole della realtà americana di inizio Novecento – ma inizialmente marginalizzato – vengono riconosciuti nella scrittura di un Hemingway traumatizzato dagli orrori della guerra in Europa e dalle varie forme di



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crudeltà sociale che sottendono alla spavalderia di facciata dei *Roaring Twenties*. Come evidenzia Goutam Ghosal nel saggio nono di questa raccolta, Hemingway dà prova di essere ben consapevole di quanto sia necessario migrare verso il margine per ritrovare quella parte più umana del sé, quella sepolta al di sotto di ogni condizionamento culturale che insegna all'uomo la prevaricazione sul più debole, per recuperare l'istinto che porta a fornire aiuto reciproco, a vivere in comunità, non nell'isolamento o all'insegna della discriminazione. Recuperare un'identità innocente facendosi guidare dal proprio *sound heart*, questo è ciò che Hemingway sembra voler veicolare nel suo volume postumo *The Nick Adams Stories* (1972).

Quest'ultimo tema, quello della ricerca dell'identità personale, potrebbe essere definito come una delle profonde ossessioni che pervadono la letteratura americana sin dagli albori, come ci ricordano testi iconici quali *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) di Mark Twain o *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), a cui, sono dedicati due saggi in questo volume. E non potrebbe essere diversamente, poiché non ci si può interrogare sulla marginalità senza avere esperienza del centro, e dunque sarebbe impossibile anche il solo tentare di comprendere la prospettiva dell'*outsider* senza essersi interrogati sull'etichetta stessa, creata da una presupposta società dominante che necessita di parassitare l'"altro" per mantenere il suo status.

Questa raccolta offre un'ampia e intrigante prospettiva sulle varie declinazioni che il termine *outsider* assume nel contesto americano, unitamente a un'ancora più affascinante analisi delle varie strategie di *coping* che questi ultimi mettono in atto per far emergere la loro voce all'interno di una società che li vorrebbe muti. Sin dal primo saggio, dedicato alla poetessa schiava afroamericana Phillis Wheatley e ai suoi carteggi con illustri personalità del suo tempo, è possibile notare come ella riesca a far emergere la sua sensibilità e individualità sfruttando argutamente i meccanismi della scrittura epistolare e della polisemia del linguaggio. Utilizzando una maschera letteraria ed esprimendosi attraverso





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un “seemly White-friendly language” (10) riesce a dimostrare l’inconsistenza del sistema da cui è doppiamente oppressa, come donna e afroamericana. La sua corrispondenza, rivalutata specialmente dai movimenti femministi degli anni Ottanta del secolo scorso, viene ora considerata come un grande *epistolary novel* dal quale emerge l’identità più profonda della poetessa, costruita su un’autonoma e indipendente attività di esegesi biblica. Attraverso la strategia che il filosofo Homi Bhabha definisce *mimicry* – una forma di mimetismo comportamentale dell’oppresso verso l’oppressore – Phillis Wheatley riesce di fatto ad inserirsi all’interno del *dominant discourse*, sovvertendolo dall’interno e rendendo accettabile la sua protesta dietro la maschera dell’innocenza.

Allo stesso modo sembra agire Jasmine, personaggio-protagonista dell’omonimo romanzo, *Jasmine* (1989), della scrittrice naturalizzata americana Bharati Mukherjee, a cui sono dedicati due saggi nella presente raccolta. Se nel primo saggio, gli autori Carole Rozzonelli e Alessandro Monti insistono maggiormente sui vari ‘stadi’ evolutivi dell’identità della protagonista e al suo personale percorso di emancipazione rispetto alle etichette imposte alla sua persona dall’esterno, il secondo saggio, a cura di Reena Mitra, mette invece in primo piano l’impiego di una prospettiva marcatamente *gender-oriented* dell’autrice nell’affrontare il tema dell’esperienza della migrazione. Anche in questo caso viene sottolineata la doppia oppressione che Jasmine, giovane vedova di origine indiana, subisce in quanto migrante e donna e alla quale trova la forza di reagire lottando su due fronti, contemporaneamente: per superare le barriere – linguistiche e culturali in primis – che la tengono ai margini della vita sociale una volta giunta a destinazione in America, ma anche a dover proteggere – invano – i confini del suo stesso corpo. Tuttavia, Jasmine a seguito della ‘talea’ subita, dimostra di essere capace di *ri-generarsi* da sé senza alcun tipo di sostegno maschile, di saper *ri-nascere* sotto mutevoli e differenti forme, di diventare ‘the architect of her own life’ (36), nonostante l’ambiente ostile in cui attecchisce la sua nuova vita. Se in *Jasmine* emerge anche il tema del *passing* – una delle strategie di *coping* messe in



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atto inizialmente dalla protagonista –, questo non è invece riscontrabile in *The Kite Runner* (2003) di Khaled Hosseini, come mette in evidenza Mehar Fatima nell’ottavo saggio della presente raccolta, in cui viene contrariamente posto l’accento sulla visibilità dell’‘altro’ all’interno della cultura dominante. Con particolare riferimento a diversi testi dell’accademico Edward Said – tra i principali critici letterari di fine XX secolo – il saggio procede ad interpretare la figura del migrante attraverso un doppio filtro, quello dell’orientalismo e dell’imperialismo. In quest’ottica emerge un Occidente che coincide con il nord geografico del mondo e che sembra esercitare un ruolo egemonico nel distribuire gli individui in categorie manichee: “us and them”, “west and the rest”, “the in-group and the other” (104), dove il secondo termine viene sempre impiegato per descrivere una condizione sfavorevole. Dunque, il romanzo si concentra sulle rovinose conseguenze della migrazione sulla sfera psicologica dell’individuo, ma anche una possibile via da percorrere per arginare la straziante perdita d’identità e il senso di alienazione del marginalizzato, presentando all’America la cultura afghana in dettaglio, rendendo visibile all’Occidente l’invisibile ricchezza identitaria delle culture considerate ‘subalterne’, alla quale si accede scostando il velo offuscante del razzismo. E proprio di questa particolare declinazione di marginalizzazione – specificatamente americana – che si compie attraverso una logica razzista e prende la forma di un annichimento identitario comunitario esercitato da un presupposto gruppo dominante *white* a discapito della minoranza *black*, si occupano i tre saggi riguardanti rispettivamente i tre romanzi premiati con il Pulitzer: *Roots* (1976) di Alex Haley, *The Color Purple* (1982) di Alice Walker e *Beloved* (1987) di Toni Morrison. Nel primo saggio viene ripetutamente evidenziata la vera, grande innovazione che esso porta con sé: l’aver dato voce all’alterità per eccellenza della società americana, l’afroamericano. Il romanzo, che può essere considerato una *counter-narrative* della storia americana, sulla natura artificiale delle differenze razziali e da questo scaturisce la necessità del protagonista di risalire alle sue origini più autentiche, alla sua vera identità, libera di ogni etichetta



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sociale. Ugualmente, anche il saggio dedicato al romanzo di Alice Walker affronta il problema identitario negli afroamericani, ma da una prospettiva esclusivamente femminile e ne deriva una riflessione incentrata sulla doppia sofferenza delle donne afroamericane – vittime di un sistema patriarcale e razzista –, dalla quale emerge la necessità della crescita interiore. Quello della protagonista Celie diventa un cammino di ‘morte’ e rinascita ad una nuova vita, che, come per Jasmine, passa attraverso vari stadi evolutivi: da *submissive* è poi definita *subversive*, ma questa ulteriore definizione con la quale la società vorrebbe nuovamente limitarla in uno spazio marginale, non ha alcun valore per lei che ha scoperto il potere di articolare autonomamente la propria voce, attraverso la quale è capace di reclamare una posizione nel mondo, interno ed esterno all’asfittica sfera domestica. È interessante notare come, in questo particolare caso, l’augurio dell’autrice riguardi la sola comunità afroamericana, alla quale viene chiesto in primis di assumere un atteggiamento più solidale al proprio interno, al fine di creare uno spazio in cui uomini e donne abbiano pari diritto di coesistere. L’importanza della comunità viene ribadita anche nell’ultimo saggio della raccolta, che riguarda *Beloved*, di Toni Morrison. Anche questo romanzo, come quello di Alice Walker, risente moltissimo della lezione del femminismo e l’analisi si sofferma a riflettere sui motivi che hanno spinto Morrison a dar voce alle vittime di un sistema di soprusi sorretto dalla sola artificiosità del discorso egemonico e del patriarcato. Viene di fatto sottolineato il doppio movimento di decostruzione che Sethe compie nei confronti di una Storia eurocentrica che non riconosce i danni che le ha inferto in quanto afroamericana, e verso la sua stessa storia, che la tortura in quanto donna-madre apparentemente snaturata. Tuttavia, anche qui è possibile notare la messa in atto di una strategia di *coping* per giungere alla propria identità: quel processo che Morrison definisce *rememory*, il personale confronto con un passato attanagliante che vuole annientare la donna col dolore del ricordo, ma dal quale emergono frammenti di vita che contribuiscono a sanare il puzzle identitario. A mio avviso, anche Sethe potrebbe essere considerata una figura di



migrante, che prendendo le distanze dal suo passato – una sorta di spazio marginale che lei continua ad abitare anche nel presente – si incammina alla scoperta della sua vera identità, subendo il duro colpo del decentramento culturale che la condurrà ad intravedere la possibilità di un futuro.

Infine, nella raccolta sono inseriti due saggi affini dal punto di vista dell'oggetto di loro interesse, il romanzo di J.D. Salinger *The Catcher in The Rye* (1951), che viene preso ad esempio di un particolare tipo di marginalizzazione: in questo caso il giovane protagonista Holden Caulfield è esso stesso causa della sua discriminazione da parte dell'ambiente esterno. Con il suo rifiuto di abbandonare l'ambiente sicuro dell'infanzia traccia una linea di separazione dal mondo adulto, il che lo rende un *outcast*, incapace di stabilire relazioni con l'ambiente esterno dei coetanei. Tuttavia, il giovane Holden, nonostante l'intrigante parallelismo proposto da Reena Mitra con la figura di Huckleberry Finn, prende coscienza di non avere alcun *territory* in cui evadere, semplicemente perché la sua richiesta è inattuabile: egli non cerca di fuggire da un particolare ambiente, ma dall'ineluttabile avanzare dell'età, che lo condanna ad entrare nel mondo degli adulti. Questa vicenda, un misto di humor e horror, sembra ben mettere in evidenza l'importanza dell'esperienza vissuta, poiché proprio grazie ad un atteggiamento più concreto e realista, Caulfield riuscirà a giungere alla conclusione che il suo stesso tentativo di isolarsi è vano: il flusso della vita scorre incessante e non c'è possibilità di sostare lungo un percorso di continua evoluzione di sé.

A conclusione di questa esplorazione dello spazio liminale nella società americana, in cui, come è stato possibile notare, emergono voci distintamente dissimili, è possibile giungere a due principali conclusioni. La prima è che il margine non è costituito da una nebulosa ed omogenea massa di voci indistinte: ognuna di esse, nonostante relegata ad esistere in uno spazio secondario non meglio definito, che orbita attorno ad uno spazio *mainstream*, opposto e complementare ad esso, ha una propria unicità, un'identità, una



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storia, delle radici, nonché un insegnamento da condividere. La seconda è che ogni forma di marginalizzazione, per quanto dolorosa può *ri*-configurarsi e diventare un'opportunità di evoluzione, di scoperta della propria essenza più vera, affrancata da ogni forma di prevaricazione identitaria cultura-dipendente. Si scopre veramente sé stessi nel momento in cui ci si allontana dall'idea di sé stessi.



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### **Nota bio-bibliografica**

**Francesca Scaccia** è attualmente iscritta al secondo anno della Scuola di Dottorato in *Studi Comparati* (indirizzo in Lingue e Letterature Straniere) presso l'Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata" e il suo progetto di ricerca riguarda l'analisi contrastiva tra i romanzi *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* di Mark Twain e *Beloved* di Toni Morrison, con particolare attenzione ai temi della 'quest for self-identity' e dell'*outsiderism*. I suoi principali interessi di ricerca riguardano gli *African American Studies*, gli *Ethnic Studies*, la letteratura americana del XIX e XX secolo e i *Post-Colonial studies*.

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**Saverio Tomaiuolo, *La televisione dell'Ottocento: i vittoriani sullo schermo italiano* (Mimesis, 2021)**

Recensione di Maria Fiorella Suozzo  
(Università degli Studi di Salerno, IT)

*La televisione dell'Ottocento: i vittoriani sullo schermo italiano* di Saverio Tomaiuolo, uscito nel 2021 per i tipi di Mimesis, è un saggio denso d'informazioni che si concentra su alcuni adattamenti di classici vittoriani per la televisione italiana. Perché prediligere gli adattamenti televisivi rispetto a quelli cinematografici? Nella prospettiva di Tomaiuolo, che evidenzia continui rimandi tra gli ipotesti letterari e il contesto italiano di ricezione, il medium televisivo offre un ponte più solido con l'attualità: a differenza del cinema, intrattiene un rapporto più diretto e immediato con la contemporaneità di cui si nutre e a cui si rivolge; basti pensare che gli stessi palinsesti televisivi in cui gli sceneggiati sono inseriti ruotano intorno a ciò che accade nel mondo in un dato momento (12). La televisione offre inoltre un formato episodico più lungo e disteso, che risulta particolarmente adatto alla messa in scena di narrazioni lunghe e complesse come quelle che caratterizzano i romanzi vittoriani (97).

L'analisi di Tomaiuolo opera su tre livelli: nel tracciare una storia di questi adattamenti sul piccolo schermo (con qualche sconfinamento cinematografico, come si vedrà), l'autore dialoga non solo con i fatti di cronaca italiana, ma disegna anche, parallelamente, un pezzo di storia della nostra rete televisiva nazionale, che tra gli anni Sessant e Ottanta (anni in cui si collocano le opere prese in esame) "ha vissuto la propria stagione più ricca e [...] qualitativamente superiore" (13).



I tre livelli di analisi comunicano tra loro: l'atto di 'far dialogare' è ciò che meglio esprime il tipo di operazione compiuta in questo saggio, un *readerly dialogue* (11) tra il testo di partenza e quello di arrivo inscenato tramite l'analisi dello "sguardo dell'altro" (9), strumento interpretativo che permette all'autore di riconoscere e decostruire le lenti attraverso cui ciascun adattatore italiano ha attualizzato il testo di partenza. L'adattamento, ci ricorda Tomaiuolo, è una forma di traduzione intersemiotica, un 'viaggio' intrinsecamente processuale: ogni rilettura cambia a seconda dello 'sguardo dell'altro' dell'adattatore, ciascuno influenzato dal proprio contesto. Non si creda, però, che questa premessa sfoci in un'interpretazione meccanicistica di tipo causa-effetto, perché l'approccio al testo di partenza è piuttosto "un procedimento potenzialmente aperto a letture sempre diverse" (11). Il frequente riferimento al concetto di dialogo e a quello di 'portata ermeneutica' collocano il saggio di Tomaiuolo nel solco di una tradizione interpretativa delineata nel secolo scorso da Hans-Georg Gadamer, la cui ermeneutica ontologica si basa sul dialogo con l'opera e prende le mosse dalle domande che il testo in esame di volta in volta pone al suo interprete. Com'è noto, il filosofo tedesco attribuisce un ruolo significativo alla distanza temporale, che costituisce uno dei presupposti della comprensione: comprendere significa sempre 'comprendere diversamente', facendo dialogare il proprio orizzonte di senso con quello del testo che si vuole interpretare. Se, come sostiene Gadamer in *Verità e metodo*, "il comprendere non è mai solo un atto riproduttivo, ma anche un atto produttivo", è la distanza temporale a consentire una produzione di senso che è anche 'distillazione del senso': nell'operazione dialogica compiuta da Tomaiuolo, tale distillazione avviene in quanto l'interprete, nel nostro caso il regista (insieme alle altre figure coinvolte nella produzione di uno sceneggiato), risponde dal proprio orizzonte temporale alla domanda del testo che sta interpretando.

Gli adattamenti presi in esame da Tomaiuolo sono organizzati in capitoli tematici: dopo un'introduzione dedicata, oltre che all'apparato teorico di studi sugli adattamenti, alla





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figura-ponte di Emilio Salgari, il primo capitolo si occupa di una ‘dickensiana’ all’italiana e segue il filo conduttore del diverso ruolo della memoria nell’adattamento del 1965 di *David Copperfield* (Anton Giulio Majano) e in quello di *The Pickwick Papers* del 1968 (Ugo Gregoretti). *David Copperfield* – “un racconto della e sulla memoria, incentrato sul potere che essa possiede di riconfigurare il passato, permettendo di ripensarlo in maniera diversa, alternativa, se non addirittura creativa” (33) – offre a Majano la possibilità di mettere in scena una storia che, rappresentando i valori domestici dell’Inghilterra vittoriana, richiami parallelamente i valori dell’Italia pre-industriale, incentrati sulla famiglia, sulla religione, sul sacrificio e sull’abnegazione. Il *David Copperfield* del 1965 ben rappresenta il motto della Rai di quegli anni “Divertire educando, o educare divertendo”, coniato un anno prima da Bonaventura Tecchi, presidente del Comitato Centrale di Vigilanza sulle Radiodiffusioni, che informava il profilo della politica culturale della Rai. Ben diverso sarà invece l’intento di Gregoretti, che nel 1968 fornisce una lettura di *The Pickwick Papers* imperniata sul tema della libertà, eco della contestazione giovanile che aveva raggiunto anche l’Italia. Un esempio su tutti: nel suo *Il circolo Pickwick*, Sam Weller racconta di aver incontrato “un tizio con la barba”, che gli avrebbe regalato un libricino ispiratore delle sue riflessioni sulla libertà. Il riferimento è ovviamente a Karl Marx, e mettendo tra parentesi il lieve anacronismo (il romanzo è ambientato negli anni Venti dell’Ottocento, mentre Marx arriverà in Inghilterra negli anni Quaranta) l’interpretazione provocatoria di Gregoretti “[proietta] il proprio messaggio al futuro prossimo piuttosto che al passato” (84).

Spostandosi dal tema della memoria a quello della condizione della donna, il secondo capitolo analizza la centralità delle figure femminili in un periodo di grandi trasformazioni sociali quali furono gli anni Settanta, ripercorrendo le conquiste che portarono dalla legge che proibì il licenziamento delle lavoratrici a causa del matrimonio (1963), passando per l’accesso a tutti gli impieghi pubblici (1966), all’iter della legge sul divorzio, che si concluse nel 1974 con la schiacciante vittoria del ‘no’ al referendum abrogativo. Dal punto di vista



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dell'alfabetizzazione e dell'accesso all'istruzione, nel 1962 era stata approvata la legge 1859 sulla scuola media unica e sulla graduale introduzione delle classi miste; nel 1965 per la prima volta le giovani lettrici (età 15-25 anni) avevano superato il numero della loro controparte maschile. È ancora lo 'sguardo dell'altro' di Anton Giulio Majano, nome fondamentale nella storia degli sceneggiati italiani di quegli anni, a dare il via alla riflessione di Tomaiuolo, che confronta la sua *Jane Eyre* del 1957 con la Becky Sharp protagonista de *La fiera della vanità* (1967), per cui Majano si servì tra l'altro della consulenza poetica di Attilio Bertolucci. Nel confrontare le due protagoniste femminili, Tomaiuolo evidenzia come, a distanza di soli dieci anni, Becky risulti una donna contemporanea molto più che un'antieroina vittoriana (93), mentre dieci anni prima l'indomita Jane era stata addomesticata da Majano, che ne aveva sottolineato esclusivamente i tratti di donna riflessiva e riservata. Secondo Tomaiuolo, la difficoltà di adattare *Vanity Fair* risiede soprattutto nel rendere la sua sottile satira: molti adattamenti, pur fedeli in superficie, sarebbero quindi venuti meno al senso profondo dell'opera di Thackeray, perché ne avrebbero omissso il sottotesto. La trasposizione di Majano, a differenza di altri adattamenti celebri, mantiene l'ambivalenza narratoria dell'ipotesto: il narratore esterno, come nel romanzo, si sottrae al compito di giudicare le azioni dei personaggi, delegando al pubblico la necessità di ricostruire una visione morale della storia. L'analisi de *La donna in bianco* di Mario Morini (del 1980, tratto da *The Woman in White* di Wilkie Collins) conclude il capitolo con una riflessione sulla brutalità domestica e, parallelamente, allude al dibattito – all'epoca apertissimo – sulla legge Basaglia (entrata in vigore due anni prima) mettendo in primo piano e sviluppando ulteriormente quella parte della trama in cui la protagonista viene ingiustamente rinchiusa in manicomio.

Dagli esempi portati finora emerge un metodo rigoroso di analisi dei fenomeni culturali, che inquadra in maniera precisa ed efficace il contesto storico e sociale di riferimento, sebbene talvolta la sovrabbondanza di informazioni legate agli altri



adattamenti del testo rischi forse di confondere il lettore meno esperto rispetto all'oggetto dell'analisi. Si tratta però di un saggio di pregio, che non manca di evidenziare puntualmente le modalità in cui la letteratura vittoriana figlia della propria epoca riesca a dialogare con il contesto italiano in cui viene adattata.

I fatti di cronaca degli anni Settanta, ben lungi dall'essere ricordati solo per le lotte di emancipazione femminile e per i molti episodi di violenza domestica, sono tristemente noti per una lunga serie di attentati terroristici iniziata nel 1969 con la strage di piazza Fontana: questi avvenimenti forniscono a Tomaiuolo l'occasione per far dialogare Joseph Conrad con l'orizzonte temporale dei cosiddetti anni di piombo. Anche qui all'autore, che pure traccia un'amplissima panoramica sugli altri adattamenti celebri, preme sottolineare la duttilità dei testi di partenza, in questo caso *The Secret Agent* (1907) e *Under Western Eyes* (1911): i contenuti narrativi sono rifunzionalizzati, rispettivamente da Antonio Calenda (*L'agente segreto*, 1978) e da Vittorio Cottafavi (*Con gli occhi dell'occidente*, 1979), per un pubblico ancora scosso dagli attentati di piazza della Loggia e del treno Italicus (entrambi del 1974), in un'escalation che si sarebbe conclusa con il rapimento di Aldo Moro, il crescente fenomeno del pentitismo e la strage della stazione di Bologna. Secondo Tomaiuolo, “[*The Secret Agent*] riesce ad anticipare i tempi, prestandosi a traduzioni audiovisive che si nutrono della contemporaneità, pur fondandosi su un *source text* pubblicato agli inizi del XX secolo” (149). Per portare un esempio d'oltreoceano, pare che ‘Unabomber’, il bombarolo che terrorizzò gli Stati Uniti per quasi un ventennio, possedesse l'intera collezione delle opere di Conrad, e che *The Secret Agent* fosse uno dei suoi romanzi preferiti.

Il quarto capitolo chiude la rassegna degli sceneggiati occupandosi di un'opera “divenuta parte integrante dei miti della modernità, [che] si riflette nell'estrema (e plurima) adattabilità di una storia che è penetrata nei più disparati recessi sia della cultura ‘alta’ sia di quella ‘popolare’” (196), dagli adattamenti teatrali a quelli televisivi, dai *graphic novel* al cinema e ai cartoni animati: *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. I molteplici



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adattamenti italiani della novella di Stevenson tematizzano di volta in volta elementi diversi dell'ipotesto: la violenza domestica, il doppio, il ruolo della scienza, talvolta anche sovvertendo il senso del testo di partenza (come nel caso del film *Dottor Jekyll e gentile signora* di Steno, del 1979, in cui Jekyll è lo spregiudicato manager di una multinazionale senza scrupoli, e Hyde la sua versione addomesticata e docile, lavoratore indefesso e consumatore perfetto). Qui Tomaiuolo abbandona l'analisi tematica per procedere piuttosto a una rassegna degli adattamenti italiani più celebri dell'ipotesto, concedendosi anche un riferimento al cinema. Se il film di Steno, con Paolo Villaggio nei panni di Jekyll/Hyde, rappresenta una critica al capitalismo aggressivo e spregiudicato mascherata da commedia (239), il musical di Antonello Falqui e del Quartetto Cetra (inserito all'interno del format antologico *La Biblioteca di Studio Uno* del 1964) aveva invece proposto una rilettura parodistico-educativa del testo di partenza, rielaborando brani di operette e canzoni popolari capaci di trattare temi fondamentali come "le apparenze del perbenismo piccolo-borghese (nell'Italia di quegli anni) e la realtà, fatta di relazioni extraconiugali se non, peggio, di violenza domestica" (216). Non a caso questo adattamento, ludico solo in superficie, ottenne uno share televisivo inferiore di oltre 15 punti percentuali rispetto alle precedenti puntate de *La Biblioteca di Studio Uno*, a riprova del fatto che il pubblico non era probabilmente pronto ad affrontare tematiche così delicate attraverso un mezzo, quello televisivo, normalmente riservato all'intrattenimento e alla riproposizione dei valori dominanti.

A proposito di generi d'intrattenimento e operazioni parodistiche, nella conclusione Tomaiuolo si occupa del grande 'rimosso' della storia d'Italia nel Novecento, il colonialismo, che nel film di Ettore Scola *Riusciranno i nostri eroi a ritrovare l'amico misteriosamente scomparso in Africa?* dialoga ancora una volta con Joseph Conrad, questa volta attraverso le pagine di *Heart of Darkness*. Il film, del 1968, si inserisce nel filone della commedia all'italiana, ma lo "sguardo dell'altro" di Scola riesce a mescolare i toni cupi del capolavoro di Conrad con



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quelli scherzosi del fumetto *Topolino e il Pippotarzan* del 1957 (di cui viene riproposto quasi esattamente il finale, con Nino Manfredi nei panni dell'amico disperso che, già a bordo della nave che lo avrebbe riportato in Italia, si tuffa in acqua per tornare dalla sua tribù adottiva), dando vita a un'operazione di rispecchiamento in cui l'Angola Portoghese degli anni Sessanta riflette in filigrana le violenze e i massacri compiuti dagli italiani appena trent'anni prima, all'epoca dell'impresa imperiale mussoliniana.

Che riaffermassero lo status quo o lo mettessero in discussione, che rispecchiassero le conquiste sociali o gli eventi più traumatici di un decennio, o ancora "l'orrore, l'orrore" di un capitolo di storia italiana troppo poco discusso fuori dagli ambienti accademici, gli sceneggiati italiani ispirati ai classici vittoriani hanno contribuito all'epoca d'oro della televisione italiana, riflettendo al tempo stesso il (e sul) retroterra culturale in cui sono stati prodotti. Il saggio di Tomaiuolo ha quindi il merito di aver portato alla luce queste risonanze, offrendo in poco più di duecento pagine un 'distillato di senso' di oltre tre decenni di televisione - e di storia - della Repubblica italiana.



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### Nota bio-bibliografica

**Maria Fiorella Suozzo** frequenta il secondo anno del dottorato in *Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Storici*, curriculum letterario, presso l'Università degli Studi di Salerno, con un progetto sulle testimonianze dei viaggiatori stranieri in visita a Paestum nel XVIII e XIX secolo. Nel 2020 si è laureata in *Letterature e Culture Compare* presso L'Orientale – Università di Napoli con una tesi in Glottologia. Nel 2021 ha insegnato inglese nella scuola secondaria di primo grado e ha poi vissuto in Germania, a Friburgo, dove è stata assistente di lingua italiana. Ha curato la sinossi della serie TV *Downton Abbey* per *Downton Abbey: il fascino sfacciato dell'aristocrazia*, a cura di L. Esposito e A. Ruggiero (Mimesis, 2021). Attualmente sta lavorando a un saggio sull'adattamento televisivo di *The Handmaid's Tale*, parte di una monografia che uscirà per Mimesis nel 2023.

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## The Rivers Within: An Interview with Jaydeep Sarangi

Elisabetta Marino

(Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata", IT)

**Jaydeep Sarangi** is a widely anthologized poet with ten collections published, the latest being, *Letters in Lower Case* (2022). A regular reviewer for poetry journals and newspapers, Jaydeep Sarangi has delivered keynote addresses and read poems in different continents and lectured on poetry and marginal studies in universities/colleges of repute. His books on poetry and Indian writings, articles and poems are archived in all major libraries and online restores in the world, including Harvard University, Oxford University, Sorbonne University, Barkley Library and University of Chicago. He is the President, *Guild of Indian English Writers, Editors and Critics* (GIEWEC) and Vice President, *EC, Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library*, Kolkata. He has been known as 'the bard of Dulung' for his poems on the rivulet Dulung and people who reside on its banks. Sarangi is Principal and professor of English at New Alipore College, Kolkata and actively spreading the wings of poetry among generations. He edits *Teesta*, a journal devoted to poetry and poetry criticism. With Rob Harle he has edited seven anthologies of poems from Australia and India which constitute a great literary link between the nations. With Amelia Walker, he has guest edited a special issue for *TEXT*, Australia. He has kindly consented to answer a few questions about himself and his output.

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E.M.: Our journal is entitled *Margins*. What does this word evoke in contemporary India?

J.S.:

'Margins' is a loaded term implying multiple angles to look at it. It means the other, underprivileged, dislocated and uprooted by force or by circumstances. As a sociological category, it refers to different marginal positions, i.e. tribal margin, working class, geographical margin, people residing in conflict zones and people with disabilities. It also refers to a social hierarchy. In India, marginalised people dwell in all places including rural, suburban, and urban areas. Let me give you an example of a recent book, *The Partition of Indian Women*, edited by Carole Rozzonelli, Alessandro Monti and Jaydeep Sarangi. It is an unusual mix of reflective articles, poems and an interview which attempt to present Indian women, portioned from the main stream of power from a variety of experiences and perspectives, based on Indian cinema and literature (fiction and poetry). With Malsawmi Jacob of Mizoram, I worked on a book, *Prose Writings from North East India* (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi). The North East consists of eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. If one looks at the geographical map, the region is attached to the rest of India by a narrow strip aptly called 'chicken neck' to West Bengal. With Angana Dutta, I translated a book entitled, *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal* which is a text book in many universities now. Its directness of style chronicling the 'realities' of growing up in a *namashudra* (casteless Hindu) community in Khulna is an engaging discourse. For me, 'margin' is mental constructs. We must break barriers at different levels to create space for equal opportunities, equity and inclusivity.

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I strongly believe that there will be a time when we shall not be troubled/thrilled with the word, 'margins'; margin will be synonymous with the centre. They will not be binaries in critical frameworks.

**E.M.:** You are both a poet and a scholar. Do you think the two activities influence one another?

**J.S.:**

Yes. It's true. Reading habits give me an access to be familiar with world poetry. I read A. D. Hope to Salvatore Quasimodo. I consider myself fortunate that I was introduced to Federico García Lorca, Rabindranath Tagore, Jibanananda Das, W.B. Yeats and John Keats very early in my life. They stayed. John Keats is my heart beat I read each day. Hampstead became my dream place. Being a student of literature, it was my good fortune to read British, American, Indian, West Indian, Australian and African poets as part of the courses. Their rhythm tuned my ears. Later on, I worked on world poetry at a length. They formed my hearth.

My close associations with leading Indian English poets and critics are always a blessing. This gave me an insight into the canon. Critical knowledge, at times, is a hindrance for free flow of poetry writing.

For me, Words never sleep. They keep happening. They play a long languid game of love and longing to where other forms wait. They curl into a rare many-hued fabric of joy! As a critic, I love exploring the untold. I open the doors of words and phrases and lead myself into the heart of thoughts. My training as a scholar works as a ladder of hope in the process. Still



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now, I find the process juicy and sumptuous. My creative or critical works are the products of joy that I experience in life.

**E.M.:** Can you tell us more about your background and family history?

**J.S.:**

I'm genetically Odiya, coming from Odisha, as a priest for the Kanakdurga Temple at Chilkigarh, nearly three hundred and fifty years ago. Here is the link to an article I wrote on my family tree and our ancestral relationship with Chilkigrah: [https://www.chitrolekha.com/V2/n1/11\\_Kanakdurga\\_Temple\\_Medinipur.pdf](https://www.chitrolekha.com/V2/n1/11_Kanakdurga_Temple_Medinipur.pdf)

My links with Chilkigarh are genetic and academic. I'm an insider as well as an outsider. Situated on the bank of the rivulet Dulung, forest enclosed Chilkigarh is unique for its harmonious coexistence of tribal culture and Bramhin settlement and their cultural legacy. Famous for its forest cover and an ancient temple dedicated to Goddess Durga, is a small village. Demography of Chilkigarh involves a heterogeneous population; people of different communities have been living here for ages. All of them maintained their unique cultural nuances and it became a melting pot of cultures. I was born in a forest enclosed town of West Bengal, Jhargram. Jhargram has a magical charm for me. Its red soil, its forest, people here and its festivals are sap of my vitality. My father was a school teacher. I learnt my life-lessons mostly from him. I lost my brother too early in my life whom I miss in lonely nights. My mother, wife and my daughter are constant support for my works. Cricket was an important part of my making. It continued even in the hostel days at universities. My days in Hyderabad instilled many a subtle element in me. I came in contact with some great teachers. They taught me the



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fact how teaching could be an art form. I enjoyed teaching with my heart's content. My wife, Sutapa is my first reader for many of my poems. She is a teacher at Kapgari. My daughter has keen interest in literatures.

I feel myself fortune to take the first official class for the post graduate students of the Department of English of Sadhu Ramchand Murmu University of Jhargram when my home town got a State University. Within a busy schedule in Kolkata, I still go there and take few classes. I return to Jhargram as someone returns to her/his mother.

**E.M.:** As a poet and artist, what prompts you to compose? Can you share your sources of inspiration with us?

**J.S.:**

My choice of writing is deliberate because, as a post-colonial critic engaged with marginal discourse, I like to celebrate the small and local. India is an ethnological wonderland. Threads of Indian ways of life and society are the reservoir of poetic inspiration. Creativity is an aroma of human heart. Aroma has no colour or creed. So, regarding language, I do not have problem with my second language English and I don't see any problem with my first language either, which is like my mother's milk – Bangla. I am fortunate I can read Bangla which is an amazing reservoir of literature. How can I forget reading Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Prothom Alo* (*First Light*)? I am happy that I can use both the languages together as a product of typical Indian society. Knowing many languages help. I have so many things to say. Rivers are my vital dose for living and writing. Small rivers are sap of my existence. People call me, 'Bard on the banks of Dulung' for writings (obsessions?) about Dulung and people living nearby. The temple near



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the river Dulong – Kanak Durga Temple in Chilkigarh, the tribal culture associated with the river, I find everything very engaging and I feel an innate urge to transmute what I have experience. Dulong, for me, is the metaphor of celebration of the local. I think I always carry my land and people as inspiration. Old buildings, relics of the past, folklores and heritage sights haunt me. I'm at home with matters related to ancestors. I read Pablo Neruda and Giorgos Seferis in translation. I return to poetry each day. I'm blessed with genuine friendships since my childhood days. All are in my folders of love and longing. I like Jayanta Mahapatra's famous comment, "...poetry has to be witness" in his essay published in *Indian Literature*. I write poems because I feel happy after writing.

There are hours when meditative inwardness engulfs me. I reach at an ecstasy. That heightened space prompts me to write. I have been associated with a few social projects and some of the projects have given me strength to return to my soul's space. I have seen people practicing Truth to the highest scale. I call them Goddess. They are my temple, churches and mosques.

**E.M.:** Can you expand on your experience with marginalized groups, such as the Dalits?

**J.S.:**

I do not know why I am engaged with it but I am happy that I work with the Dalit writers of India. I find them fascinating. I am not afraid to face the truth. I am not afraid to unfold their truth in whatever small and humble way I can. Now it has become a commitment – a journey we travel together. I am happy to announce that there is a sound corpus of Dalit Literature and it exists with authority.



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I learnt a lot from stalwarts of Dalit movement in India: Sharankumar Limbale, Neerav Patel, Bama, Arjun Dangle, Harish Mangalam, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Kalyani Thakur Charal, Palanimuthu Sivakami, JatinBala and Kapilkrishna Thakur – all are my good friends. One of the aims of working on Dalit literature in India has been to reveal to the greater society, the injustice, oppression, helplessness and struggles of many of the disadvantaged populations under the social machine of stratification in India. Caste politics in India is unique and culture specific. It's an opportunity to work with Dalit writers! My work is my book.

I've worked on literatures from the North East India. The history of Dalit literature in India is uniquely long, heterogeneous and multi-stratified. The political, cultural, linguistic and sociological forces that shaped the narratives of Dalit writing were never one-dimensional, constant and consistent for the various geographical and cultural regions within the country. My recently published translation, *A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers* (2022) is dedicated to dedicated to all people, all over the world, displaced and uprooted by force or by circumstances.

**E.M.:** How does the experience you relate in *A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers* resonate with so many other refugees across the world?

**J.S.:**

Dalit aesthetics is never a postulation of beauty as the basic value of human life in an equation of truth with beauty. It's rather an urgent voice of struggle against the age-old socio-political-cultural stratifications and power structures of Indian society. Jatin Bala was born in Jossore (now in Bangladesh) in the year 1949 and migrated to India in 1954. Partition of India forced



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his family to immigrate to India, and take shelter in refugee camps. Refugee, a politically sensitive term, has political as well as sociological connotations in contemporary world society. The history of India has been considerably influenced by refugees and policies related to them. The Governments, both in the state and at the centre, have adopted varied policies for 'owning' the refugees. While refugees have always wrested for stability and rootedness, low caste refugees have struggled harder being doubly disadvantaged – almost predictably they have been victims of the worst infringement of human rights and cultural riggings. In the autobiography the Septic wound bleeds. There are occasions for social resistance. This compelling autobiography by Jatin Bala exposes the iniquities of caste and class during the Partition of 1947 in Bengal. A refugee child growing up in a tent, his long struggle for a life of dignity is doubly hard when culturally fixed by a Dalit identity. In the book a seed sprouts with hope too.

Refugee literatures are literatures of social awakening. I consider them as an important body of 'conflict literature' written from different backgrounds, a must for reading for social change for a better tomorrow.

**E.M.:** Talking about the imagery in your poems, borders, boundaries abound, but also natural images, that appease the reader. Could you comment on that?

**J.S.:**

I read poetry every day. Images come to me as loan and love. My experiments with truth, history and legends give me an insight into border discourses. 'Door' is a recurrent image. I believe that walls can be turned into doors to create a borderless society. I read a lot of partition



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literature written in different places. History is a corridor of thoughts. I like to travel. For me, more we travel, more we learn. The Himalayas are my wonderland. Images come automatically like leaves to plants. Many Bengali language poets also help me to construct images. Stitching them into a fabric is a challenge. I share a poem with you,

### **Soul Spaces**

Over my piercing eyes desire  
is called for, again and again

Talking to you is my desire  
dancing near the old canal at Jhargram

I celebrate my daughter's feats  
taking a special *biryani* for home

As the summer rain sails over me  
my desire makes me of its own

The silent waters of the Ganges  
carrying the light of my silent eyes

Delayed is my mind's full moon,  
someone calls me to meet in deep dark

Darkness has a voice, mysterious caller tones  
You call; my desire has an evening, our moods mate

A long day signs off waiting for your  
mood to return and celebrate the best in the world  
Unbound from cultural images, meetings  
her free spirit with a trident and a sword





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Bright blue, standing on Shiva she  
keeps time, the dark mother of the land

As she moves in dense forest of life  
my heart is taken on loan, undefined.

**E.M.: What's next? Any plans for the future?**

**J.S.:**

Living is always longing for something. I (with Basudhara Roy as co-editor) submitted an anthology to Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, *Mapping the Mind, Minding the Map*. It's an anthology of poems by twenty leading poets writing in English. I hope it will act as a map maker. With Zinia Mitra, I've been working for a translation project. It's the translation of a fiery Dalit anthology, *Chandalinir Kabita* (Poems by a Chandalini) by Kalyani Thakur Charal. I also have a plan for a critical book on Dalit Aesthetics.

**E.M.: Well, best of luck, Jaydeep! And thank you!**

### **Bio-bibliographical note**

**Elisabetta Marino** is Associate Professor of English literature at the University of Rome "Tor Vergata" and head of "Asia and the West" research centre. She is the author of four monographs: a volume on the figure of Tamerlane in British and American literature (2000); an introduction to British Bangladeshi literature (2005); a study on the relationship between Mary Shelley and Italy (2011); an analysis of the Romantic dramas on a mythological subject (2016). In 2006 she published the first Italian translation of poems by Maria Mazziotti Gillan. Between 2001 and 2023 she has edited/co-edited twelve collections of essays (three more are forthcoming) and a Special Forum of Journal of Transnational American Studies (2012). In 2022,



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she translated *Parkwater*, a Victorian novel by Ellen Wood, for the first time into Italian. She co-edited a special issue of *De-Genere. Journal of Postcolonial, Literary and Gender Studies* (2022), and is currently acting as guest editor for a special issue of *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* focused on Italian American material culture.

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## SIX POEMS BY JAYDEEP SARANGI

1

### **If We Three Meet**

The characters on the canvas are on interface  
they turn around to show their full face.  
some wear a smug smile, others wry.  
they never look us in the eye, deep.

This untrained eye search for  
the stars during a rainy night  
hands of care sitting near the widow,  
all stories that hearts stitch.

We never counted time,  
we discovered eyes of each other  
whom we wished to see  
slowly blinking in Time's mist.

Someone watching us would write a note  
on our first meeting by a riverside  
minding the map, mapping the minds.  
All were true, and continue to run.



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2

### **My Room of Poems**

How can I forget what has grown deep in me  
my aged father's shape through a careful history  
long before I got my space, a room of my own.  
My days were running after an image  
books, playmates and cricketers  
I gathered them all in blood.

It was an incredible formation of an image  
I carry where all good things are  
I missed many a things, my friends gained  
rooms changed, new books arrived, faces too.

My frail diabetic body thinks for  
someone who cares for me  
I wait for rains to come to touch the pores  
my numbed senses run wild

I've nothing much to say  
I never complaint against my room  
I created my own, planted a tree there  
I am not taking something away from myself.



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3

### **When I Lose My Poems**

All started with poems  
All ended with silence

Poems to silence is a book  
We planned, we travelled

I could do nothing to her  
She remained as a goddess

I couldn't touch her words, shades of thoughts  
She remained the dream poem

It's time to leave for no tomorrow  
Tonight is a long dark spell

My ancestors will line up, fares are open  
to welcome me with my unfulfilled wishes.

These days when the phone is dead  
I fall flat on the ground of no hope

I understand how I made crude calls  
behaved like a bull of no reason

Each home has a lantern, not in my house  
deep dark of no words, no poems

Promises smile, some leave behind  
in a tunnel of no tomorrow

When you change your mind  
I wait, I listen to your silence

Some unbearable darkness kill me  
my rites are done , guest leave too early

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You will not write anything, no review  
My last book of poems remain untouched.

I know how I was demanding  
You got an opportunity to pull yourself out

Never mind, all will be well for you  
My heart had no value, dead dark.



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4

## Curios

All are talking about that plight we face  
when the nations hope, gather grounds  
Humanity has a different plight.

Nations have missions, leaders of colours  
Some are deaf, some are dumb  
all they want is a ballot in their mouth.

Hungry minds are greedy with wealth,  
name and fame by the people  
for their graves to be decorated well.

Dead bodies have their own swing  
in the rivers of the nations, hearts are pale.  
They are heavy with angst.

The unhappy sun waits for a worthy son.  
He will come, he will, today  
If he decides to come, after this poem.

Come alone , looking for you and me  
We'd see him emerging from the blaze of fire  
Judgement rod is in his right hand, fixed.

Going to the temple is polity  
Cows are too shy to call them victims.  
Going for vaccination is a chance.

You and I take the makeshift plans  
when all answers fail  
we arise out the ashes, dead selves.

Life is a search for curios  
To include, ignite and innovate  
Strange things to make one's native.

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It plays over the patient water  
Will this face never changed?  
Shall we be vaccinated from crimes?





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5

### **The Colours of Life**

Neither the smoke nor the old city is like a ring  
the horns of nature hummed on a mystic ring

From above, the silence is like a scheme  
bitter in bottles of wine in a ring

Between these soft light of a ring  
the shards of colours fall in a ring

Going away, with everything intact, is a ring  
I know that to be kind of dying in a ring.  
I watch the indifferent lake beyond a ring  
flattened by the nails of things in a ring.

I stay there agile like a master in the ring,  
the colourful life's infinity is there with a ring.



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6

### **Kanakdurga Temple at Chilkigarh**

The uncertain fate lies heavy  
upon desirous stones that never speak

I smell its rough loneliness  
its ancient shadows, love that it holds.

In the retreating light there're  
silent bodies I can never lose.

I'm followed by my longings and returns  
to forest paths leading to the temple

I wait for a spell of rain in this afternoon  
When trees will smell insistent, tender

These loving trees, desiring rivulet  
I never let my daughter know

On my body of falling leaves  
I look up and find the shrine

I hear a small voice speaking to me always  
Someone calling me by my meaningless name

Uneasy peace of my last night's dream  
I recollect in an act of love and surrender.