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At The Margins: Liminality, Otherness, and Transgression across Texts and Media

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At The Margins: Liminality, Otherness, and Transgression across Texts and Media

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According to Julian Wolfreys, transgression “is the very pulse that constitutes our identities, and we would have no sense of our own subjectivity were it not for a constant, if discontinuous negotiation with the transgressive otherness by which we are formed and informed. Identity must needs believe in its own stability for the conventions of transgression to apply” (Wolfreys 2008, 1). In other words, transgression becomes intelligible only once identity categories (e.g. class, disability, gender) are socially constructed as stable and clearly delimited. It is precisely against these perceived boundaries that the individual may experience the impulse to cross, disrupt, or inhabit the threshold between categories.

And yet, in her 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler had already identified the critical operation that must follow from such a recognition: “What is the means by which we come to see this delimiting power, and what are the means by which we transform it?” (Butler 2006, xxiii). Once we recognise the codependency between cultural intelligibility and transgression, we must therefore take a step further and examine the way(s) such delimiting power is constructed and, possibly, questioned. Following Butler, in this stage it is pivotal to understand that these two



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movements take place within the same field of discursive practices, whether directly or symbolically, where the 'symbolic' should not be understood as a mere abstraction but as a mode of power that may be "more effective because it doesn't appear to be an exercise of power" (Mooney and Evans 2023, 16).

In this light, if language becomes what Nicoletta Vallorani has otherwise defined as a 'practice of signification' (cfr. Vallorani 2016, 36), it comes as no surprise that literature and culture offer fertile ground for investigating the dynamics of oppression and liberation. Taking its cue from the previous issues of *Margins/Mares/Margini*, which explored the multilayered concepts of 'margins' and 'marginalities', this issue focuses on the linguistic, literary, and cultural processes through which people are turned into 'liminal' and 'other' beings¹, as well as on the ways in which texts and media can both represent and challenge these phenomena.

In line with these premises, the issue opens with a set of theoretical reflections on liminality, deviance, and reading practices (Del Zoppo), before moving through a series of diachronically organised explorations of literary marginality: from King Arthur (Bria) to Shakespeare (Ciutacu), Middleton, and Rowley (Continisio), passing through Percy Bysshe Shelley (Luciano), Abdulrazak Gurnah (Brazzelli), and Pedro Lemebel (Barretta). These contributions show that processes of othering – and the responses they generate – are inherent to the very experience of literature and can be analysed from a variety of perspectives (e.g. ecocriticism, queer theory, postcolonial studies). The essays that follow are grouped thematically, shifting the focus from literary texts to media and audiovisual discourse (Magazzù, Ilkal, Imbri, Sileo), and then to performance and digital spaces (Ferrari, Cotoc and Radu, Capalbo).

¹ One might also recall Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), in which he exposes the physical and discursive practices through which the colonised – defined as 'the other man' – and the coloniser himself are turned into animals (cfr. Césaire 2000, 41).



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The reviews selected for publication further confirm the conceptual framework at the core of the essay section, moving from theory to practice across different historical moments and cultures. They engage with questions of geo-spatiality (Igneo), borders, boundaries, and frontiers (Perillo), while also addressing Southern feminism (Frandina) and queer bodies (Maio). The issue closes with Elisabetta Marino's interview with Susan Caperna Lloyd, an Italian American artist whose work occupies an interstitial space between literature and visual culture, text and photography.

What emerges from such a wide range of literary, linguistic, and cultural analyses is precisely the multiplicity that Julian Wolfreys evokes when he refers to the "various transgressive departures borne out of the singular structural manifestation of an otherwise 'combinative infinity'" (Wolfreys 2008, 12). The essays collected in this issue show that transgression does not follow a single trajectory, nor does it operate through one privileged medium, genre, or historical moment. Rather, it takes shape through a plurality of textual, visual, and performative practices that expose the apparent stability of social and cultural categories. In doing so, they recall the image of the 'network of roots' offered by Dean Atta in *Person Unlimited: An Ode to My Black Queer Body* (2024): "I contemplated how these trees might also be entangled underground, connected by a network of roots and mycorrhizal fungi in the soil, communicating and cooperating in ways humans fail to fathom" (Atta 2024, 247). Similarly, while pursuing distinct aims and employing different methodologies, the contributions gathered here remain coherent, invisibly connected by the subterranean networks of liminality, otherness, and transgression.

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Giuseppe Capalbo holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Rome Tor Vergata (Italy). In June 2022 he received a fellowship from the Warburg Institute (University of London, UK) to attend the course *Decoding the Renaissance*. He has conducted research on corporeality in modern and contemporary Anglophone fiction at the Bodleian Library (University of Oxford, UK) and presented at national and international conferences. His research interests include representations of the body, *fin-de-siècle* literature and culture, gender, queer, and disability studies.

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To Be in or Not to Be:
A Critical-Theoretical Framing of Liminality, Deviance, and Reading
Practices in German-Language Modernism (1890–1940)

Paola Del Zoppo

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Abstract

The article elaborates a critical-theoretical framework for the analysis of German-language modernist prose (1890–1940) by articulating a triadic nexus between the figuration of marginality (liminal and deviant subject-positions), the formal means through which such figuration is rendered intelligible (openness, indeterminacy, intertextuality, metalepsis), and the hermeneutic-historiographical regimes that have governed their reception and canonization. Drawing on Victor Turner’s concept of the liminoid and Howard S. Becker’s sociology of deviance, marginality is reconceptualized not as thematic content but as an immanent aesthetic operator that organizes narrative form and interpretive protocols. Through three case studies (Margarete Böhme, Lou Andreas-Salomé, Helene Böhlau), the essay demonstrates that the representation of deviance is structurally coextensive with formal strategies that suspend adjudication, dislocate epistemic authority, and destabilize juridical, medical, and moral discourse. Deviance emerges as a processual effect of ‘labeling’ and narrative mediation, while liminality is formalized as structural non-closure: fragmentation, parataxis, perspectival disjunction, and recursive framing produce texts that resist epistemic stabilization. In this sense, modernist form operates as an “open work” (Eco 1962; 1989) and as a site of co-constitutive meaning production (Iser 1974), wherein reading is repositioned as an ethically charged practice of negotiating indeterminacy rather than resolving it. At the level of critical methodology, the article advances the concept of ‘fake reading’ to designate interpretive regimes that instrumentalize literary texts by subsuming them under pre-given schemas, thereby enacting forms of epistemic injustice. Against such reductive appropriations, the framework integrates formalist analysis, sociological theory, and reception aesthetics into a mode of reading that is both analytically rigorous and politically reflexive. Reading is thus theorized as a site of epistemic struggle, in which the reproduction or suspension of normative categories is at stake. From this perspective, the margins of the canon are reconfigured as zones of heightened formal and epistemic productivity, where modernism’s constitutive operations – its refusal of closure, redistribution of interpretive agency, and interrogation of institutional knowledge – are



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most legible. German modernism thereby emerges not as a purely stylistic formation but as an epistemic apparatus that rearticulates the conditions under which marginality can be represented, interpreted, and known.

Keywords: liminality; hermeneutics; modernist form; epistemic injustice; theories of reading.

1. Situating marginality between theme, form, and reception

This essay proposes an interpretive framework that integrates three trajectories for reading German-language fiction around the beginning of the twentieth century: (1) the thematic representation of outsiders, liminoids, and deviants – figures whose lives unfold at the thresholds of social belonging; (2) the aesthetic and formal strategies by which such figures are rendered legible, particularly through narratological strategies such as intertextuality and metalepsis, narrative openness and indeterminacy; and (3) the hermeneutic and historical consequences of these strategies – how such works have been relegated to the margins of the canon, and how renewed critical attention to their aesthetics may illuminate persistent social questions around gender, mental health, and exclusion. Focusing on authors such as Lou Andreas-Salomé, Margarete Böhme, Helene Böhlau, the essay casts liminality not simply as a sociological condition but as an aesthetic problem: the encounter between non-conforming lives and forms that resist closure. Rather than treating literature as a transparent vehicle for social diagnosis, it argues that literary ‘outsides’ – of gender, of mental health, of legality, of class – are inseparable from formal decisions that solicit, complicate, or defer interpretive consensus. Not only the recovery of neglected authors, but also the demonstration that marginality itself is a generative aesthetic principle are at stake: the very condition modernism exploits to reconfigure form, reading practices, and cultural legitimacy, ultimately functioning as an epistemic laboratory of marginality.

2. Conceptual hooks: liminoid figures and deviant careers

The first conceptual hook is Victor Turner’s notion of the ‘liminoid’, a category that retains the threshold dynamics of ritual liminality while transposing them into modern, individualized, and often voluntary arenas of experience (Turner 1969, 1982). Liminoid figures “are neither here nor there,” (Turner 1974, 232) and their representation exposes the



meaning of refusing socially prescribed life-course milestones – marriage, parenthood, religious rites, and other normative ‘steps.’ Such protagonists do not “live by the rules,” (Turner 1974, 232) yet their refusal is not reducible to criminality; they inhabit a gray zone in which noncompliance may be ethically motivated, aesthetically productive, or existentially necessary. Turner built on Van Gennep’s tripartite schema (Van Gennep 1909); his re-theorization of liminality as a vital “betwixt and between” (Turner 1974, 232) can help reading threshold states not as mere passages to reintegration but as zones of heightened instability, symbolic density, and potential reconfiguration – what later criticism also names as threshold chronotopes (Bakhtin) or even interstitial ‘third spaces.’ There disorder, asymmetry, and ambiguity become productive rather than merely disruptive. As widely documented in anglophone Gothic and modernist short fiction (e.g., Woolf and others); anglophone modernist short fiction (e.g., Woolf, Moore, D’Arcy, Egerton, and others), where porous interiors dramatize threshold life where rites of passage (marriage, work, aging) are stalled or refused; domestic interiors, streets, and waiting rooms become porous thresholds; and form itself (the short story’s compression, montage, and open *pointe*) stages the volatility of being neither fully inside nor outside (Del Zoppo 2021). Against this English baseline, the German-language cases examine function as a comparative gauge: they show how marginality and liminality not only surface as themes but operate as aesthetic engines on a much broader and transcultural level – activating liminoid experience, deviance as social process, and open form as readerly address – and thus warrant a renewed literary historiography attuned to margins as generative.

The second anchor comes from Howard S. Becker’s sociology of deviance, especially his analysis of ‘deviant careers’ as multi-step processes shaped by labeling, surveillance, and public exposure. Becker underlines the difficulty of achieving a genuine ‘outsider view’ of deviance – the difficulty of seeing deviance as a social construction rather than a pre-given essence. He also shows how actors learn “techniques of neutralization” (Sykes and

Matza 1957) to justify norm-transgressing acts against internalized codes. The moment of being “caught and publicly labeled” (Becker 1963, 32) marks a pivotal conversion of private irregularity into social identity.

Here then the literary stakes: if the liminoid marks a voluntary, often aestheticized thresholding of identity, the deviant career dramatizes the social and procedural capture of that threshold. The two perspectives – one emphasizing experience and form, the other institutional process – suggest that literary modernism’s preoccupation with marginality is not merely mimetic but reflexive and metapoetic: literature probes how thresholds are experienced and narrated into being. This also foregrounds and gives space to a sociological-literary approach, linking what Jérôme Meizoz (2007) calls “authorial postures”: the ways in which writers publicly negotiated their positions, shaping both their contemporary reception and later marginalization. For example, in the case studies below, Böhme’s self-positioning as *Herausgeberin* of *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* can offer a paradigmatic example of such an authorial posture, mediating scandal through editorial distance while simultaneously heightening claims to authenticity.

3. Gender, stigma, and the everyday dramaturgy of transgression and deviance: a corpus

The corpus foregrounds women whose ‘outsideness’ is marked not only by the refusal or failure to marry but also by proximity to criminalized economies and stigmatized conditions: prostitution, theft, abortion, abandonment, or the burden of ‘multiple marriages.’ The case studies are deliberately limited, selected from a broader constellation I have examined elsewhere.¹ In Margarete Böhme, the traffic between intimacy and commerce is not an incidental plot device but a social language in which desire and vulnerability are written against the law. In Helene Böhlau, violent ruptures expose the

¹ For a broader constellation of authors, including Ilse Frapan, Johanna Wolff, Friedrich Glauser, and Leonhard Frank, see Del Zoppo (2018, 2020, 2023, 2026).



gendered distribution of culpability and sympathy. In Lou Andreas-Salomé, boundary-testing through abandonment or trespassing dramatizes the costs of selfhood that refuses domestication.

From the vantage of Becker and Sykes/Matza, these narratives can be read as archives of rationalization and counter-rationalization – repertoires by which characters (and sometimes narrators) test, deflect, or repurpose the moral grammar of their worlds. Yet Turner’s liminoid lens cautions against collapsing these acts into purely instrumental defences; they may be, instead, modes of experimenting with life forms – of trying on identities that the social field makes anomalous.²

The stigmas (Goffman 1963) attached to women’s exclusion and to mental health – particularly in discourses surrounding so-called ‘manic-depressive disorder’ – are inseparable from *cupio dissolvi*, a desire for dissolution that may appear pathological, mystical, erotic, or aesthetic depending on the interpretive frame. Such doubleness makes these texts crucial for understanding how modernism stages the dramaturgy of transgression: not as a set of predictable infractions but as thresholds where identities are tested and meaning itself is negotiated and requires a dual lens. On the one hand, medicalizing languages translate suffering into diagnosis; on the other, they risk occluding agency and reducing ambiguity. The liminoid model reframes this tension, treating dissolution not as fixed pathology but as a threshold experience whose meaning depends on context. Formally, *cupio dissolvi* correlates with the texts’ own gestures toward disaggregation: episodic structures, broken chronologies, porous boundaries between letters, reports, confessions, and dreams. In these architectures, psychic disintegration is mirrored in literary design. One thinks, for example, of Isolde’s final walk into the ‘white

² See Reinhart Koselleck’s reflections on threshold concepts – between *Erfahrungsraum* (space of experience) and *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectation) – help clarify how these texts situate dissolution at the juncture of lived suffering and projected possibility, a temporality where the self is suspended between historical experience and future-oriented anticipation.



morning' in Böhlau's *Halbtier!*: a moment in which dissolution is staged not as termination, but as threshold. Or of Irene von Geyern's image walking towards the landscape in the last story of *Menschenkinder*. Or of Thymian's diary voice fading into silence rather than resolution: moments where dissolution is staged as threshold, as liminal moments, rather than terminus, an Iserian blank rather than pathology. Yet because endings remain open, dissolution is not equated with narrative death. Instead, meaning is suspended to the reader: what forms of life remain possible in a field calibrated to exclude them? A final cadence that withholds verdict (a walk into 'white morning,' a diary's self-address that fades rather than closes) enacts dissolution as threshold rather than terminus – an Iserian blank rather than a pathology.

Sykes and Matza's classic account of "techniques of neutralization" (1957) – denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of condemners, appeal to higher loyalties – offers a vocabulary for analyzing how characters and narrators justify actions that violate convention. In this corpus, such strategies rarely appear in isolation; rather, they intermingle with confessional modes (*Beichte*), sentimental appeals, or bureaucratic discourse. Their literary interest lies in friction zones: when a justification overshoots its mark, when an "appeal to higher loyalties" (Sykes and Matza 1957, 667) exposes parasitic dependence on patriarchal authority, or when "condemnation of condemners" (Sykes and Matza 1957, 668) doubles as a sharp diagnosis of institutional hypocrisy. When a protagonist frames violence as protection of a higher law, the appeal to higher loyalties is immediately unsettled by a narrative swerve to parataxis and silence – form refusing to underwrite exoneration. For instance, as we'll see, in Böhlau's *Halbtier!* Isolde's act of shooting Mengersen is framed as 'self-defense' and a higher loyalty to female integrity – an appeal to neutralization that the narrative immediately serves the reader a moral gap, unsettles by shifting into lyrical parataxis rather than juridical justification.

4. Form as ethics: openness, indeterminacy, the refusal of closure and the act of reading

A second axis of the framework concerns how modernist aesthetics – especially open or indeterminate forms – represent liminal or deviant life. As Umberto Eco argues, the “open work” interpellates readers to take a stance on meaning and ending, transforming interpretation into an active and ethically charged process (Eco 1989). In contrast to juridical forms that promise closure through verdict, the open novel suspends judgment and defers it to the reader, who must navigate the seductions of neutralization and the ambiguities of confession without recourse to stable categories. In this interval, texts reveal the politics of form, showing how justification and testimony are shaped by – and resist – normative codes. The refusal of definitive endings mirrors the protagonists’ refusal of prescribed life-courses, positioning openness as a literary analogue of the liminoid: a form that inhabits thresholds and resists premature reintegration into social scripts.

Openness thus functions as an ethical demand, requiring readers to adjudicate between competing claims under conditions of partial knowledge. Narrative gaps, perspectival shifts, and paratactic structures deny any sovereign vantage point, compelling participation in meaning-making. Where institutions demand classification – innocent or guilty, sane or insane – modernist form insists on suspension. As Eco emphasizes, the absence of closure resists juridical authority while exposing the reader’s complicity in desiring resolution. Such openness is not aesthetic caprice but a politics of form. As Peter Bürger argues in *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974), modernist techniques intervene in the institution of art itself: withholding closure turns the text into a laboratory where form and social praxis collide. Fragmentation, montage, and perspectival plurality distribute authority across conflicting registers, producing a pedagogy of interpretation. Modernism’s refusal of closure thus becomes a form of resistance, training attention to thresholds rather than dissolving them into verdicts and making these texts a privileged site for investigating marginality and reception.



“The ideal reader must be found” – a famous Iser’s concept is decisive here. After examining English novels in *The Implied Reader*, Iser develops his position in *The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach*. He insists that a literary work involves not only the text but also “the actions involved in responding to that text.” (Iser 1972, 279) It therefore has two poles: the ‘artistic’ (the text by the author) and the ‘aesthetic’: the “realization accomplished by the reader” (Iser 1972, 279). The work lies “half-way between the two” and comes into being only through their convergence (Iser 1972, 280). Reading activates the text’s “inherently dynamic character” (Iser 1972, 280), filling gaps that stimulate imagination yet are delimited by textual strategies. Iser’s phenomenology of reading conceives meaning as co-produced: the text offers ‘blanks’ and ‘gaps’ that summon readers to complete patterns without ever securing a sovereign vantage point. In contexts of marginality this labour becomes ethically fraught. Readers must decide how to interpret silences around stigmatized acts, how to weigh competing genres of evidence – rumor, confession, dossier, testimony – and how to register that official discourses (medical, juridical) narrate only partial stories. The ‘ideal’ (implied) reader is therefore not merely competent but attuned to the demands of uncertainty, willing to hold judgment open where closure would simply ratify power’s categories.

This is precisely where the sociological and the aesthetic touch. Becker (1963) reminds us that deviance is ‘made’ by social reaction – by the very labels and procedures that sort persons; Iser (1972, 1974) reminds us that meaning is ‘made’ by interpretive action – by how readers negotiate gaps and distribute credibility. Together, they foreground reading as a site where categories are either reproduced or suspended. Reading these works is never passive consumption: it risks reproducing the labels the texts expose, or, alternatively, suspends them long enough to perceive other possible narratives of personhood. In this suspended interval, produced by formal openness, the ethics of interpretation becomes inseparable from the politics of representation.

5. Canon, criticism, and the politics of legibility and endings

'Intelligible criticism' often emerges from outside the canon: the historical consolidation of modernism has left substantial seams of women's writing and 'popular' or documentary forms either misread or excluded. What has frequently been treated as mere sociology or biographical document (fallen women, criminal 'types,' madness) or dismissed as sensationalism (seriality, documentary frames, melodrama) are in fact the technical means by which liminality and deviance become thinkable. Here 'testimony is form': to recover these works aesthetically is not to deny their social testimony, but to recognize that the social is encoded in choices of voice, structure, and pacing. As Paul de Man reminds us: "Criticism is a metaphor for the act of reading" (de Man 1971, 107) and what we are doing while we wave canons is recognizing different ways of readings, which are of course obliged to the text and the narrative strategies. Also, as Hans Robert Jauss reminds us, canons are mediated by changing horizons of expectation (Jauss 1982); the texts we examine show how those horizons were narrowed by suspicion and widened by later readers attentive to formal complexity. Conversely, when formalist readings evacuate the social, they miss how form functions as a pressure point where the social world imprints itself on narrative design.

This is also a question of disciplinary 'memory.' Poetology, comparative approaches and literary history must be held together: literary self-understandings and institutional historiographies interact to regulate the boundaries of the canon. Together, they authorize – or block – access to interpretive authority. An integrated method restores legibility where canon-making had produced silence or even, through "fake readings" (Del Zoppo 2026), epistemic cancellations. An integrated method restores legibility where canon-making has produced silence or, through 'fake readings,' forms of epistemic cancellation. The concept of 'fake reading' designates not simple misinterpretation, but a recurrent critical reduction that turns literature into a prop for pre-established positions, thereby obscuring its formal



and epistemic complexity.³ Early responses to authors such as Böhme or Böhlau often enacted this reduction, treating their works either as sociological documents or as sensational trivialities. In this sense, fake reading can be understood in relation to epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), insofar as it suppresses the interpretive resources required to render a text's mode of knowledge production intelligible. It may produce testimonial injustice by discrediting marginal voices, and hermeneutical injustice by lacking the conceptual frameworks needed to understand them. By reducing textual processes to familiar categories (such as theme or representation), it generates a hermeneutic gap in which the text's reconfiguration of perception and agency remains unrecognized. This is not a general critique of critical practice, but an account of moments in which interpretive frameworks become restrictive rather than enabling – particularly in the reception of marginal or non-canonical texts. In this context, fake reading names a structural limitation within regimes of interpretation that constrain what can be known and perceived through literature. Interpretive practice – especially intertextual reading (Del Zoppo 2026) – thus becomes a form of epistemic reparation, restoring intelligibility to marginal texts that reductive frameworks have rendered opaque or misrecognized.

From this vantage, the 'use' of literature must not be neither purely instrumental nor merely decorative. It is diagnostic in a phenomenological sense: literature shows how a world feels and reasons when power scripts the meanings of bodies, desires, and acts. As Rita Felski argues in *Uses of Literature* (2008), suspicion is only one mode of engagement; literature also works through recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock, inviting readers into forms of attachment that exceed ideology critique. Incorporating such

³ This concept does not aim to dismiss existing scholarship as a whole, but rather to identify a recurrent interpretive tendency. By 'fake reading' I refer to a performative mode of interpretation that approaches literary texts through pre-established ideological, ethical, or identity-based frameworks, thereby foreclosing their formal and epistemic complexity. Rather than engaging with ambiguity, indeterminacy, and the dynamic operations of narrative form, such readings tend to stabilize meaning prematurely, transforming literature into an instrument of confirmation.



perspectives reinforces the claim that reading practices must preserve formal and experiential complexity rather than collapsing texts into scandal or pathology. Suspicion has long been a motor of criticism, but it can easily harden into reflex. On one side, moral suspicion reduces difficult texts to dossiers of vice or pathology; on the other, ideological suspicion reduces them to unacknowledged complicities. Both modes flatten formal complexity. The antidote is not naïveté but a doubled literacy: to read institutions as producers of deviance, and at the same time to read form as producer of insight.

Crucially, literature stages how scripting can be inhabited and how it can be refused. It does so 'as art' – through deliberate choices of voice, structure, and pacing that neither mirror reality nor escape it, but refract it until new angles of regard become available. Given all the complex theoretical infrastructure, this framework proposes a set of reading protocols that track life-course scripts (Turner; Becker 1963), map repertoires of justification (Sykes and Matza 1957), read for epistemic form (Eco; Iser), and historicize suspicion (Jauss 1982; Felski 2008). Together, these approaches show how marginality operates simultaneously as aesthetic form, social process, and site of interpretive contestation, resisting reduction to sociological evidence, trivial spectacle or moral judgment.

6. Case-cluster heuristics: from plot engines to epistemic forms

Before turning to individual examples, it is useful to note that the following section develops three synthetic case studies. Each case illustrates how the thematic figures of marginality, the formal strategies of openness, and the dynamics of reception converge in specific texts. Taken together, these clusters are meant not as isolated readings but as interconnected demonstrations of the broader framework proposed above. Rather than offering exhaustive readings of each author, the framework proceeds these 'case-clusters' heuristics – illuminating some configurations across the corpus that clarify the traffic between theme and form.

6.1. Transactions and ledgers: Böhme and beyond

The broad literature on autobiographical and diaristic fiction has already elucidated about intimacy: mediated by money or documents – letters, diaries, police files – the narrative literalizes the ledgers by which people are rendered legible or disposable. Such forms promise transparency while distributing opacity: who writes, who edits, who redacts? In Margarete Böhme's *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* (1905), this dynamic becomes the organizing principle.

a) Liminality, stigma, open form

Böhme's *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* (*Diary of a lost one*) was one of the German-language blockbusters of the early twentieth century – sensational, endlessly re-mediated, and long misread. Its contemporary allure derived not only from subject matter (often reduced to: a young woman's descent into prostitution) but from a calculated play with 'documentary' form: Böhme presented herself on the title page as editor (*Herausgeberin*) of a diary "by a dead woman" (Böhme 1907) staging authorship and authenticity as contested zones. That paratextual gambit both distanced the writer from scandal and charged the text with truth-effects that shaped its reception – and its misreception. In turn, Böhme's formal experiment becomes legible as a case of liminal narrative: a fiction that inhabits thresholds between document and novel, victimhood and agency, domesticity and street, death and afterlife. Read this way, *Tagebuch* sits squarely with our essay's triad – marginality, deviance, openness – and adds a corrective to the critical record.

b) From 'fallen woman' to stigmatized subject: labeling and self-narration



The diary protagonist, Thymian, is labeled in the classic sense of labeling theory: a ‘fallen’ (*gefallene*) girl, then a prostitute, later a kept woman – each label reassigning her social legibility. Böhme makes the label visible and historically specific: a bourgeois moral order that polices female desire and punishes sexual nonconformity as deviance. Plotted as entries of intimate address (“Wenn ich Freude oder Schmerz empfinde, bist du meine Freundin...”, Böhme 1905, 5), the diary turns stigma into a practice of self-narration. The ‘documentary’ pose intensifies the ethical claim: this is not a case; it’s a voice.

Two moves matter here. First, Böhme’s self-positioning as editor withdraws ‘authorial’ responsibility while heightening plausibility; second, the text organizes an affective economy in which pain outranks pleasure – the performative aesthetics of *Lust* and *Schmerz* (desire/pain) anchors the diary’s claim to authenticity and its critique of moral law (Schönfeld 2015). The novel maps a theatre of thresholds: reform school, brothel, rented rooms, clinics, cemetery. As argued elsewhere (Del Zoppo 2023), the grave emerges as Thymian’s only secure ‘home,’ once reintegration into bourgeois domesticity proves structurally impossible. These spaces register what Turner calls the liminoid condition: suspended, ritual-like states without stable re-entry paths. The narrative contract is equally liminal: the fiction of editorial mediation and the sequel (*Dida Ibsens Geschichte*), together with later film adaptations, repeatedly reopen the storyworld. Openness here is systemic rather than episodic: frames, sequels, and aftertexts refuse definitive closure. The logic of stigma and narrative self-positioning is already prefigured in the novel’s opening, where Thymian frames her own act of writing in terms of belatedness and ambivalence:

Tante Lehnsmann brachte mir gestern das Tagebuch als verspätetes Konfirmationsgeschenk. Es sei sinnig für ein junges Mädchen, sagte sie. Und so billig, dachte ich. Aber nun es einmal da ist, will ich es auch benutzen. Vielleicht entdecke ich dabei noch schriftstellerisches Talent in mir.⁴ (Böhme 1905, 5)

⁴ “Yesterday Aunt Lehnsmann brought me the diary as a belated confirmation gift. ‘It is quite suitable for a young girl,’ she said. ‘And so cheap,’ I thought. But now that I have it, I shall use it. Perhaps I may even



This passage stages writing not as authentic self-expression but as a socially mediated practice. The diary is already an object – gift, commodity, moral instrument – before becoming a voice. The ironic distance (“Und so billig, dachte ich”) signals an early awareness of the gap between prescribed femininity and subjective experience. From the outset, narration is caught between compliance and resistance. The formation of subjectivity is further shaped by a dense network of social observation and judgment, as the small-town environment imposes legibility through constant surveillance:

Die Straßen sind alle schnurgerade und sehr sauber. Gras wächst nicht zwischen den Steinen und die Häuser laufen auch sehr akkurat auf dem Pflaster umher. Die Häuser sehen alle so geschniegelt und glatt aus wie Männer, die eben vom Barbier den Bart abgenommen bekommen haben. [...] Abends sitzen die Leute auf Bänken vor der Tür und schwatzen mit den Nachbarn über den Nachbarn. Und wenn die anderen Nachbarn dann dazu kommen, reden sie wieder über andere Nachbarn.⁵ (Böhme 1905, 18)

Here spatial order becomes moral order. The obsessive cleanliness and repetition produce what Foucault would call a microphysics of discipline, but crucially, the narration registers this as estrangement. Thymian’s gaze does not naturalize this world; it renders it excessive, almost grotesque. This is where the Antigonean dimension emerges structurally: not in explicit defiance, but in the inability to fully inhabit the normative space.

discover a talent for writing in myself.” Although I list the English edition in the bibliography, I have preferred to provide my own translations. The published English translation is, inevitably, influenced by the interpretative choices of the translator and the editors and, for this reason, is not suitable for the purposes of my analysis.

⁵ “The streets are all perfectly straight and scrupulously clean. No grass grows between the stones, and even the houses seem to proceed with meticulous order along the pavement. They look as sleek and polished as men who have just had their beards shaved by the barber. [...] In the evenings, people sit on benches outside their doors, gossiping with neighbors about neighbors. And when those neighbors join them, they begin talking about others in turn.”



c) Reading 'with' Antigone

Antigone's isotopies – burial, law's violence, sisterly care, stigma – saturate the diary. Thymian's gravitation toward graves prefigures death-as-home; the subtitle *By a Dead Woman* literalizes that isotopy. The editor who survives her performs an Ismene-like function, curating and witnessing. The scandal of the diary lies less in sex than in sepulture: who is permitted re-entry into civic life and who must remain unburied, socially erased. In embracing the mark of 'fallen,' Thymian mirrors Antigone's gesture of accepting outlawry to expose the law's violence. In Goffman's terms, Thymian both suffers the discrediting mark and seeks to manage its exposure; but, crucially, she also inhabits the mark to speak from it, anticipating readings of stigma as resource that our Antigone strand foregrounds.

d) Causality without verdict: ethics at the reader's edge

In the broader theoretical frame (Becker; Turner; Eco; Iser), *Tagebuch* can be restated as an experiment in causality more than a thesis about guilt. How are 'lostness' and 'fallenness' produced and maintained? Böhme writes a sequence of institutional encounters – family, school, clinic, reform institute, brothel – in which the 'lost' subject is processed. The novel's epistemic tension is particularly visible in scenes of accusation, where labeling precedes understanding and speech is overridden by institutional authority (also signaled by the alternance *du/Sie*):

Kommen, Thymian! Du bleibst hier bei mir, Fräulein ... Und sie wollte mich beim Schlafittchen packen, aber ich, schnell wie der Wind, retirierte und über Gläser und Flaschen und Dessertteller weg aus dem Saal. [...] Wenn deine anständige Mutter das wüßte...⁶ (Böhme 1905, 9)

⁶ "'Come along, Thymian! You will stay here with me. Miss, have you no shame, standing there so improperly – go back inside at once...!' She tried to seize me by the collar, but I, swift as the wind, slipped away and fled across glasses and bottles and dessert plates, out of the hall. [...] 'If your respectable mother knew of this...'"



Already in the opening pages, Aunt Frieda registers that the child is being drawn into troubling dynamics: while Thymian perceives her as prudish and overbearing, the reader recognizes her awareness of the sexualized positioning imposed by both the father and his apprentice Meinert, whose later coercion is thus prefigured. This early dissonance – between childish perception and readerly recognition – does not absolve Frieda’s complicity within patriarchal structures, but foregrounds a moment of epistemic injustice, in which the interpretive resources available within the narrative fail to fully render the situation intelligible, thereby requiring an ethical stance from the reader – one the text presupposes as available to its contemporary audience. From the protagonist’s psychological perspective (internal focalization), these moments dramatize the immediacy of moral classification: shame is imposed before any narrative of causality can emerge. Thymian’s flight – physical and narrative – interrupts this fixation into stable identity; what matters is not the event itself, but the speed with which social discourse stabilizes its meaning. The diary resists this through fragmentation, hesitation, and movement. Such gaps (ellipses, temporal leaps, muted transitions), intimate address to a silent second person (“dear diary”), and slippage between diarist and editor install Iserian blanks that compel the reader to complete the ethical meaning. The form withholds a verdict; the reader must supply it – and confront the complicity of moral law in producing the deviance it punishes. *Tagebuch* thus performs liminality both thematically (Thymian’s suspended, unreintegrable existence) and formally (diary/novel thresholds, editor/author blend), with domestic interiors mapping social permeability. The grave as “last dwelling” (Del Zoppo 2023) closes the circle: the city offers no home; only sepulture does. Closure is displaced from verdict to address, distributing judgment to readers and culture. Alongside this narratological openness, the novel’s pain aesthetics – the weighting of injury over eroticism – stage affect as cognition, producing a

pedagogy of inference that trains ethical attention without resolving ambiguity into moral cliché.

e) Reception, 'fake reading' and the aftertext: recognizing liminal authorship as corrective stance

Also, the openness goes beyond the representation: *Dida Ibsens Geschichte* reactivates Thymian within another woman's narrative; Oswald's 1918 and Pabst's 1929 film versions supply competing codas for different publics. These afterlives testify to the book's systemic openness: culture itself could not decide its ending. What emerges is a text that insists on readerly and cultural labor to complete its meaning. The reception of *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* extends significantly into cinema, where its three adaptations – the lost 1912 version, the 1918 film by Richard Oswald, and especially the 1929 adaptation by Georg Wilhelm Pabst – function as 'aftertexts' that reconfigure the novel's legibility. While the earlier films tend to reduce its complexity to moral melodrama or social document, Pabst's version, starring Louise Brooks as Thymian, restores its formal and epistemic dimension, transforming adaptation into a site of modernist experimentation. In this sense, the shift from novel to film is not merely a medial translation but a process of epistemic redistribution, in which meaning is rearticulated across forms: cinema becomes a laboratory for new modes of interpretation, confirming that reception itself is integral to the production of knowledge.

Early readers and important critics (Del Zoppo 2023) took the diary-frame at face value and consumed the book as social documentary or scandalous confession; others dismissed it as 'popular' melodrama, unworthy of formal analysis. Both postures flatten the novel's formal liminality (diary/novel, editor/author, voice/frame) and miss the rhetorical craft that makes reading ethically arduous. It was not misreading as productive tension but performative reduction: the text becomes a prop for a predetermined position (reformist



pity or moral condemnation), which then feeds canon gatekeeping and ‘benevolent discrimination’ toward women’s fiction. Re-centering form – focalization, paratext, narratorial metalepsis, and seriality – repositions Böhme within modernism’s experimental field rather than outside it. A corrective reception can do three things. First, it recognizes the editorial fiction as a deliberate aesthetic device, part of a tradition of women’s ‘liminal authorship’ as an authorial posture. Second, it revalues readability and melodrama as political technique – a maieutic accessibility designed to reach a broad audience. Third, it integrates *Tagebuch* into modernism’s genealogy of openness, not despite its success but because of it, showing how women’s bestsellers shaped the turn to seriality and multivocality.

6.2. Trespass and boundary policing: Lou Andreas-Salomé – *Menschenkinder* as an Antigonean laboratory of liminality, open form, and corrective reading

Narratives of abandonment and trespass in Lou Andreas-Salomé’s *Menschenkinder* (1899) dramatize the erotics of crossing and the sanctions that crossings trigger. The cycle’s circular architecture and open endings displace closure from the plot to the reader, so that blame remains unclaimed by any single discourse. Here an Antigone isotopy surfaces not as citation but as structure: deviance becomes chosen visibility, a refusal of reintegration into normative domestic or civic scripts.

a) Architecture of reading

To read Lou Andreas-Salomé’s *Menschenkinder* as mere ‘illustration’ of her philosophical or psychoanalytic prose is to miss how rigorously these novellas stage the tensions our essay tracks: liminality, deviance as visibility, and the ethics of indeterminacy. The cycle’s compositional logic – its circular pacing, its distributed motifs, its metalogical clues – does not simply exemplify a set of theses; it ‘produces’ them by making the reader enact a mode



of reading that refuses closure. This is where Salomé becomes method, not topic: the fiction instructs us in how to read women's writing when it disallows disciplinarily neat endpoints. In doing so, it offers a strong 'corrective' to those reception habits (the 'fake readings') that have long kept Salomé on the edges of the literary system as a biographical anecdote – Nietzsche's muse, Rilke's lover, Freud's friend – rather than as a major experimental prose writer.

A first orientation: *Menschenkinder* is a *Novellencyklus* whose internal cross-references and echoic naming practices create a retrospective unification; only at the end do earlier elements click into a pattern. Contemporary witnesses and subsequent editors sometimes dismembered the cycle, printing single pieces that 'work' on their own as plot, but that choice actively sabotages the cycle's formal program. A key payoff of reading the unit whole is the figure of Irene von Geyern (the last text's protagonist), who retrospectively reframes earlier heroines and stabilizes an Antigonean contour: a liminal subject who withdraws rather than reconciles, the outline of a young woman refusing reintegration into civic or domestic scripts. The cycle's unity thus relies on 'rereading': its 'message' sits twice enclosed – once by the circular architecture, once by each novella's final volte – so that recognition is structurally deferred. That deferred recognition is not a gimmick; it is Salomé's ethics of form.

The opening tableau of *Vor dem Erwachen* – the first story – already installs a grammar of thresholds in which perception precedes judgment. The train compartment is not merely a setting but a suspended social field in which roles are both legible and unstable:

Die Waggonfenster sind von der Januarkälte so beschlagen, daß man das Hereindämmern des Morgens kaum gewahr wird [...] Von den drei Insassen des Coupés erster Klasse hat nur die alte Dame ihre Morgentoilette schon beendet [...] während sie mit schlecht verhehltem Interesse das Paar ihr gegenüber beobachtet [...] Der Herr [...] ist halb gelähmt [...] und sie kommen aus dem



Süden [...] die Tochter [...] in einer fast unmöglichen Lage [...] augenscheinlich vortrefflich geschlafen hat.⁷ (Andreas-Salomé 1899, 9)

This scene stages visibility as already mediated: bodies are read, classified, and narrated before they act. The fogged windows literalize epistemic opacity, while the observing gaze introduces a proto-juridical framing. Salomé thus displaces causality into perception: what matters is not yet what happens, but how it is pre-read. As the text itself demonstrates – “Die Waggonfenster sind...” – perception is already mediated and structured by acts of observation that precede understanding. Likewise, moments such as the one in which Edith chooses not to stay and sleep with the man who presumes to be her lover: “‘Ihr Ernst? ... Sie wollen nicht übernachten?’ Sie schüttelt den Kopf. ‘... und warum nicht? ... Was ist geschehen?’ – ‘Nichts. Ich habe die Lust verloren’”⁸ (Andreas-Salomé 1899, 20) interrupt the possibility of causal explanation, producing precisely the hermeneutic gap that reductive readings attempt to close, while Ediths slips categorization (lover, passive woman and so on).

Within this architecture, Antigone is not merely cited; she operates as what we call mute hypotext (Genette 2018): an ethical-rhythmic constellation that arranges relations among law, kinship, and inner necessity without theatrical declamation. Early tales already hint at Antigone through emblems: a girl “buried alive” in a building for a transgression that is also a murder; a young woman who “tells herself” what being a woman means only to slip away from that self-telling in the end, even a love between an adoptive brother and a girl and her affection for the memory of him, who died young leaving her with the adoptive

⁷ The carriage windows are so clouded by the January cold that one can scarcely perceive the slow dimming of the morning light. [...] Of the three occupants of the first-class compartment, only the elderly lady has already completed her morning toilette [...] while, with poorly concealed curiosity, she observes the pair seated opposite her. [...] The gentleman [...] is half-paralyzed [...] and they come from the south [...] the daughter [...] in an almost impossible position [...] yet she appears to have slept exceedingly well.

⁸ “‘You’re serious? ... You don’t intend to stay the night?’ She shakes her head. ‘... And why not? ... What has happened?’ – ‘Nothing. I have lost the desire.’”



family, and of course the gorgeous scenario of the last story, which is a proper rewriting of the Sophoclean tragedy. The isotopy is not thematic alone; it is structural. Deviance becomes chosen visibility: the Antigone gesture survives as a refusal to let juridical, domestic, or medical discourses monopolize guilt. The stories end open, not because Salomé dithers, but because closure would mean outsourcing judgment to a single discourse. The Antigonean structure becomes more explicit in moments where language itself oscillates between play, desire, and classification, without stabilizing meaning:

“Nach der Weichheit Ihrer Bewegungen nach könnten Sie es schon sein...” “...die Kätzchen... die an den Weidenbäumen hängen... zart, flaumig, blaßgelb... wer sie berührt, dem bleiben Duft und Farbe an der Hand zurück, wie von einem Schmetterlingsflügel... Vorfrühling.”⁹ (Salomé 1899, 19)

Here metaphor replaces judgment. The discourse slides between erotic insinuation, aestheticization, and deflection. Crucially, no single code – moral, medical, or social – secures interpretive authority.

This perspective shifts the argument from a matter of recognized intertextuality to one of critical reparation. Here, deviance appears not as transgression of a rule but as an excess of signification: a visibility that cannot be contained within naming. The ‘mute hypotext’ of Antigone operates structurally, not referentially. Reading the hypotext does not merely add interpretive depth; it restores intelligibility to what reductive readings have historically neutralized. As the afterword emphasizes, three elements are decisive: the centrality of *Menschenkinder* within Salomé’s narrative production; its structural sophistication, articulated through intertextual play, dramatic dialogicity, and metanarrative devices; and

⁹ “‘From the softness of your movements, one might almost think you were...’ ‘...the little catkins... hanging from the willow trees... delicate, downy, pale yellow... whoever touches them finds their scent and color lingering on the hand, like the dust of a butterfly’s wing... early spring.’”

the necessity of an analogical and participatory mode of reading grounded in rereading, precision, and a refusal of contingency.

It is precisely at this juncture that the hermeneutic recognition of Antigone as hypotext operates as a form of reparative justice in the face of epistemic injustice. Not because it definitively 'explains' the text, but because it reopens an interpretive field where reception had produced a hermeneutic gap – reducing Salomé's writing to biographical, psychological, or gendered document. In this light, recognizing Antigone as a mute hypotext is not an ornamental gesture but an act of restitution: it renders legible once more the cycle's formal logic, its minimal tragic rhythm, its structure of deferral, and the non-reconciled subjectivity of its protagonists. To read *Menschenkinder* in this way is to withdraw it from a tradition of reductive reception and restore it to its full aesthetic and conceptual function, where intertextuality, structure, and knowledge converge.

b) Circularity as openness

Formally, the cycle's open endings are a signature device. Muriel Cormican (2009) makes the point broadly for Salomé's narrative practice –women who 'move too much,' endings that do not seal – but *Menschenkinder* translates that tendency into structural method: the text requires the reader to build coherence by crossing stories, not by extracting morals from them. That is why the concluding recognition of Irene von Geyern matters so much: it is less character revelation than metanarrative instruction to reread. In this light, the oft-lamented 'indeterminacy' in the cycle registers as 'ethical indeterminacy'. The uncertainty around culpability (is there a murder here? could there have been?) returns the reader to Becker's labeling dynamics: who gets named deviant, by whom, for what social purpose? A medicalized glance makes one kind of culprit; a domestic one, another; a juridical one, another still. Salomé's prose makes these glances audible 'as' glances; it does not promote

any to the rank of truth. The false promise of full transparency is what the text is designed to break.

Two stylistic aspects sustain this ethics. First, the narrative voice oscillates between closely focalized free indirect discourse and a cooler observational register. The effect is double: interiority is granted without confessional guarantees, and exterior description resists documentary solidity. Second, intertextual placements remain deliberately oblique. The sequence is thick with allusive ‘links,’ in Gisela Brinker-Gabler’s sense – memory as a productive condition rather than as mere content – so that the reader moves through an image-based epistemology that keeps ‘mastery’ undesirable. This is Salomé’s wager against instrumental ratio and her invitation into a plural, participatory sense-making (Brinker-Gabler 2001). A brief second look at *Vor dem Erwachen* (the opening tale) clarifies the mechanics. Its train-car scene and Lübeck winter – its scraped windows, staged triangles, the hotel’s liminal ‘sitting room’ between rooms – compose a physical grammar of thresholds. The episode’s erotic choreography (petals raining, the ambiguous passivity of Edith, the hand that is both paternal and predatory) is written to hover just below declarative naming. The point is not whether we can decide who ‘did’ what; the point is how social scripts of guardianship, marriage, and desire write pre-narratives of blame that readers must either inhabit or resist. In classical terms: the ‘scene of burial’ is here displaced into the ‘scene of staying’ – a chosen visibility in the very posture of withdrawal. The novella’s permissive dreaminess is neither innocence nor guilt; it is the literary condition for reopening judgment.

Because the cycle builds coherence through spatial and onomastic recurrence (names that echo across stories, locales that return transfigured), it is especially vulnerable to reception that prefers the biographical legend to the crafted artifact. That reception reduces Salomé’s prose to symptomatic ‘document,’ a form of cultural erasure or epistemic cancellation. Restoring *Menschenkinder* to the domain of form yields a different placement:



not an eccentric appendix to modernism but a contributing laboratory. The rhetoric of outline (*Umriss*) that Brinker-Gabler isolates – image as a way of knowing rather than a mere ornament – identifies also what our larger essay names as liminality: an art that inhabits thresholds (self/other, law/affect, visibility/invisibility) without asking to be ‘integrated.’ Two further intertexts consolidate this reading. First, Antigone’s afterlife in women’s prose: *Menschenkinder* belongs in that cartography not as an analog but as a model instance of what a ‘mute’ hypotext can do. Second, the *Novellencyklus* tradition (still insufficiently studied) clarifies Salomé’s special twist: the cycle does not only unify discrete stories; it retrofits them into a meta-narration that rejects moral finality. Both lines argue for a recognized repositioning: when we read ‘otherwise,’ we place ‘otherwise’.¹⁰

6.3. Catastrophe and culpability: Helene Böhlau’s *Halbtier!*

Helene Böhlau’s *Halbtier!* (1899) epitomizes this nexus of marginality, openness, and reception. Known for her satirical Weimar sketches, Böhlau shocked readers with a novel combining naturalist textures, feminist protest, and experimental narration. Contemporary critics read it as polemic against marriage; later scholarship has emphasized its role in the genealogy of the women’s novel. In both views, form negotiates stigma and suspends closure where institutions would impose it. This logic culminates in a radical rejection of normative life-forms, articulated not as despair but as an alternative existential stance: “...dann gar nichts – aber auch gar nichts! ... das ist auch eine Welt! Aber nicht so wie wir!”¹¹ (Böhlau 1907, 357). Also what emerges here is an Antigonean posture: not

¹⁰ Finally, a word on translation and access. The cycle is available in German in historical scans and reprints, and in English as *The Human Family*, which has helped push criticism beyond biographism toward form and reader response. That shift matters for our essay’s politics of reception: attending to Salomé’s experimental design lets us see how deviance and openness intersect as literary methods in women’s prose – and why the canon must be redrawn from the inside of form, not appended from the outside of sociology.

¹¹ “Then nothing at all – but also a nothing! This is a world too! But not the way we are!”



negotiation within the existing order, but the assertion of a different horizon of value. The refusal is total, yet generative – it opens the possibility of a life beyond the structures.

At the level of plot, *Halbtier!* stages the story of two Munich sisters, Marie and Isolde Frey. Their conflict revolves around talent, marriage, and the claims of art. Isolde, the younger, is drawn into the orbit of her brother-in-law, the celebrated artist Henry Mengerssen. His “predator’s gaze” gradually becomes a claim to her body, culminating in a final assault. Armed with a revolver given to her “for protection,” Isolde shoots him. The novel’s last pages refuse juridical aftermath: there is no trial, no sentence. Instead, Böhlau shifts to a lyrical meditation on dawn and death, where Isolde names herself “Herrin über Leben und Tod” and walks into a white morning, promising to “return strong, with the power to redeem” (Böhlau 1907, 364). This refusal of juridical closure functions as an institutional critique in Bürger’s sense, exposing how aesthetic form can challenge the very structures of legal and social authority. The ambiguity lies not in whether she kills – she does – but in how the novel withholds the machinery of law and leaves the reader suspended between metaphysical promise and narrative disappearance.

From the perspective of Howard Becker’s sociology of deviance, the scene dramatizes the moment of public labeling: the cry “Mörderin!”¹² (Böhlau 1907, 365) flashes like a brand. Yet Böhlau complicates this process, as Isolde does not deny the label but accepts it, transforming stigma into stance. This Antigone-like gesture (Del Zoppo 2018) refigures outlawry as agency: stigma, to use Goffman’s terms, becomes chosen visibility rather than imposed degradation. The refusal of normative frameworks emerged at the very beginning in Isolde’s handling of a skull, where boundaries between human, animal, and object collapse: “Wir haben ja doch alle so einen unter dem Gesicht... ‘Schön ist er doch!’”¹³ (Böhlau 1907, 16). By normalizing the skull, Isolde neutralizes the categories that enable

¹² “Murderess!”

¹³ “We do all have such one under our face, it is indeed beautiful.”



judgment, resisting medicalization and moralization alike. This gesture is one of the recalling of the Sophoclean Antigone, which is also here not only thematically but structurally an hypotext: the Isolde/Marie dyad mirrors Antigone and Ismene, while the ending – after the assumption of the ‘murderess’ label – stages a withdrawal from visibility. Crucially, Isolde’s act produces a short circuit with an earlier scene of structural causality: a woman seduced by her brother, rendered pregnant and unemployable, is expelled from both labor and care, and encountered only in the morgue, dead with her dead child upon her – an image exposing a gendered double standard and the asymmetrical distribution of culpability.

Animal imagery reinforces this reversal: ‘Halbtier’ names women’s condition, Mengersen’s gaze is predatory, and Isolde executes him “‘wie einen Hund!’ – schrie sie”¹⁴ (Böhlau 1907, 349). Denied the maxim “Ein Kind und Arbeit!,” her final gesture redistributes survival through work, echoing Honig’s Antigone as survival-giver (Honig 2013). Ethical indeterminacy is encoded in the novel’s affective vocabulary, where guilt appears as ambivalent intensity – “ein Gefühl der Schuld, so geheimnisvoll anziehend”¹⁵ (Böhlau 1907, 365) – rather than juridical attribution. The violent act thus functions less as climax than as an experiment in causality: which exclusions prime catastrophe? Already in the opening – “Über dem ganzen überspannten, überhitzten Menschentum lastet”¹⁶ (Böhlau 1907, 1) – social life appears as compression, displacing causality from individual intention to systemic constraint. Indeterminacy here is ethical, refusing to let medical or juridical discourses monopolize blame.

Formally, fragmentation and parataxis produce partial knowledge, resonating with Iser’s blanks and requiring ethical interpretation. Thematically, the comparative reading with Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbeville*, enlightens – among other things – the uselessness of

¹⁴ “‘As a dog!’, she cried.”

¹⁵ “A sense of guilt, so strangely and irresistibly alluring.”

¹⁶ “Over the whole of this overstrained, overheated humanity there weighs.”

law: in *Tess* law closes the narrative, here Böhlau suspends judgment, entrusting it to the reader. Reception has oscillated between scandal and feminist recuperation, but this very openness marks the novel's modernist centrality: not vagueness, but ethical address.

7. Conclusion: moving borders and living margins

This investigation invites a revisionary view of German modernism. If we center liminoid lives, deviant careers, and open forms, modernism emerges less as stylistic revolt than as a laboratory for rethinking belonging. The 'modern' is not an abstract temporal break but a re-scripting of thresholds: between legality and illegality, sanity and its administrations, intimacy and contract, testimony and surveillance. The canon's peripheries – women's writing, documentary modes, crime narratives – prove to be central sites where these re-scriptings are worked out with formal ingenuity. To insist on their aesthetic intelligence is to insist that the history of German literature is also a history of how societies imagine their borders. From this perspective, German-language modernism emerges as an epistemic laboratory of marginality. Through formal indeterminacy – its refusals of closure, its gaps, its suspended judgments – these texts do not merely represent marginal lives but reorganize the conditions under which they can be known. In doing so, they enact a form of epistemic redistribution that displaces the authority of juridical, medical, and moral discourses, and reassigns interpretive agency to the reader.

To read these works accordingly is therefore not only an interpretive choice, but a reparative practice: it responds to forms of epistemic injustice by restoring the intelligibility of experiences that have been historically reduced, misrecognized, or excluded. In this sense, modernist form does not resolve marginality but transforms it into a site of knowledge – one that resists closure and demands sustained critical attention.

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Dal margine al centro:

Artù nella storia dei Britanni da Geoffrey e Wace al *Brut in prosa*

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Abstract

Nelle narrazioni pseudo-storiche sulla Britannia leggendaria, la figura di Artù, come condottiero e come regnante, riveste un ruolo di primo piano fin dall'elaborazione della materia operata da Geoffrey of Monmouth, nella *Historia regum Britanniae* (ca. 1123-39). Nel suo capovolgere la direzione della *translatio studii*, Geoffrey propone una rappresentazione di Artù simbolo di una profonda ambivalenza politica e culturale, in quanto eroe emerso dalle fasce periferiche, elevato a strumento di unificazione culturale e caricato di aspirazioni imperialiste. In questa prospettiva, traduzione e riscrittura operano come strumenti di costruzione e ridefinizione identitaria: da un testo a un altro, la storia di Britannia, in cui Artù è cardine, è usata per costruire identità etniche e politiche, in bilico tra centro e margine, dominio e resistenza, memoria autoctona e progetti imperiali. Il presente contributo si propone, pertanto, di ricostruire l'evoluzione dell'immagine arturiana dall'opera di Geoffrey, al *Roman de Brut*, traduzione in versi francesi da parte di Wace (ca. 1155), fino al *Brut in prosa*, progetto cronachistico composto alla fine del XIII secolo e rielaborato più volte fino alla fine del XV. Filo conduttore dell'analisi è l'episodio dello scontro con il gigante di Mont Saint-Michel, interpretato come scena-soglia, in cui Artù, dominando la dimensione mostruosa e liminale, sfiora tuttavia egli stesso una forma di eccesso.

Keywords: Geoffrey of Monmouth; Wace; cronache *Brut*; materia arturiana; gigante di Mont Saint-Michel.



1. La storia leggendaria di Britannia

Le altalenanti fortune dei Britanni sono riportate, nel Tardo Medioevo, nelle narrazioni pseudo-storiografiche note come *Brut*.¹ In queste opere, la figura di Artù emerge come fondamentale nella formazione dell'identità britannica e non solo; arriverà a rappresentare il modello del re ideale anche per i futuri 'inglesi'.

Il nucleo originario delle vicende di Britannia si rintraccia fin dal IX secolo nella *Historia Brittonum*, ma si diffonde soprattutto a partire dal XII secolo,² nella versione di Geoffrey of Monmouth, il *Galfridus Monemutensis*, autore della *Historia regum Britanniae* (anche *De Gestis Britonum*).

L'opera galfridiana aspira a ricostruire un passato storico-leggendario perduto: prende avvio dalla fuga di Bruto da Troia, descrivendone l'approdo sull'isola e la vittoria sui giganti, e si conclude con la morte di Cadwallader, ultimo dei Britanni a rivendicare domini in Inghilterra.³ Sebbene non esauriscano l'intera cronaca, le gesta arturiane sono qui collocate al centro della narrazione: i momenti dedicati alle figure successive appaiono come corollario della grandezza di Artù.

La *Historia* è controversa fin dalla sua prima diffusione:⁴ William of Newburgh e Gerald of Wales la considerano falsa e ingannevole (Fulton 2009, 46). Tuttavia, ha un enorme successo in Inghilterra e nel nord della Francia, come testimonia l'ampia tradizione manoscritta.⁵ Già negli anni Quaranta del XII secolo Geffrei Gaimar avrebbe composto una

¹ Sull'uso di questo titolo cfr. Pagan 2015, 179-181.

² Prescindendo dalla tradizione celtica, racconti diffusi oralmente sui personaggi arturiani dovevano essere divenuti popolari ben prima di Geoffrey e oltre il territorio britannico, come è dimostrato dalle sculture rappresentate sulla Porta della Pescheria del Duomo di Modena che nominano personaggi arturiani e risalgono agli anni 1120-30 (Fulton 2009, 44).

³ Oltre alla sezione arturiana, che copre un terzo della *Historia*, i blocchi narrativi più sviluppati riguardano: le vicende dei fratelli Belino e Brennio (Libro III), l'invasione di Cesare e i conflitti tra Romani e Britanni (Libro IV), l'arrivo e le continue guerre contro i Sassoni (Libri V e VI).

⁴ Nella forma trasmessa, l'opera deve essere stata completata tra il 1123 e il 1139 (Reeve e Wright 2007, vii-viii).

⁵ È conservata in duecentodiciassette codici, con differenze di redazione spesso notevoli. Fin da subito, emerge una 'Prima Variante' che si discosta dalla 'Vulgata' per l'uso di un linguaggio biblico, la tendenza ad



sua traduzione in versi francesi, oggi perduta. A circa un decennio dopo, risale il *Roman de Brut* di Wace.⁶

Le informazioni su questa figura si rintracciano unicamente nel poema stesso: originario dell'isola di Jersey, al tempo parte del ducato di Normandia, Wace si autodefinisce "clerc lisant" (*Roman de Rou*, III, v.180), riferendosi probabilmente alla qualifica di letterato con compiti da segretario.⁷ Se, in principio, le sue aspirazioni lo spingono alla stesura di opere agiografiche, intorno al 1150 Wace riversa il proprio talento compositivo verso una diversa pratica creativa, la *mise en romanz* dell'opera di Geoffrey.⁸ Secondo Lazamon, il *Roman de Brut* sarebbe stato presentato a Eleonora d'Aquitania, e quindi concluso, nel 1155 (cfr. *Brut*, vv. 20-23, ed. Barron e Weinberg 1995, 2).

Come Geoffrey, Wace scrive per l'élite normanna in Inghilterra, interessata alla storia della propria terra d'adozione. Tuttavia, rivolgendosi a un pubblico non latinofono, rielabora liberamente la narrazione.⁹ Rendendo le vicende dei Britanni accessibili a un

aggiungere, tagliare o parafrasare e le omissioni di alcuni dettagli considerati spiacevoli, come lo stupro ai danni della balia di Elena da parte del gigante di Mont Saint-Michel (Hammer 1951, 9-12; Wright 1988, xi).

⁶ Secondo Ian Short, la traduzione di Gaimar si sarebbe trovata a competere con l'opera di Wace che l'avrebbe soppiantata. Il testo del *Roman de Brut*, infatti, precede l'*Estoire des Engleis* in tutti e quattro i manoscritti in cui è conservata. Il destino dell'opera di Gaimar è condiviso dai numerosi adattamenti francesi della *Historia* effettuati nel XII secolo e successivamente andati perduti, o sopravvissuti soltanto in frammenti. Il successo del *Roman de Brut* potrebbe aver finito per eclissare le altre traduzioni (Short 2009, x-XII; Le Saux 2020, 237-240).

⁷ Il ruolo è di difficile definizione. In relazione agli usi specifici dell'espressione, Burgess scrive: "Wace may simply have used the phrase to indicate that he was a 'learned cleric', but it is more likely that he had specific duties to perform, such as writing, reading aloud (perhaps at mealtimes), composing, acting as notary, studying, teaching and interpreting texts" (Burgess 2004, xiv).

⁸ Jeanette Beer scrive a riguardo: "The most influential product of creative *translatio* was the *roman*, medieval translation's lasting gift to European literature. Like a fossilized resin that traps and preserves in itself the early stage of an evolutionary life-form, the French word for the genre – 'roman' – and the English word 'romance' embody the translation process *mettre en roman*" (Beer 2019, 4).

⁹ Tra frammenti e codici completi, il poema sopravvive in trentatré manoscritti. I testimoni più antichi sono conservati a Durham (Cathedral Chapter Library C.IV.27, fine XII secolo) e a Lincoln (Cathedral Library 104, inizio XIII secolo). Entrambi tramandano il testo insieme alla *Estoire des Engleis* di Gaimar e alla *Cronaca* di Jordan Fantosme sullo scontro tra Enrico II e suo figlio. Tale struttura, tesa a offrire un profilo cronologico ordinato della storia dell'isola, anticipa la conformazione che sarà tipica del *Brut in prosa* (Le Saux e Damian-Grint 2006, 96).



pubblico più ampio, i versi di Wace fungono da ponte per una vasta produzione di opere pseudo-storiografiche, composte in latino, in francese e in inglese.¹⁰ In questo contesto è di particolare rilevanza la prosificazione nota come *Brut in prosa* (*Brut en prose* o *Prose Brut*). Composta originariamente in francese anglonormanno alla fine del XIII secolo, l'opera presenta una tradizione articolata, con numerose espansioni e traduzioni in inglese e in latino.¹¹ Questo testo, o questo insieme di testi, assume un ruolo di rilievo, soprattutto per l'ampia diffusione della versione medio-inglese in Inghilterra tra i secoli XIV e XV, e, pertanto, per l'importanza rivestita nella formazione della cultura inglese nel Tardo Medioevo. La versione della storia offerta da queste cronache era infatti al tempo percepita come il principale racconto storiografico sull'isola.

2. Dal margine al centro

Nel prologo della *Historia*, dopo aver lamentato l'assenza nella storiografia tradizionale di riferimenti alle vicende dei Britanni (*HRB*, Prol., 2), Geoffrey informa il pubblico di aver tradotto un antichissimo libro in lingua bretone ("Britannici sermonis librum

¹⁰ Primo adattamento è il menzionato *Brut* di Lazamon, traduzione in inglese, risalente alla fine del XII secolo, ma conservato in soli due manoscritti, resta un'impresa isolata di scarsa diffusione. Nei secoli successivi, gli esempi, però, si moltiplicano: si susseguono le cronache di Robert of Gloucester (1300 ca.), Peres de Langtoft (1307), Thomas Castleford (1327-50) e Robert Mannyng (1338). Per una visione d'insieme sulla tradizione cronachistica, cfr. Matheson 2009, 58-69.

¹¹ Nel novero complessivo delle varianti, essa è oggi conservata in oltre duecentocinquanta manoscritti. La prima redazione del testo francese (*Oldest Version*) offre una narrazione continuativa della storia dell'isola fino al 1272. Il testo è quindi rielaborato in più stadi di composizione. I due rami principali della tradizione francese sono rappresentati dalla versione *Short*, che aggiunge il prologo (il poema *Des Grantz Geanz*, poi prosacizzato) e una continuazione che giunge all'anno 1333, e dalla versione *Long*, una redazione che si conclude similmente nell'anno 1333 ma rielabora il materiale aggiungendo capitoli e rubriche. La prima parte del *Brut in prosa* in medio-inglese è una traduzione *word-for-word* di questa versione *Long*. Matheson e, con lui, Mairey ipotizzano la traduzione sia avvenuta tra il 1380 e il 1400. La principale famiglia testuale del testo medio-inglese è identificata come *Common Version*, accanto alla quale esistono la versione estesa (*Extended Version*), la versione abbreviata (*Abbreviated Version*) e i cosiddetti *Peculiar Texts*, rielaborazioni dalla natura eterogenea non immediatamente classificabili. A margine dell'ampia tradizione vernacolare, esistono anche due redazioni in lingua latina (Cfr. Matheson 1998, 30-49; Pagan 2011, 3-4; Mairey 2018, 169-190).



uetustissimum” Reeve e Wright 2007, 5), messo a sua disposizione da Walter, arcidiacono di Oxford (Le Saux e Damian-Grint 2006, 93).

Geoffrey, legato alla nobiltà normanna, costruisce per i suoi mecenati una storia alternativa e mitica del loro paese adottivo. Data la scarsità di fonti per il periodo precedente la dominazione romana, egli stesso inventa probabilmente la maggior parte dei regnanti presentati, delineandone, di volta in volta, i nomi e le complesse biografie (cfr. Fulton 2009, 46).

Il disegno che ne emerge è duplice. Da una parte, Geoffrey costruirebbe per il passato britannico un modello di ascesa e declino, connesso a forza e debolezza morale. In questo senso, la *Historia* sarebbe un’opera a tema, tesa a illustrare la perdita del controllo dell’isola come conseguenza della corruzione dei Britanni. Dall’altra, il progetto storiografico galfridiano si configurerebbe come una risposta alle idee dei committenti, con l’obiettivo di fornire al regno d’Inghilterra una legittimazione storica, rivendicando per esso una discendenza da Troia pari a quella di Roma e di altre nazioni dell’Europa Occidentale. In entrambi i casi, al centro simbolico di questa costruzione si collocherebbe Artù, elevato a modello di eroe nazionale e segno di una possibile unità tra identità diverse (Pearsall 1977, 85; Kennedy 1996, xv; Weiss 2002, xvi–xvii).

L’espedito della traduzione permetterebbe a questo progetto di rifondazione storica di concretizzarsi. In questo gesto si possono rintracciare le ambizioni più profonde dell’opera: recuperare una memoria cancellata e, al contempo, costruire una nuova *auctoritas* che sfidi quella della tradizione latina.

Nel testo galfridiano si riconoscono, in verità, molteplici fonti: dalla citata *Historia Brittonum* ad altri testi con maggiore legittimità storica, come il *De Excidio Britanniae* di Gildas e la *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* di Beda, a tradizioni di origine orale. È probabile che l’antico libro sia un espedito retorico inteso a conferire credibilità e mistero



alla narrazione.¹² Tuttavia, non si possono del tutto escludere le ipotesi che vedono, da un lato, l'arcidiacono Walter fornire a Geoffrey materiale testuale da tradurre e, dall'altro, Geoffrey stesso attingere a fonti scritte di matrice celtica – bretone o gallese (Reeve e Wright 2007, lvii-lviii).

Michelle Warren, applicando strumenti della critica postcoloniale all'opera galfridiana, osserva come la *Historia* rappresenti "a particularly cogent example of the fantasy of empire and the ambivalence of colonial desire because it portrays the forgotten empire of a marginalized people in reaction to an urgently present colonial dynamic" (Warren 1998, 116). Secondo Warren, all'interno del peculiare contesto dell'Inghilterra normanna,¹³ la *Historia* opera come strumento di contatto culturale e di mediazione politica e linguistica. Si tratterebbe, in altre parole, di un testo riconducibile alla categoria di "contact zone" secondo la definizione di Mary Louise Pratt: uno spazio narrativo in cui culture in tensione si incontrano, si scontrano e si riscrivono reciprocamente (Pratt 1993, 88-89).

Posto che l'atto traduttivo non possa mai dirsi neutrale, la traduzione – autentica o frutto di invenzione – attribuita a Geoffrey risulta, a maggior ragione, carica di intenzionalità. La fonte, sconosciuta perché esterna al canone greco-romano, è investita di due caratteri fondamentali, antichità e alterità linguistica, che le conferiscono il valore di *auctoritas* necessario per stabilire una narrazione storica alternativa. Pertanto, pur non essendo verificabile in senso storico, la fonte di Geoffrey si presenta come autorevole grazie

¹² Barron nota, infatti: "Had it existed, it would have been a highly unusual text since the *Historia*, wide-ranging and complex in its components, nonetheless gives a strong impression of homogeneity, authorial control and relevance to the interests of the age for which it was written" (Barron 2001, 15).

¹³ Fin dal periodo Anglosassone, i rapporti tra le popolazioni sull'isola sono caratterizzati da conflitti etnici e sovrapposizioni culturali, per cui fenomeni di marginalizzazione e mescolanza identitaria sono sempre stati elementi costitutivi del tessuto sociale. La conquista normanna interviene su questo scenario preesistente con una forza trasformativa, accentuando quelle che Warren chiama "boundary pressures", ovvero tensioni che aumentano nei punti di contatto tra gruppi e culture. Il colonialismo normanno, infatti, focalizza l'interesse per il passato britannico perché i traumi culturali, in generale, tendono a innescare meccanismi di difesa delle identità collettive (Warren 2000, 1).

alla sua distanza rispetto alla tradizione classica, in modo analogo a quanto accade nella costruzione delle storie nazionali in contesti postcoloniali contemporanei.

Il presunto libro antico è, d'altra parte, descritto come composto in una lingua elegante e raffinata e in un ordine cronologicamente impeccabile ("continue et ex ordine perpulcris orationibus" *HRB*, Prol., 2; Reeve e Wright 2007, 5). In altre parole, avrebbe, come sottolineato da Françoise Le Saux (2020, 237), i tratti distintivi dei classici che costituivano la base della letteratura medievale – Lucano, Sallustio, Virgilio – pur essendo completamente *altro* da essi.

Geoffrey compie un'azione simbolica di grande impatto: invertendo la direzione della *translatio studii*, egli metterebbe in discussione la superiorità estetica e culturale del latino. Tale inversione trasformerebbe la marginalità in fondamento narrativo, traducendo un sapere marginale in narrazione storica dominante.¹⁴

In tale contesto, la figura di Artù può essere interpretata come simbolica, in quanto eroe emerso dalle fasce periferiche, elevato a sovrano modello e strumento di unificazione culturale, ma, al contempo caricato di aspirazioni imperialiste. Geoffrey metterebbe in scena la possibilità di un'identità britannica che emerge dalla tensione tra centro e periferia, dominio e resistenza, memoria indigena e costruzione imperiale.

Il carattere ambiguo di Artù affiora con chiarezza nel confronto con il gigante di Mont Saint-Michel. Nei tre testi analizzati (*Historia regum Britanniae*, *Roman de Brut* e *Brut in prosa*), il gigante è una figura liminale, una forza disumana che Artù deve dominare per affermare il proprio ruolo sovrano. Tuttavia, nel corso dello scontro, anche Artù si trova ad affrontare i propri limiti: per conseguire la vittoria, rischia di riflettersi eccessivamente nel nemico, superando così il confine tra ordine e caos, tra civiltà e violenza selvaggia. In questa prospettiva, le operazioni di traduzione e riscrittura che caratterizzano la tradizione

¹⁴ Senza dimenticare che il toponimico, *Monemutensis*, colloca le origini di Geoffrey nelle 'Welsh Marches', area di confine.

possono essere intese come strumenti attraverso cui si ridefiniscono identità culturali e assetti di potere.

3. Artù nella *Historia regum Britanniae*

Quasi impossibile stabilire la storicità dell'uomo, il personaggio Artù compare per la prima volta in un'opera messa per iscritto nella *Historia Brittonum*.¹⁵ Il testo, attribuito a Nennio e quasi certamente prodotto, intorno all'830, nel regno di Gwynedd con il benestare di re Merfyn,¹⁶ è elaborato come strumento di rivalutazione dell'orgoglio etnico dei britannici. Così, diversamente da Gildas, che attribuisce le invasioni sassoni alla corruzione della popolazione, il trattato esclude il *topos* della decadenza morale. Artù, costruito in analogia con il Giosué biblico (Higham 2011, 14-17), condottiero militare che infligge una serie di sconfitte ai Sassoni invasori, è inserito all'interno di una rosa di personaggi di etnia britannica che servono per controbilanciare la figura negativa rappresentata da Vortigern. Questa serie di personaggi, come scrive Higham, sono stati sviluppati "so as to present the Britons as both courageous and beloved of the Lord" (Higham 2011, 11).

Geoffrey acquisisce la narrazione pseudo-nenniana e la elabora a proprio piacimento, trasformando Artù da mero comandante militare in un sovrano storicamente radicato. Egli ne definisce la genealogia, il contesto temporale e lo spazio geografico fornendo un fondamento autorevole e accademico per il personaggio (Le Saux e Damian-Grint 2006, 93). In questa versione compaiono di già i tratti canonici del mito: l'Artù galfridiano è un giovane re guerriero, capace di riconquistare la Britannia, espandere le proprie mire su gran parte dell'Europa e rivaleggiare con la potenza di Roma. Al contempo, la *Historia* ne codifica la

¹⁵ Un ulteriore riferimento in area gallese ma successivo si trova negli *Annales Cambriae* (ca. 950). L'anno 518 fa riferimento alla Battaglia di Badon, nella quale i Britanni avrebbero inflitto una cocente sconfitta ai Sassoni, mentre l'anno 539 riporta l'uccisione di Artù e 'Medraut'.

¹⁶ È molto probabile che all'origine del trattato vi siano diverse autorialità. Da un punto di vista strutturale, il testo è divisibile in sette parti che appaiono indipendenti l'una dall'altra; ciascuna sezione, infatti, menziona eventi e tratta tematiche diverse. Il cap. XVI del testo fa riferimento al quarto anno di regno di Merfyn. Per una trattazione diffusa sull'opera (Cfr. Higham 2011, 9-25; Pirrone 2020, 8-13).



dimensione relazionale, associandolo per la prima volta a figure quali Cai, Bedivere e Galvano, nonché al legame con Ginevra e al tradimento di Mordred. Fondamentale è anche la figura di Merlino,¹⁷ che profetizza la grandezza di Artù e ne orchestra la nascita modificando l'aspetto di Uther per consentirgli di avvicinarsi alla casta Igerne. Avvolto in un'atmosfera di "predestined glory" (Le Saux e Damian-Grint 2006, 95), l'Artù di Geoffrey può essere letto in analogia con diverse figure eroiche, appartenenti a tradizioni culturali anche molto distanti tra di loro, poiché con esse condivide la cifra mitologica nella presentazione della propria nascita.¹⁸

Siân Echard definisce la narrazione arturiana della *Historia* come una "temporary holiday" (Echard 2011, 58), una pausa nell'implacabile alternanza di ascesa e caduta:¹⁹ l'Arturiade galfridiana occupa un terzo dell'opera, il ritmo rallenta e lo stile si fa più spiccatamente narrativo, persino epico, con lunghi monologhi e descrizioni della corte e della sua magnificenza.

Il personaggio è introdotto come un giovane dalle virtù eccellenti, prodigo ma pragmatico, che muove battaglia ai Sassoni con l'obiettivo di redistribuire il bottino tra i propri seguaci (HRB, IX, 143):

¹⁷ Merlino è centrale nell'economia della *Historia*. Geoffrey, infatti, sembrerebbe considerare l'opera precedente, le *Prophetiae Merlini*, come parte costitutiva del nuovo lavoro. L'opera, già in circolazione, è introdotta all'interno della *Historia* come Libro VII, dove diventa una sorta di commento tanto agli eventi narrati nel testo quanto ad eventi contemporanei (come la guerra civile tra Stefano di Blois e l'Imperatrice Matilda). (Cfr. Fulton 2009, 45).

¹⁸ Si pensi, esemplificativamente, a Roland, prodotto del rapporto incestuoso tra Carlo e la sorella in alcune versioni tarde della leggenda; a Galahad nato dall'incontro tra Elena e Lancillotto, convinto di giacere con Ginevra; a Eracle, nella mitologia greca, nato dall'ingannevole trasformazione dell'aspetto di Zeus in quello di Anfitrione. Un episodio analogo, studiato come modello per la nascita di Artù, è anche il racconto biblico della relazione tra re Davide e Betsabea. (Cfr. Morris 1985, 70-92; Mathey-Maille 1991, 222-29; Breton 2017, 43-57).

¹⁹ Tuttavia, sempre Echard rileva come il miglior modo per comprendere al meglio cosa rappresenti la figura arturiana per Geoffrey sia metterla in relazione al resto dell'opera: "Arthur may be Britain's greatest king, but for Geoffrey at least, his achievements were inevitably framed by the triumphs and disasters of his predecessors and successors" (Echard 2011, 46).



Erat autem Arturus quindecim annorum iuuenis inauditae uirtutis atque largitatis, in quo tantam gratiam innata bonitas praestiterat ut a cunctis fere populis amaretur [...]. Arturus ergo, quia in illo probitas largitionem comitabatur, statuit Saxones inquietare, ut eorum opibus quae ei famulabatur ditaret familiam (Reeve e Wright 2007, 193).

Era Artù un giovane di quindici anni di virtù e generosità senza pari, nel quale eccelleva tanta grazia da essere amato da quasi tutti i popoli per la sua innata bontà [...]. Artù, quindi, perché in lui la giustizia accompagnava la liberalità, decise di affrontare i Sassoni, per arricchire la famiglia che lo stava servendo con le loro ricchezze.²⁰

Geoffrey procede quindi a narrare le vittorie contro i Sassoni, che mettono in risalto tanto le abilità strategiche quanto l'eccezionale valore in battaglia del re. La prima grande campagna arturiana trova il suo apice nella battaglia di Bath;²¹ seppur i Britanni risultino investiti dalla benedizione divina,²² lo scontro è descritto come equilibrato nel valore dei combattenti di entrambe le parti. Artù offre, quindi, ai suoi l'esempio per superare l'impasse, dimostrando coraggio e abilità nel corpo a corpo (HRB, IX, 147):

Indignatus est Arturus [...]. Abstracto ergo Caliburno gladio, nomen sanctae Mariae proclamat et sese cito impetu infra densas hostium acies immisit. Quemcumque attingebat Deum inuocando solo ictu perimebat, nec requieuit impetum suum facere donec quadringentos septuaginta uiros solo Caliburno gladio peremit. (Reeve e Wright 2007, 199).

Artù era irritato [...]. Così, brandendo la sua spada Caliburn, invocò il nome di Santa Maria e si lanciò rapidamente tra le fitte schiere nemiche. Ogni colpo che sferrava invocando il nome di Dio, uccideva istantaneamente, e non si fermò fino a quando non ebbe ucciso con la sola Caliburn quattrocentosettanta uomini.

²⁰ Se non diversamente specificato, traduzioni a cura di chi scrive.

²¹ Gildas (*De Excidio Britanniae*, XXVI, 1) menziona una battaglia tra Sassoni e Britanni, guidati da Ambrosio Aureliano, combattuta presso il monte Badonico (*mons Badonicus*). Nella *Historia Brittonum* (LVI), l'ultima delle dodici battaglie vinte da Artù avviene presso il monte Badon. Geoffrey identifica Badon con Bath.

²² Prima dell'inizio del combattimento, il vescovo Dubricio, affida ai Britanni la difesa del territorio contro i pagani. Questa benedizione si traduce anche nell'effigie che Artù porta in battaglia: l'immagine di Maria, Madre di Dio ("imago sanctae Mariae Dei genitricis", HRB IX, 147; Reeve e Wright 2007, 199). Sul carattere da *miles christi* di Artù cfr., tra gli altri, Deininger 2019, 117-119.



Il re è dipinto come un individuo che trae piacere dal conflitto. Dopo aver consolidato il proprio potere in Britannia con le conquiste di Scozia e Irlanda, Artù intraprende campagne esterne: dapprima verso Islanda, isole Orkney e Jutland; quindi, dopo dodici anni di pace con l'istituzione di una corte di fama internazionale, contro Norvegia e Danimarca, e, infine, contro la Gallia. Il timore reverenziale incusso sulle altre popolazioni, sottolinea Geoffrey, rende Artù esultante (*"extollens se quia cunctis timori erat"* *HRB*, IX,154; Reeve e Wright 2007, 205).

In questo quadro, è significativo lo spazio e l'attenzione dedicati allo scontro con il gigante di Mont Saint-Michel. L'episodio, ampio e articolato (*HRB*, X, 165; Reeve e Wright 2007, 224-228), si colloca mentre Artù raduna le truppe sul continente per fronteggiare Roma: giunge allora la notizia che un gigante, fuggito dalla Spagna, ha rapito Elena, nipote del duca di Bretagna, rifugiandosi sul monte. Senza attendere l'arrivo di altre truppe, Artù manda in avanscoperta Cai e Bedivere, e, una volta udite dalla nutrice di Elena le malefatte del gigante, decide di sfidarlo personalmente.

Geoffrey introduce opportunamente questo nemico come un essere dalle dimensioni esagerate (*"mirae magnitudinis giga[s]"*). Come entità dell'immaginario, il gigante incarna una forza liminale: è un essere umano che trascende i confini della propria condizione. Nella nota definizione di Jeffrey J. Cohen (1999, 38), tale alterità è determinata da una propensione incontrollata alla gratificazione sensuale immediata.

L'antagonista galfridiano ne riflette appieno i tratti: il suo aspetto è inequivocabilmente umano e maschile, ma la statura spropositata e l'incapacità di controllare i propri impulsi lo pongono al di fuori di entrambe le categorie. Il suo isolamento è fisico e simbolico: Mont Saint-Michel è una cima montuosa su un'isola e, dunque, doppiamente separata dalla civiltà (*"infra mare situs fuerat"* Reeve e Wright 2007, 225). È inoltre significativo che il gigante non provenga dalla vicina Gallia, ma dalla lontana Spagna, territorio che nel XII secolo era occupato dagli 'estranei' Saraceni.



Il confronto tra Artù e il mostro, dunque, riveste particolare rilevanza nel delineare l'identità simbolica del re. Non a caso, il momento dello scontro è descritto con dovizia di particolari. Geoffrey caratterizza l'azione attraverso una suggestiva evocazione di stimoli visivi e uditivi. La scena si apre sul volto del gigante cosperso di interiora suine, ("illitus ora tabo semesorum porcorum"), presto seguite dal proprio sangue che gli annebbia la vista sotto i precisi colpi di Artù. Il ritmo dell'azione è scandito da un'acustica violenta: il boato della clava contro lo scudo si percuote per l'intera costa ("quod sonitu ictus et tota littora repleuit"), il fragore della caduta del gigante è accostato al rumore che fa una quercia quando viene sradicata ("uelut quercus uentorum uiribus eradicata"), e le urla del mostro morente sono seguite dalle risate del re ("in risum solutus"), che ordina la decapitazione del gigante, riaffermando il proprio ruolo attraverso una violenza speculare a quella del mostro (HRB, x, 165; Reeve e Wright 2007, 227). Così, di fronte al mostruoso, Artù subisce il 'contagio' della bestialità nemica e rivela la sua statura sfiorante l'inumano.

Geoffrey presenta il gigante come un'entità nefasta e orribile, ma soprattutto come un tiranno: se, in prima istanza, infatti, esso soggioga Elena e la nutrice ai suoi capricci sessuali, il testo rileva anche come l'isola sia stata conquistata con la forza: "Nam siue mari siue terra illum inuadebant, aut naues eorum ingentibus saxis obruebat aut diuersorum generum telis interimebat, sed plures capiebat, quos deuorabat semiuiuos" (Reeve e Wright 2007, 225) ("Che si avvicinassero via mare o via terra, egli affondava le loro imbarcazioni con grandi massi o ne uccideva alcuni con varie armi, catturava la maggior parte di loro e li mangiava vivi").

Il personaggio di Artù, in questo contesto, può dunque essere interpretato come un 'novello Bruto': mentre l'esiliato troiano, all'inizio della storia dei Britanni, scaccia i giganti dall'isola per portare la civiltà, Artù, qui simbolicamente un nuovo fondatore, sconfigge il tiranno per ristabilire l'ordine.



Tuttavia, lo scontro tra Artù e il gigante offre anche chiavi di lettura che riflettono una prospettiva imperialista e mette in luce sia le potenzialità che i limiti dell'interazione umana con il mondo naturale. In particolare, come evidenziato da McKee e Pirzadeh (2017, 2-13), Artù, abile stratega, si rivela competente nell'uso bellico del paesaggio naturale per il conseguimento dei suoi obiettivi: controllare i popoli che lo abitano. Lo scontro con il gigante è presentato poco prima della campagna contro Roma, quindi all'apice delle ambizioni imperiali del re.

Il gigante è in questo un avversario formidabile, un personaggio che, similmente ad Artù, dimostra abilità nell'utilizzare l'ambiente circostante tanto come strumento di difesa che come strumento di attacco. L'occupazione strategica di Mont Saint-Michel, mediante l'impiego delle sue fortificazioni naturali e la conversione di massi e rocce in strumenti bellici, è esempio significativo di adattamento e innovazione nel contesto delle tattiche militari. Ma la simbiosi sovrano-territorio è qui vista come esagerata, l'eccessiva integrazione con la natura porta alla perdita di autorità su di esso.

Artù rappresenterebbe colui che controlla la natura selvaggia del gigante, al fine di affermare la superiorità dell'uomo. Tuttavia, al momento dello scontro conclusivo, il furore descritto da Geoffrey annienta ogni traccia di razionalità e umanità, e nel gigante e nel re. Artù sconfigge il mostro, ma gli aspetti più 'selvaggi' del suo carattere prenderanno da questo punto in avanti il sopravvento.

Così, l'accurata attenzione al dettaglio, dimostrata nello scontro con il gigante, continua anche nella resa dell'ultimo glorioso conflitto contro Lucio e Roma, focalizzato sulle tattiche belliche e sulle azioni eroiche di Artù e dei suoi (HRB, x, 167-175). Durante la battaglia contro i Romani, Artù è ancora un condottiero spietato, un leone capace di terrorizzare tutti i suoi avversari (HRB, x, 174): "Diffugiebant ergo ipsum uelut beluae ferocem leonem quem saeua fames instimulat ad deuorandum quicquid casus subuectat" (Reeve e Wright 2007, 245-247) ('Fuggivano dunque davanti a lui come belve selvagge



davanti a un leone feroce, spinto dalla fame rabbiosa a divorare tutto ciò che il caso gli pone davanti').

Tuttavia, la cura dello stile narrativo di cui è caratterizzata l'Arturiade fino alla campagna di Roma si pone in netto contrasto con la crudezza cronachistica con cui Geoffrey riporta i momenti finali del regno. Mentre Artù porta al culmine il suo progetto imperialista, in Britannia declina drasticamente la fiducia dei suoi servitori. La vittoria contro Roma rappresenta l'ultimo successo.

Lo scontro contro il gigante può essere interpretato come il momento di non ritorno del regno arturiano. Le battaglie contro Mordred, prive di eroismi, rivelano soltanto gli aspetti più turpi della guerra (*HRB*, XI, 178): "Ipsis itaque commilitones suos hinc et inde cohortantibus, subito impetu concurrunt acies et commisso proelio crebros ictus innectere elaborant. Fiunt ilico in utrisque partibus tantae strages, tanti morientium gemitus, tanti inuadentium furores, quantos et dolorosum et laboriosum est describere" (Reeve e Wright 2007, 253) ('I commilitoni quindi, incoraggiati da una parte e dall'altra, si affrontano improvvisamente con impeto e, ingaggiata la battaglia, cercano di infliggere colpi frequenti. Subito tanta è la carneficina da entrambe le parti, tanti i gemiti di coloro che stanno per morire, tante le urla di coloro che stanno attaccando, quanto è doloroso e difficile descrivere').

I passaggi conclusivi dell'epopea arturiana non offrono neppure una effettiva scena di morte per il re: "Sed et inclitus ille rex Arturus letaliter uulneratus est; qui illinc ad sananda uulnera sua in insulam Auallonis euectus Constantino cognato suo et filio Cadoris ducis Cornubiae diadema Britanniae concessit anno ab incarnatione Domini .dxlii" (*HRB*, XI, 178; Reeve e Wright 2007, 253) ('Ma anche l'illustre re Artù fu ferito a morte; e così, trasportato ad Avalon per curare le sue ferite, consegnò la corona di Britannia a Costantino, suo cognato e figlio di Cador, duca di Cornovaglia, nell'anno dalla nascita del Signore 542').

Secondo Echard, ritornando alla narrazione rapida e oggettiva degli eventi, che costituisce il fondamento della sua opera, Geoffrey mira a riportare il lettore al “relentless cycle of strife that has characterized most of British history” (Echard 2011, 58). Per quanto straordinario nelle abilità e nel percorso, neppure Artù può sfuggire l’inesorabile fallacia dell’esistenza umana.

Lo scontro con il gigante di Mont Saint-Michel aiuta in questo senso a rivelare la doppia natura dell’Artù galfridiano: tanto re trionfante che ripristina l’ordine, quanto figura dall’ambizione sfrenata destinato a una rapida caduta.

4. Artù nel *Roman de Brut*

Se la narrazione galfridiana si pone in una prospettiva che vede Artù transitare dal margine mitico al centro di una memoria ‘nazionale’, è con il *Roman de Brut* di Wace che questa centralità si rafforza attraverso una rilettura della materia. La traduzione in francese da atto linguistico diventa anche atto politico, che amplia il pubblico e muta il testo in un veicolo di ibridazione tra memoria insulare e gusto cortese continentale.

Wace, pur rispettando la struttura della *Historia*, la trasforma, rendendo Artù contemporaneamente eroe e figura emblematica di una società cavalleresca in piena formazione. La narrazione viene così adattata alle mode di una cultura cortese, consapevole ed elegante. Il *Roman de Brut* combina la ‘Vulgata’ della *Historia* con la ‘Prima Variante’ dell’opera, integrandole con materiali provenienti dalle conoscenze di Wace in ambienti eruditi e popolari.²³ Nella sua interezza, il poema inserisce nel modello originario, incentrato sull’idea di ascesa e caduta, una più dettagliata analisi di cause ed effetti. Questo arricchimento emerge soprattutto nelle descrizioni, cariche di particolarità nei campi in cui

²³ Wace dovrebbe aver utilizzato come testo di riferimento una copia della ‘Prima Variante’, in una forma più completa rispetto a quelle correntemente attestate, integrata al testo della ‘Vulgata’ (Wright 1988, xii). Avrebbe poi consultato anche opere di William of Malmesbury – sia i *Gesta Regum Anglorum* che i *Gesta Pontificum* –, di Henry of Huntingdon e di Gaimar. Inoltre, sembrerebbe che fosse un grande conoscitore delle tradizioni orali (Weiss 2002, xviii).



il poeta è più competente, come l'intrattenimento, la musica, le tecniche belliche o la navigazione.

Tale tendenza rende la narrazione più accessibile e diventa sempre più evidente lungo il poema, culminando proprio nella sezione arturiana. Su un totale di 14866 versi, oltre 4000 sono dedicati al regno di Artù, che, pertanto, anche nel *Roman de Brut* supera di gran lunga tutte le altre sezioni narrative. Ciò avviene nonostante Wace scelga di ridurre la presenza di Merlino, le cui profezie vengono completamente omesse.²⁴

Le scene marziali spesso seguono il canovaccio impostato da Geoffrey. Tuttavia, Wace infonde alla sua opera, oltre che il tipico lessico e i concetti caratteristici delle *chansons de geste* del XII secolo, il suo interesse per atmosfere e sentimenti (Weiss 2002, xxii-xxiii). L'eroe Artù mantiene la sua eccellente prodezza, che si rivela, ancora una volta, al culmine della Battaglia di Bath. In questo episodio, le modifiche apportate non sono molte ma significative, il discorso diretto, inserito da Wace al momento della carica, conferisce al passo una diversa coloritura emotiva (*RdB*, vv. 9337-58):

A cez paroles Artur puinst,
A la peintrine l'escu juinst ;
Ne sai quel des Saisnes ateinst
Jus a la terre mort l'empeinst ;
Avant s'en passe si s'escrie :
'Deus aïe, sainte Marie!'
'Miens est, dist il li premiers cous,
A cestui ai sun luier sous.'
Dunc veïssiez Bretuns aidier,
Saisnes abat e derochier;
De toutes pars les avirunent,
Lacent e butent e cops dunent.
Artur fu mult de grant aspresce,
De grant vigur, de grant prüesces.

²⁴ Le Saux suggerisce che la cautela di Wace derivasse dal rischio di mal interpretare questo materiale politicamente delicato, il che avrebbe potuto compromettere l'integrità del poema e la sua credibilità come studioso (Le Saux e Damian-Grint 2006, 97).



L'escu levé, l'espee traite,
Ad cuntremunt sa veie faite ;
La presse ad tute derumpue,
Destre e senestre mult en tue.
Quatre senz il suls en ocist,
Plus que tute sa gent ne fist. (Weiss 2002, 234-236).

A queste parole Artù spinse a galoppo il cavallo, strinse al petto lo scudo, non so chi tra i Sassoni colpì, ma lo spinse a terra fino alla morte. Prima di passare, esclamò: "Dio ci aiuti e Santa Maria! È mio," disse "il primo colpo a costui che mi è sotto!" Allora si videro i Britanni stringersi in schiera, abbattere e sconfiggere i Sassoni; li circondavano da ogni parte, li arpionavano con lance, disarcionavano, affondavano i colpi. Artù dimostrò grande ferocia, grande vigore, grande prodezza. Alzato lo scudo, estratta la spada, si fece strada controcorrente sulla folla completamente dispersa, da destra e da sinistra molti ne uccise. Ne uccise quattrocento da solo, più di tutta la sua gente insieme.

Il poema di Wace meglio rappresenta la nuova società cortese. Le modalità stilistiche che adopera nel rappresentare le sontuose occasioni di stato contribuiscono significativamente alla sua reputazione di poeta di corte, in particolare, però, Wace parrebbe aggiungere un carattere più 'umano' alla magnificenza in precedenza descritta da Geoffrey (Wulf 2013, 241).²⁵ Così, per esempio, durante la cerimonia d'incoronazione di Artù e Ginevra a Carleon, a seguito dell'interminabile elenco di dignitari presenti, Wace descrive vivacemente la cittadina in tumulto ("cité fremir", *RdB*, v. 10339) a causa dei preparativi per l'evento, che creano un'atmosfera festosa di fiera ("feire semblast, ço vus fust vis" *RdB*, v. 10358). Così ancora, nei versi seguenti, dopo aver descritto la processione della regina, il poeta normanno descrive la cerimonia della messa solenne, aggiungendo dettagli affascinanti che vivacizzano il passaggio descrittivo (*RdB*, vv. 10419-24):

²⁵ Un ulteriore aspetto dell' "umanizzazione" operata da Wace riguarda le relazioni tra i personaggi: il poeta mostra un'acuta comprensione dei sentimenti. Emblematico è il caso di Mordred e Ginevra: pur mantenendo un fermo giudizio morale, Wace attenua la valenza politica del tradimento, interpretandolo come esito di un amore segreto più che di sete di potere. Su questo cfr. Breton 2017, 49-50.



Quant la messe fu comenciee,
Ke le jur fu mult exalciee,
Mult oïssiez orgues suner
E clers chanter e orgener,
Voiz abaissier e voiz lever,
Chanz avaler e chanz munter (Weiss 2002, 262).

Quando cominciò la messa, che quel giorno era molto solenne, sentivate molti suoni d'organi e i chierici cantavano e suonavano, voci a calare, voci a levare, canti a discendere, canti a salire.

Nel *Roman de Brut*, Artù si arricchisce di un altro aspetto fondamentale; il *dux bellorum* dello pseudo-Nennio che è diventato re guerriero nella *Historia* galfridiana acquista una dimensione politica. L'Artù di Wace è contemporaneamente un sovrano, un condottiero e un uomo di corte. In questo senso, l'aggiunta, forse più significativa, è l'introduzione della Tavola Rotonda, fondamentale istituzione politica e sociale, presentata come necessaria nella risoluzione finale alle dispute sulla precedenza dei cavalieri (*RdB*, vv. 9747-52) e creatrice di numerose leggende (o *fables*) sulla figura di Artù:

Pur les nobles baruns qu'il out,
Dunt chescuns mielldre estre quidout,
Chescuns se teneit al meillur,
Ne nuls n'en saveit le peiur,
Fist Artur la Runde Table
Dunt Bretuns dient mainte fable (Weiss 2002, 244).

Per i nobili baroni che aveva, fra i quali ognuno credeva di essere migliore, e nessuno ne sapeva il peggiore, Artù fece la Tavola Rotonda, di cui i Britanni raccontano molte storie.

È interessante infatti notare come proprio l'introduzione di un elemento nuovo – forse tratto da tradizioni popolari, forse introdotto arbitrariamente da Wace – gli permetta di commentare sull'incertezza delle proprie fonti (*RdB*, vv. 9787-98):



En cele grant pais ke jo di,
Ne sai si vus l'avez oï,
Furent les merveilles pruvees
E les aventures truvees
Ki d'Arthur sunt tant recuntees
Ke a fable sunt aturnees:
Ne tut mençunge, ne tut veir,
Ne tut folie ne tut saveir.
Tant unt li cunteür cunté
E li fableür tant flablé
Pur lur cuntes enbeleter,
Que tut unt fait fable sembler (Weiss 2002, 246).

In quel lungo momento di pace di cui ho parlato, non so se l'avete sentito, furono sperimentate quelle meraviglie e cercate quelle avventure che riguardo Artù sono tanto raccontate da essere diventate materia di finzione: né tutta menzogna, né tutta verità, né tutta follia, né tutta saggezza. I narratori hanno tanto narrato e i favolisti tanto favoleggiato, per abbellire i propri racconti, che hanno fatto sembrare tutto una finzione.

Judith Weiss sottolinea come qui la rima tra *pruvees* e *truvees* suggerisca "an inextricable mix of fact (*pruver* = to appear, show, demonstrate) and fiction (*truver* = to seek, discover, invent)" (Weiss 2002, xxi). Paradossalmente, mettendo in discussione l'affidabilità stessa delle proprie fonti, la voce di Wace ne risulta rafforzata. Infatti, nonostante egli menzioni i diffusi racconti sulla figura di Artù, il poeta normanno si astiene dall'integrarli nella sua narrazione, e, come osservato in precedenza, rimane fedele alla sequenza degli eventi delineati nella *Historia*. Inoltre, allineando le avventure della Tavola Rotonda con un periodo di pace, Wace razionalizza il contrasto tra le conquiste storiche di Artù e la sua rappresentazione romanzesca successiva. Mentre Geoffrey scrive la *Historia* da una prospettiva interna, Wace si avvicina alla sua materia con un senso di distacco; osserva le vicende dall'esterno con un piglio divertito. Mantiene, infine, una distinzione tra la verità storica all'origine della leggenda di Artù e gli elementi più fantasiosi delle *fables* (Weiss 2002, xix-xxiii; Le Saux e Damian-Grint 2006, 99-101 e Le Saux 2020, 241).

Anche nell'adattare l'episodio dello scontro con il gigante, Wace si concentra su quegli aspetti più affini alla cultura cortese, accentuando lo spessore emotivo.

Il dialogo con la nutrice, che in Geoffrey era un monologo, si trasforma in uno scambio esteso, che consente al legato del re – Bedivere – di mostrare il suo animo “gentil” e “curteis” (*RdB*, v. 11420). Questo accento sulla ‘cortesia’ mette in risalto il contrasto con la brutalità disumana del gigante, raffigurato come una forza distruttiva e selvaggia. L’orrore generato dal mostro non è, infatti, limitato al suo aspetto fisico: Wace lo connota come figura demoniaca, definendolo attraverso la voce della nutrice come “li adversiers” (*RdB*, v. 11389) e “uns diables” (*RdB*, v.11405). In questo modo, il gigante diventa emblema del male assoluto, in aperta opposizione ai valori di cavalleria e umanità incarnati da Artù e dai suoi. L’intero episodio acquisisce così una dimensione morale: il conflitto è anche quello tra cultura e natura. Potremmo leggere, con Pickens (1997), il viaggio sulla Manica come una transizione simbolica: si tratterebbe per Wace di un cambiamento di ‘modalità’, un passaggio da uno stato di pace, di ordine, di cortesia, a uno stato di guerra, di disordine e di ferocia. La dominazione violenta del gigante sul paesaggio e sui corpi femminili è parallela al suo dominio su una terra priva di ordine religioso.

Tuttavia, così come in Geoffrey anche nella rappresentazione di Wace, se il gigante è epitome di *savagery*, anche Artù, nel momento dello scontro, sembra perdere il controllo, lasciando emergere una furia animalesca che lo avvicina pericolosamente al nemico. Lo scontro, anche in questo caso, rappresenta una tensione irrisolta tra civiltà e barbarie: benché vittorioso, anche l’eroe cortese di Wace ne esce segnato, portando con sé un’ombra della mostruosità che ha sconfitto (McKee e Pirzadeh 2017, 12).

5. Artù nel *Brut in prosa*

La rielaborazione di Wace rappresenta un momento cruciale nell’evoluzione del mito arturiano, ma con il *Brut in prosa* questo processo raggiunge una nuova profondità

ideologica. L'eroe Artù, ormai istituzionalizzato, viene inserito in una narrazione in prosa che ne attenua i tratti mitici e la tensione ambivalente per collocarlo all'interno di un discorso volto a legittimare il presente.

Le versioni del *Brut in prosa* si distinguono per una continua espansione della materia narrativa rispetto alla tradizione galfridiana. La versione più antica anglonormanna si configura come una composizione stratificata: rielabora il *Roman de Brut* per la storia britannica delle origini, integra l'opera di Gaimar per il periodo Anglosassone e si prolunga, attraverso diverse fonti, fino a eventi contemporanei, come la morte di Enrico III nel 1272 e gli esordi del regno di Edoardo I.²⁶ Le versioni successive mantengono questa struttura, aggiornando progressivamente il racconto con l'obiettivo di offrire una storia completa e continua dell'isola.

In questa organizzazione della materia, i collegamenti tra passato antico e recente non scaturiscono da semplici associazioni analogiche, ma da una selezione consapevole del materiale, volta a costruire una continuità dinastica. In tal modo, le identità britannica, inglese e normanna vengono fuse in un unico percorso cronologico (Marvin 2009, 231). In questo contesto, la figura di Artù subisce una trasformazione significativa: da figura emblematica di resistenza contro gli invasori Sassoni diventa progressivamente simbolo di un'ideologia imperialista, funzionale a giustificare le pretese inglesi sul resto del territorio insulare (Smith 2019).

Nonostante l'ampia variabilità della tradizione manoscritta, le vicende arturiane si presentano in forma relativamente stabile. È dunque possibile applicare la nozione di *core-*

²⁶ Marvin, editrice della versione più antica, ipotizza che il testo sia stato composto in una biblioteca monastica del nord dell'Inghilterra, forse Lincolnshire, sotto richiesta da parte della nobiltà secolare. Tra le fonti adoperate, oltre ai testi menzionati, si ritraccia anche la *Historia* galfridiana nella forma della 'Vulgata'; mentre per il periodo 1066-1272, la fonte principale sarebbe stata una cronaca legata al monastero premonstratense di Barlings presso Lincoln (*The Barlings Chronicle*). In relazione al sapiente uso delle fonti, Marvin sottolinea la capacità dell'autore di selezionare gli episodi di editarli e tradurli per riproporli in prosa, considerata al tempo lo strumento più consono per il racconto storico (Marvin 2006, 1-47).



text,²⁷ poiché tali episodi risultano sostanzialmente equivalenti nelle diverse versioni. In particolare, la *Long Version* anglonormanna e la *Common Version* medio-inglese sono largamente sovrapponibili e condividono la stessa articolazione in capitoli.²⁸

L'autore della *Oldest Version*, pur partendo dal *Roman de Brut*, rielabora il materiale in senso più marcatamente cronachistico. La prosa e l'intento storiografico comportano una riduzione degli aspetti più decorativi presenti in Wace. Artù è un conquistatore, il re guerriero della tradizione galfridiana, ma è anche il sovrano ideale: un governatore giusto, garante di pace e stabilità, gentile e generoso con i poveri e gli indifesi, misericordioso con gli sconfitti e, soprattutto, attento al suo seguito. Le sue conquiste diventano così occasione per esaltarne le qualità politiche e morali (Marvin 2006, 11).

Appare evidente la volontà di rendere ancora più che in passato le vicende arturiane una *cautionary tale* per la contemporaneità. Un esempio significativo è rappresentato dall'episodio della guerra contro Roma. Mentre in Wace (*RdB*, vv. 12400-77), l'Artù condottiero, politico e cortese, incoraggia le truppe facendo leva sull'onore macchiato dei Britanni dall'arrogante Roma, nel *Brut in prosa* lo scontro assume una dimensione religiosa, poiché è presentato come un dovere cristiano contro forze pagane ostili: "Occioms paeins e crestiens qe sunt venuz oue eux pur destrure crestiens, e deu nous aidera, qar nostre est le dreit." (Marvin 2006, 174) ('Uccidiamo pagani e Cristiani che giungono con loro per distruggere i Cristiani, e Dio ci aiuterà, perché siamo nel giusto'). Questo elemento, seppure già presente nel brano di Wace, risulta qui fortemente enfatizzato, al punto che le truppe

²⁷ Margaret Lamont (2010, 307-308) definisce *core-text* il nucleo testuale condiviso dalla maggioranza dei testimoni, la cui individuazione aiuta nella mappatura delle macroaree tematiche di un'opera. Questa nozione permette di distinguere tra varianti accidentali e varianti significative. Un esempio emblematico è il reinserimento delle vicende di Cadwallader: sebbene escluse nella *Oldest Version*, esse riappaiono in gran parte della tradizione manoscritta successiva.

²⁸ Per una valutazione del testo presente nella *Oldest Version* si rimanda a Marvin 2006, 73-295; per la *Long Version* cfr. Maxwell 1995, che, nonostante riguardi un solo manoscritto, offre un'idea riguardo l'organizzazione testuale in questa versione; per la *Common Version* medio-inglese cfr. Brie 1906 (EETS o.s. 131) e 1908 (EETS o.s.136), rappresentante al momento l'unica edizione critica del *Brut in prosa* nella traduzione inglese.



rispondono al discorso di Artù con un'invocazione della Trinità: "Nous doyne grace a bien fere e bien feryr e destrure les enemys de la crestinte, en noun del Pier e del Fiz e del Seint Esprist." (Marvin 2006, 174). ('Concedici la grazia di ben fare e ben colpire e distruggere i nemici della Cristianità! Nel nome del Padre, del Figlio e dello Spirito Santo'). Artù aveva caratteristiche da *miles christi* anche in Geoffrey, ma questo momento nel *Brut in prosa* riflette il contesto contemporaneo, segnato dall'esperienza delle crociate.²⁹ Se nella rappresentazione cortese di Wace Artù è esempio di un ideale cavalleresco in fase di consolidamento, nel *Brut in prosa* il re viene rimodellato in funzione delle urgenze religiose e politiche del tempo. L'epopea arturiana si trasforma in uno strumento di propaganda, in cui il margine culturale viene codificato come minaccia religiosa da neutralizzare.

La tendenza ad accostare le vicende arturiane alla contemporaneità emerge anche nelle versioni successive. Una differenza significativa tra la *Oldest Version* e la *Long Version* anglonormanna, mantenuta anche nelle redazioni medio-inglesi, è l'inclusione di un lungo capitolo dedicato alle profezie di Merlino. Si tratta, in questo caso, non delle profezie di Geoffrey, ma di un testo più tardo, noto come *The Last Six Kings after John* che allude ai sovrani inglesi attraverso una simbologia animale.³⁰

In generale, fama, gloria e battaglie non sembrano essere tematiche fondamentali nella sezione arturiana del *Brut in prosa*. Per quanto le conquiste di Artù ripercorrano il percorso tracciato da Geoffrey, le cronache mostrano scarso interesse per la descrizione dettagliata degli scontri. Episodi centrali vengono condensati in poche righe. Parrebbe così che l'attenzione dall'azione militare si sposti verso le conseguenze morali e sociali.

²⁹ Il viaggio in Terra Santa del futuro Edoardo I è non a caso uno degli ultimi eventi riportati nella *Oldest Version* (Cfr. Marvin 2006, 11).

³⁰ La *Common Version* medio-inglese rubrica il capitolo come "How Kyng Arthure axede of Merlyn þe adventures of vj the laste kynges þat weren to regne in Engeland, and how þe lande shulde ende" (Brie 1906, 72) ('Come re Artù chiese a Merlino riguardo le avventure di sei degli ultimi re che avrebbero regnato in Inghilterra e che fine avrebbe fatto il paese'), ma il testo non esplicita alcuna richiesta, non vi è, di fatto, alcun legame narrativo tra le profezie e il resto della sezione (Cfr. Drukker 2002, 30).



Si veda l'episodio della battaglia di Bath. Lo scontro principe tra Artù e i Sassoni è risolto brevemente nella *Oldest Version*: "e il mesmes ala pur rescure e aider la ville de Bathe. E quant il fu la venuz, il dona tresfort bataille a Cheldrik e occist tute sa gente apoi, qar nul homme ne poeit countreester ne endurer le coupe de Caliburn sa bon espee. Iloques furent ambedeux occis Colgrin e <Bladulf> son frere" (Marvin 2006, 160) ('E lui stesso andò a salvare e ad aiutare la città di Bath. Quando giunse là, diede grande battaglia a Cheldrik e uccise tutta la gente a lui soggetta, perché nessuno poteva contrastare, né resistere colpi della sua buona spada, Caliburn'). Similmente stringata la *Common Version* in inglese medio, che pur traduzione fedele, evita di menzionare la spada Caliburn: "[...] and him-self went helpe rescue þe toune of Bathe. And when he come þider, he ȝaf a strong batail to Cheldrik, and quelde almost al þe peple þat he hade; for no man myȝt him wiþstande, ne endure vnder þe stroke of his swerde" (Brie 1906, 71).

L'attenzione è in genere rivolta ai soli esiti delle guerre, ovvero pace, tranquillità e prosperità. In particolare, la *Oldest Version* sembra riflettere una sensibilità quasi antibellica: il conflitto è giustificato solo in quanto mezzo per ristabilire l'ordine. Tematica centrale è il riconoscimento da parte del re del servizio fornito dai suoi vassalli. Più che le battaglie, sono, infatti, i due periodi di pace, prima e dopo la conquista della Francia, i momenti salienti nel regno arturiano. L'istituzione della Tavola Rotonda, dettaglio conservato interamente, è celebrata come potente mezzo di pacificazione tra cavalieri e popoli diversi.³¹

L'episodio dello scontro con il gigante è conservato in tutte le cronache, ma, in maniera analoga, le scelte narrative privilegiano il racconto della sofferenza delle vittime, piuttosto che lo scontro in sé e per sé.

Il *Brut in prosa* mette, infatti, in risalto il racconto che la nutrice di Elena fa della sua prigionia nelle mani del gigante. Nel preambolo si ritrovano gli stessi elementi presenti nelle

³¹ Cfr. la menzione delle tante genti provenienti da "tutte le terre da entrambi i lati del Monte Joux" ("des tutes les terres de cea la Mountioie e de la"; Marvin 2006, 162). Per la versione medio-inglese cfr. Brie 1906, 78 e, per la *Long Version*, Maxwell 1995, 84.



fonti: il gigante, tiranno brutale che domina il territorio attraverso la violenza e la paura, incarna una forma estrema e mostruosa di potere, contrapposta alla missione civilizzatrice di Artù. Esso è, ancora una volta, una creatura liminale, situata a metà tra umano e bestiale, simbolo di eccesso e trasgressione delle categorie. Inoltre, posto in un'area geografica isolata,³² crea una divisione sia fisica che simbolica tra civiltà e barbarie.

La dettagliata descrizione galfridiana, in cui eroe e mostro si confrontano fino a uno scambio di ruoli, viene ridotta a una sola frase. Il testo della *Common Version* medio-inglese legge: "and come on þe morne to þe Geaunt, and fau3t wiþ him strongely, and at þe laste him slou3 and Arthure bede Bedwere smyte of hes heuede, and bryng it to þe hoste to shewe ham for a wonder, for it was so grete & so huge" (Brie 1906, 85) ('E il giorno seguente andò dal gigante e lo combatté violentemente e, alla fine, lo uccise. Arthur chiese a Bedewer di decapitarlo e portare la sua testa al campo per mostrare ai combattenti questa cosa straordinaria perché era così grande, così enorme').

Con la riduzione dello spazio narrativo dedicato allo scontro, le cronache *Brut* mettono quindi in primo piano il trauma delle vittime. Attraverso le parole della nutrice, la narrazione manifesta una forte empatia verso la nutrice, anche più marcata che in Wace, e conferisce a dare profondità morale alla missione di Artù: la morte del gigante è risarcimento per il torto subito da Elena e dalla nutrice. La scelta di ridurre lo spazio dedicato allo scontro, dunque, altera il senso dell'episodio, che diventa rappresentazione della volontà di ristabilire un giusto ordine dopo momenti di guerra che lo sconvolgono.

In generale, l'Artù del *Brut in prosa* si colloca saldamente nella tradizione iniziata da Geoffrey e continuata da Wace, ma, se i due autori precedenti sono entrambi estremamente

³² Nella versione in inglese medio, l'originario Mont Saint-Michel diventa 'Mount of seynt Barnard', che potrebbe essere identificato con il *Colle del Gran San Bernardo*, valico alpino al confine italo-svizzero, noto anche come *Col du Mont Joux* e ricordato più volte nei *Brut*. È comunque impossibile determinare con sicurezza l'originario luogo di riferimento, come spesso accade per le informazioni geografiche nei testi medievali. Entrambe le collocazioni sembrano tuttavia far riferimento all'isolamento del gigante rispetto alla società civile.



consapevoli del potenziale d'intrattenimento presente nelle loro opere, le cronache *Brut* si discostano deliberatamente da qualsiasi intento non storiografico.³³ Nel *Brut in prosa* Artù è oramai divenuto l'archetipo della regalità medievale, capace di coniugare virtù etiche – cristiane –, cura dei sudditi e ambizioni imperiali, un modello di legittimazione appropriato dai monarchi inglesi, da Edoardo I a Enrico IV (cfr. Drukker 2003, 171-190; Berard 2019, 3).

6. Conclusioni

La figura di Artù, nella sua evoluzione dal nucleo della *Historia Brittonum* fino alla sua stabilizzazione nelle cronache dei *Brut*, rivela un processo di crescente centralizzazione e istituzionalizzazione del mito. Nel loro insieme, la *Historia regum Britanniae*, il *Roman de Brut* e i *Brut in prosa* mostrano come Artù passi da emblema di un'identità in tensione tra marginalità e aspirazione imperiale a elemento gradualmente inserito in una narrazione storica più stabile. In tal senso, la traiettoria della figura arturiana rende visibile una dinamica più ampia di negoziazione culturale, in cui elementi originariamente marginali vengono progressivamente integrati e rifunzionalizzati all'interno di un orizzonte dominante.

In Geoffrey, Artù contribuisce a spostare la storia britannica dal margine al centro del discorso storiografico, pur conservando tratti di liminalità. Attraverso l'inversione simbolica della *translatio studii*, il *magister* di Oxford sottrae Artù alla marginalità mitica per porlo al centro di una narrazione storica dominante, volta a legittimare il regno normanno d'Inghilterra attraverso una discendenza troiana paritetica a quella di Roma. Tuttavia, Artù mantiene una natura ambivalente: è il sovrano che ristabilisce l'ordine contro i giganti tiranni, ma è anche una figura segnata da ambizioni e istinti che, nello scontro di Mont Saint-Michel, rischiano di confonderlo con la mostruosità che combatte.

³³ Esulando dagli elementi di evasione tipici della materia arturiana dei romanzi e, come detto, caratterizzati dalla pretesa di presentare la 'verità' storica, il *Brut in prosa* rappresenta, nell'espressione di Matheson 2009, 65, "the standard history of England".



Con il *Roman de Brut* di Wace, questa ambiguità viene mediata dall'ideale cortese; Artù diventa un eroe della società cavalleresca e un fine politico, capace di trasformare la forza brutta in diplomazia attraverso l'istituzione della Tavola Rotonda, pur mantenendo un'ombra di 'ferocia animalesca' che affiora ancora una volta nel momento di confronto con il gigante.

Nelle cronache *Brut in prosa*, che costruiscono il passato britannico con l'intento di integrare le diverse identità etniche dell'isola, Artù è ormai pienamente assimilato alla cultura dominante e diventa uno strumento di legittimazione politica. Si configura come archetipo del sovrano cristiano e del governatore giusto, modello da imitare e rievocare per i re inglesi del Tardo Medioevo. Lo scontro con il gigante, privato della sua dimensione epica, assume una valenza morale e riparatoria nei confronti delle vittime, sancendo la definitiva trasformazione di Artù in figura funzionale al potere egemone.

In questa prospettiva, la parabola arturiana mostra come il recupero di una memoria marginale possa tradursi in una narrazione storiografica centralizzata, contribuendo alla definizione di un orizzonte culturale condiviso.

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Encoded Wording of a Marginalised Faith. A Conjectural Quest for Shakespeare's Shrouded Catholicism

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Abstract

This paper investigates the possibility that William Shakespeare embedded concealed Catholic references within his works, produced in the deeply anti-Catholic climate of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. It draws primarily on Clare Asquith's *Shadowplay*, which argues that Shakespeare cultivated a sophisticated coded system of religious allusion deliberately crafted to remain "deniable" and therefore resistant to definitive proof. The discussion further engages with the scholarship of Alison Shell, Curtis Bright, Jason Pearce, and Beatrice Batson to extend this interpretive framework. By situating Shakespeare's writing within the recusant political and religious context of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the study considers how symbolic language and oblique references may function as a covert Catholic lexicon. Although the analysis concentrates on a selection of sonnets, it suggests that broader examination of Shakespeare's plays and biography could yield stronger evidence for this encoded mode of expression.

Keywords: encoded wording; marginalised Catholic faith; conjecture; Shakespeare's sonnets; shrouded Catholic symbols.



1. Introduction

This study seeks to unearth a series of instances in which William Shakespeare may have encoded veiled Catholic allusions within his writings in a cultural and political environment profoundly hostile to Catholicism during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. The present argument draws substantially upon the conjectures advanced in Clare Asquith's *Shadowplay*, wherein she contends that "Shakespeare developed this hidden code into a sophisticated art form, integrating it into his more familiar work with dazzling skill. The essence of this coded method of writing, of course, was that it be 'deniable' – in other words, incapable of proof" (Asquith 2005, 7).

Building upon Asquith's thesis, this paper develops further conjectural reflections based upon the scholarship of Alison Shell, Curtis Bright, Jason Pearce, and Beatrice Batson, doing so in a manner deliberately akin to an intellectual thriller, wherein each clue opens onto further interpretive possibility rather than definitive closure. The study begins by exploring the epistemological foundations of conjectural thinking through the lens of Karl Popper's philosophy of knowledge, which regards all knowledge as provisional, grounded in conjecture, and perpetually subject to criticism and revision. It then proceeds to outline the changing religious circumstances of Shakespeare's England, from the reign of Henry VIII through those of Mary Stuart, Elizabeth I, and James I.

Thereafter, the study applies its conjectural methodology to close readings of Shakespeare's sonnets as possible sites of spiritual dissimulation and coded witness. By engaging with the theoretical perspectives of Popper, Carlo Ginzburg, Umberto Eco, and James C. Scott, this paper argues that conjectural literary interpretation offers a provocative – if necessarily provisional – means of reading Shakespeare as a recusant poet whose work subtly and artfully resists the confessional politics of Elizabethan England.



The study further advances a series of conjectures regarding Shakespeare's allusive wordings and symbolic language, many of which appear to point toward a concealed lexicon of Catholic resistance. These conjectures are derived not only from the aforementioned scholars but also from the present author's own interpretive reflections. While the scope of analysis is limited primarily to selected sonnets, the clues uncovered herein suggest that a broader inquiry into Shakespeare's dramatic works and biography might yield even stronger evidence for the existence of such a carefully constructed coded language.

2. Conjecture

2.1 The Concept Outline of Conjecture

Conjectural thinking may be defined as the process of forming an opinion, theory, or conclusion on the basis of insufficient or uncertain evidence rather than upon definitive proof. It entails educated speculation and the formulation of ideas where full information remains unavailable. The term is frequently employed in contexts such as scientific hypothesis formation, historical reconstruction, and literary interpretation, wherein conclusions must often be drawn from fragmentary or circumstantial evidence rather than from incontrovertible documentation.

In a world that frequently seeks certainty, conjectural thinking occupies an uneasy yet invaluable intellectual space. To conjecture is to propose an idea without claiming final proof, and this act constitutes a form of epistemic humility insofar as it acknowledges the possibility of error while continuing earnestly to pursue understanding. This mode of thought resists dogmatism, privileges curiosity over closure, and dares to interrogate even the most entrenched assumptions. In many respects, it constitutes a kind of cognitive adventure: a journey not toward final answers, but toward increasingly refined questions.

This section explores the virtues of conjectural thinking through the works of major philosophers and scholars including Karl Popper, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Carlo Ginzburg, and



Umberto Eco. It also acknowledges the conjectural historical paradigm associated with the philosophical school of the Scottish Enlightenment (Palmeri 2016). The argument advanced herein is that conjectural thinking is not merely an academic exercise but a vital intellectual ethic central to serious inquiry.

2.2 Conjecture in an Intellectual Thriller Study

Furthermore, this study proposes that an intellectual inquiry grounded in conjectural thinking may be metaphorically understood as an “intellectual thriller,” resembling a dynamic narrative filled with puzzles, suspense, reversals, and unexpected revelations, in which the journey itself proves more captivating than the destination. A thriller is defined not solely by plot, but by tension, uncertainty, reversal, and discovery. Likewise, a philosophical or literary study grounded in conjectural thought builds suspense through provocative questions, offers possible answers, destabilises them, and then presents new and perhaps more unsettling possibilities.

Just as a thriller compels its reader onward not to confirm what is already known but to discover what remains unknown, so too does a conjectural study guide its reader through uncertainty. It is dynamic rather than static, exploratory rather than declarative.

Nevertheless, no intellectual method is without its risks. Conjectural thinking can degenerate into aimless relativism if not anchored in rigour, evidence, and ethical responsibility. A conjecture is not a licence for arbitrary assertion; it must remain testable, debatable, and situated within a framework of scholarly accountability.

Properly practised, conjectural thinking constitutes a disciplined form of curiosity. It refuses complacency, challenges the boundaries of accepted knowledge, and invites scholars



to dwell within the liminal space between knowing and not-knowing, between theory and experience, between tradition and innovation.

When pursued effectively, conjectural thinking transforms philosophical and literary inquiry into something akin to an intellectual thriller. It seeks not to reassure but to unsettle in productive ways, drawing readers into the drama of ideas, the suspense of uncertainty, and the exhilaration of discovery. In an era increasingly obsessed with definitive answers, conjectural thinking reminds us of the enduring value of questions and of the asymptotic pursuit of truth and meaning.

2.3 Karl Popper's Theory of Conjecture

One of the clearest philosophical endorsements of conjectural thinking emerges in the work of Karl Popper, who built an entire philosophy of science around the principle of falsifiability. For Popper, scientific theories can never be definitively proven; they can only be falsified. Science progresses not by accumulating certainties but by proposing bold conjectures and subjecting them to rigorous attempts at refutation (Popper 1963).

Popper's famous dictum that "We are not students of some subject matter, but students of problems" (Popper 1963, 88) encapsulates the ethos of conjectural thought. It places the mystery, rather than the solution, at the centre of inquiry.

Although Popper's philosophy is centrally concerned with the logic of scientific discovery, its insights extend equally into the humanities. Popper argues that human beings never possess final certainty: "Our knowledge can only be finite, while our ignorance must necessarily be infinite" (Popper 1972, 28). Knowledge advances not by inductive accumulation but by bold hypotheses subjected to severe criticism. Even when a conjecture survives such criticism, it remains provisional and perpetually open to future falsification.



Asquith's assertion that Shakespeare's Catholic code is "deniable" aligns closely with this Popperian model. The hypothesis cannot be conclusively proven precisely because it was allegedly designed to remain concealed, thereby affording Shakespeare plausible deniability. Consequently, the appropriate scholarly response is not to demand impossible certainty but to assess whether the conjecture is intellectually fruitful: whether it explains more evidence than rival hypotheses, whether it generates new questions, and whether it remains vulnerable to falsification.

Indeed, Popper insists that a legitimate conjecture must be risky: it must make claims that could, in principle, be refuted (Popper 1963). The thesis advanced herein satisfies this criterion, for if scholars were to discover explicit documentary evidence of Shakespeare's rejection of Catholicism, or if linguistic analysis demonstrated that the alleged code words occur entirely randomly, then the thesis would be significantly undermined.

2.4 Conjecture's Status with Other Scholars

Conjecture is by no means alien to literary or historical scholarship. Carlo Ginzburg's influential formulation of the "evidential paradigm" compares the historian to a detective reconstructing the past from scattered clues and circumstantial traces (Ginzburg 1986). Where documentary evidence is lacking, conjecture becomes the means by which lost realities may be reconstructed.

Similarly, Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics reminds us that understanding always involves a fusion of horizons: readers approach texts with interpretive assumptions and questions that shape what they perceive within them (Gadamer 2004). Thus, interpretation is never neutral but always historically and intellectually situated.

Asquith's claim that Shakespeare's works contain a Catholic code exemplifies precisely this form of interpretive leap. The thesis cannot be proven in a strict positivist sense; it may



only be argued cumulatively through converging evidence and interpretive pattern recognition. This approach possesses both strengths and limitations. On the one hand, it encourages scholars to think holistically about recurring imagery, symbols, and thematic patterns across Shakespeare's corpus. On the other hand, as Umberto Eco warns in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, such approaches risk producing a "hermetic drift," whereby every textual detail is treated as evidence of hidden meaning (Eco 1992).

Ginzburg's microhistorical methodology offers an especially apt parallel to Asquith's conjectural method. In *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, Ginzburg describes how the past may be reconstructed from minute circumstantial traces (Ginzburg 1986). Likewise, Asquith gathers numerous textual details—images of martyrdom, purgatory, exile, and spiritual suffering—and arranges them into a pattern suggestive of Catholic coding.

Yet the risk of overinterpretation remains. As Gadamer reminds us, interpretation is dialogic rather than purely objective, and our interpretive horizon inevitably shapes what we perceive in texts. Asquith's Catholic interpretive horizon may thus enable her to perceive signs invisible to others, even while simultaneously risking overextension. The challenge, therefore, lies in maintaining critical balance between fruitful conjecture and interpretive excess.

3. Religious Strife and Recusancy in Shakespeare's England

3.1 Henry Tudor's Anglicanism

The Act of Supremacy of 1534 declared the English Crown to be "the only supreme head on earth of the Church in England," thereby severing papal authority and formally establishing royal supremacy over religious life within the kingdom. Through this legislation, allegiance to the Pope came increasingly to be regarded as an act of political disloyalty and even of high treason, insofar as the papacy continued to assert both spiritual and temporal authority over Catholic subjects across Europe.



Anti-Catholic sentiment among many English subjects was fuelled not merely by theological disagreement but also by fears concerning the Pope's perceived attempts to reclaim political influence over England. Many Protestants regarded Catholic loyalty to Rome as inherently subversive, believing that the papacy, often in alliance with continental Catholic powers such as Spain, sought to undermine English sovereignty and destabilise the kingdom's newly established Protestant identity.

3.2 Catholic Queen Mary and Anglican Queen Elizabeth

The consequences of the original Act of Supremacy were temporarily reversed in 1554 by the staunchly Catholic Queen Mary I, who restored Roman Catholicism as England's state religion. During her reign, many Protestants suffered persecution, and her execution of Protestant dissenters earned her the enduring epithet "Bloody Mary" within Protestant historiography.

Following Mary's death, Queen Elizabeth I reversed these measures through a renewed Act of Supremacy in 1559, accompanied by the Act of Uniformity, which re-established Anglican worship as compulsory throughout the realm. Those wishing to hold public office were required to swear the Oath of Supremacy, thereby recognising the monarch as supreme governor of the Church of England. Refusal to comply exposed individuals to a range of punishments, including fines, imprisonment, and, in severe cases, execution. Attendance at Anglican services became mandatory, and recusants—those who refused attendance—were subjected to significant financial penalties and the risk of further physical punishment.

3.3 Queen Elizabeth's Struggle to Preserve Anglicanism

Anti-Catholic feeling intensified considerably during Elizabeth's reign, particularly as fears mounted concerning papal attempts to depose the Protestant monarch and restore Catholic rule. In 1570, Pope Pius V issued the papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, formally excommunicating

Elizabeth I, declaring her a heretic, and absolving her Catholic subjects of their allegiance to her (Breight 1996).

This event greatly exacerbated English anxieties regarding Catholic disloyalty, strengthening the perception that English Catholics posed an internal threat to the security of the state. Matters escalated further with the outbreak of military conflict between England and Spain, the latter widely viewed as the military defender of Catholic Europe and, by extension, of papal interests. England's defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 significantly reinforced Protestant national identity and further intensified anti-Catholic rhetoric.

In the aftermath of these events, Elizabeth's government intensified its persecution of Catholic clergy and suspected sympathisers. The execution of Jesuit missionaries and Catholic priests became increasingly common, with sites such as Tyburn in London becoming infamous for the martyrdom of those executed for treasonous religious allegiance. Many of these individuals were subsequently canonised by the Catholic Church.

3.4 Anti-Catholic Books of Protestant Propaganda

Protestant propaganda also played a crucial role in fostering anti-Catholic sentiment among the English populace. John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* was widely circulated and employed as a powerful instrument of Protestant ideological formation. This text memorialised Protestant victims allegedly persecuted during Mary I's reign and became so culturally significant that copies were frequently displayed in Anglican churches alongside the Holy Bible (Breight 1996).

Another anti-Catholic text, *Pyrotechnica Loyalana* (Ignatian Fire-Works), portrayed Catholics—especially Jesuits—as responsible for various calamities and conspiracies across Europe. The book's imagery famously includes depictions of Guy Fawkes descending into the vault beneath Parliament, visually linking Catholicism with treason and terrorism in the



English popular imagination. Fawkes, together with his fellow conspirators, became emblematic of Catholic sedition after being implicated in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, an attempted bombing of Parliament during the ceremonial opening attended by King James I.

3.5 Recusants and Religious Resistance

The term “recusant” came broadly to signify principled religious refusal. More specifically, Catholic recusants were those who refused to attend services of the Church of England and consequently incurred legal and financial penalties. Church-papists, by contrast, outwardly conformed to Anglican worship while privately adhering to Catholic beliefs and practices.

Puritans, too, could on occasion be penalised as recusants when they objected to certain Anglican practices or refused participation in local worship. More broadly, recusancy may be understood as resistance to enforced participation in religious and intellectual structures perceived as incompatible with one’s convictions.

It is within this context that some scholars have speculated whether Shakespeare himself may plausibly be situated among the recusant or crypto-Catholic community (Bright 1996; Batson 2006). Circumstantial evidence drawn from Shakespeare’s biography, familial background, and social associations has repeatedly fuelled such speculation, even though definitive proof remains elusive.

For Catholics in late Elizabethan England, public religious expression was fraught with danger. Recusants who refused Anglican worship faced heavy fines, while those found harbouring Catholic priests risked execution. In such a climate, covert forms of communication became a practical necessity.

Asquith (2005) places Shakespeare within a broader tradition of writers who allegedly employed allegory, parable, and coded symbolism to communicate Catholic sympathies



covertly. According to her reading, terms such as “truth,” “mercy,” “darkness,” and “exile” frequently carry subversive theological significance beneath their ostensibly neutral literary surfaces. The deniable quality of this code ensured that hostile readers could interpret such language innocuously, while sympathetic readers might perceive its deeper significance.

This dual-layered communicative strategy recalls the Jesuit doctrine of equivocation, whereby Catholics under interrogation could provide technically truthful yet deliberately misleading answers in order to protect themselves and their co-religionists (Zagorin 1990). James C. Scott’s concept of the “hidden transcript”—the covert discourse of resistance developed by oppressed groups beneath the surface of official culture—provides an especially illuminating theoretical analogue for this phenomenon (Scott 1990). Through this lens, Shakespeare’s works may be read as participating in a hidden transcript of recusant resistance, subtly articulating forbidden meanings beneath the acceptable surface of public literary discourse.

4. Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Putative Catholic Symbolism

The Shakespearean corpus has long invited speculation precisely because the historical record surrounding Shakespeare’s life remains notably sparse. Relatively little is known with certainty regarding Shakespeare’s personal beliefs, and his religious affiliation in particular remains the subject of considerable scholarly debate. This paucity of definitive evidence has generated a range of conflicting portrayals of Shakespeare: as a loyal Protestant subject of the Crown, as a politically detached humanist, as a crypto-Catholic recusant, and even as a covert atheist. Clare Asquith’s *Shadowplay* (2005) offers one of the boldest interventions in this debate, arguing that Shakespeare developed a coded literary language through which he communicated Catholic

belief and political critique under a regime hostile to religious dissent. The present study adopts a position broadly sympathetic to this argument.

Asquith insists that this code was “deniable,” meaning deliberately structured so as to remain incapable of definitive proof (Asquith 2005, 7). This presents not merely a historical claim but also a methodological challenge. If the evidence can never be conclusive, then by what criteria ought such a thesis to be assessed? Here Karl Popper’s theory of conjectural knowledge proves especially useful. Popper rejects the classical notion that knowledge must rest upon fully justified true belief, instead maintaining that all knowledge remains conjectural and that progress is achieved through critical testing and attempted refutation (Popper 1963). Viewed through this Popperian lens, Asquith’s thesis—and indeed the thesis of the present study—must be regarded not as established truth but as an interpretive hypothesis perpetually open to scrutiny.

The proposition that Shakespeare required such a code necessarily presupposes the dangers associated with open Catholic profession in Elizabethan England. The fines imposed upon recusants, the surveillance networks directed against suspected dissidents, and the prosecution of priests under treason laws rendered overt Catholic expression politically perilous. Asquith therefore situates Shakespeare among a broader “cryptic” tradition of Catholic writers who allegedly employed allegory, parable, and emblematic symbolism to communicate forbidden truths to sympathetic readers.

The following sections provide detailed analysis of selected sonnets that may plausibly contain encoded Catholic allusions.

4.1 Sonnet 5

For never-resting Time leads summer on
To hideous winter, and confounds him there,



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Sap checked with frost and lusty leaves quite gone,
Beauty o'er-snowed and bareness everywhere...

These lines from Sonnet 5 may be interpreted as a symbolic herald of the arrival of the Reformation and the devastation it allegedly wrought upon traditional Catholic England. The “never-resting Time” may signify the relentless advance of historical change ushering in the Protestant order. “Hideous winter” becomes emblematic of the bleakness of the Reformation, while the imagery of beauty buried beneath snow may evoke the whitewashing of Catholic churches and the destruction of religious ornamentation. The barrenness described in the poem may thus signify spiritual desolation and the suppression of Catholic aesthetic and theological richness.

4.2 Sonnet 12

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls all silvered o'er with white;

These temporal and visual images from Sonnet 12 may similarly be interpreted as allegorical of religious decline. The transition from “brave day” into “hideous night” may symbolise the passage from the perceived radiance of the old Catholic order into the darkness of Protestant ascendancy. The blending of sable into white may again evoke whitewashed church walls and iconoclastic destruction. The sonnet’s pervasive emphasis upon decay and lost beauty aligns with a lament for a vanished religious and cultural order.

4.3 Sonnet 18

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, / And often is his gold complexion dimmed, / And every
fair from fair sometime declines, / By chance or nature’s changing course untrimmed: / But thy



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eternal summer shall not fade,/ Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st; / Nor shall Death brag
thou wand'rest in his shade, /When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.

In Sonnet 18, the repeated emphasis upon fairness and eternal beauty may be read as suggestive of Catholic ideals of divine beauty and permanence alluded to by: "But thy eternal summer shall not fade, /Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st." The term "fair" may function symbolically as an allusion to the beauty and sanctity associated with Catholic worship and doctrine. "Eternal summer" may signify the enduring truth of Catholicism despite outward suppression. The line "Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade" may additionally echo Psalm 23, reinforcing possible Christian theological undertones.

4.4 Sonnet 27

Sonnet 27 begins with spiritual and physical weariness: "Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed". The speaker's fatigue and nocturnal inward reflection may evoke the suffering of Catholics forced to practice their faith privately and under threat. The imagery recalls the "dark night of the soul" associated with Catholic mysticism, particularly the writings of St. John of the Cross. The poem's emphasis upon inward vision, spiritual struggle, and secret pilgrimage suggests the possibility of coded reflection upon hidden religious endurance.

4.5 Sonnet 29

Sonnet 29 opens with the speaker in a state of alienation: "When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes." The speaker's sense of exclusion and disgrace may plausibly reflect the condition of the recusant Catholic marginalised by Protestant society. The sonnet's movement from despair toward spiritual consolation may suggest hope sustained through faith amid persecution. The image of the lark "sings hymns at heaven's gate" reinforces the spiritual



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dimension of this consolation: "Haply I think on thee, and then my state, / Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;"

4.6 Sonnet 30

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought...

Sonnet 30's "sessions of sweet silent thought" may evoke meditative introspection, confession, or prayer. The speaker's mourning for "old woes" and lost friends may resonate with Catholic penitential and memorial practices. The beloved's restorative function in the concluding couplet may symbolise faith, grace, or divine consolation: "But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, / All losses are restored, and sorrows end."

4.7 Sonnet 33

Even so my sun one early morn did shine
With all triumphant splendour on my brow;
But out alack, he was but one hour mine,
The region cloud hath masked him from me now.

The sun imagery in Sonnet 33 may be interpreted as a symbol both of divine radiance and of tragic personal loss. Some have speculated that the sonnet's numbering and language may allude autobiographically to Shakespeare's grief over his son Hamnet, though within this reading the sun may equally represent divine light obscured by suffering, perhaps recalling Christological symbolism.

4.8 Sonnet 53

What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,



And you, but one, can every shadow lend.

The philosophical interplay of “substance” and “shadow” in Sonnet 53 may strongly evoke Eucharistic theological debates as present in: “What is your substance, whereof are you made, /That millions of strange shadows on you tend?” Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation claims that the substance of bread and wine changes during consecration, whereas many Protestant traditions denied this literal transformation. Thus, the vocabulary of substance and shadow may plausibly carry Eucharistic significance.

4.9 Sonnet 55

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments...

Sonnet 55’s claim that poetry shall outlast monuments may be read as asserting the endurance of suppressed truth beyond temporal destruction. Asquith and Batson both suggest that such claims may hint at the preservation of forbidden religious or political truths through literary artifice.

4.10 Sonnet 60

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, /So do our minutes hasten to their end;

The relentless passage of time in Sonnet 60 recalls Christian meditations upon mortality and spiritual endurance. The waves hastening toward shore may symbolise both life’s transience and baptismal purification, while the poem’s assertion that verse may withstand time suggests the preservation of transcendent truth against decay.

4.11 Sonnet 62



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Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye,/ And all my soul, and all my every part;
And for this sin there is no remedy, / It is so grounded inward in my heart.
Methinks no face so gracious is as mine, (...) / But when my glass shows me myself indeed,
Beated and chapped with tanned antiquity, / Mine own self-love quite contrary I read;

The repeated invocation of “sin” in Sonnet 62 strongly recalls Catholic preoccupation with sin, confession, and moral self-examination. The poem’s introspective movement from pride to penitence aligns with traditional Catholic spiritual disciplines. “Tanned” signifies “sun-burnt” which betokens the corollary of closeness to God. The recurrent word “self” may lead us to understand the poet’s lofty spiritual reign. The repeated mention of “sin” may bespeak a Catholic age-old dilemma regarding the boundaries of sin. We agree with Pearce that the emergence of the concept love may also act as a symbolic counterpart of dauntless allegiance to spiritual truth. (Pearce, 2013)

4.12 Sonnet 66

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
...And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill...

The lament that “art [is] made tongue-tied by authority” has often been cited by Asquith as an especially potent allusion to censorship and suppression. The phrase may reflect the silencing of Catholic voices under Protestant authority and the frustration of suppressed truth. The poem’s woe that “purest faith [is] unhappily forsworn” could be read as a veiled allusion to Catholics forced to outwardly conform. The desire for “restful death” tallies with the Catholic concept of a “good death” referring to the idea of dying reconciled to the faith, perhaps even as a martyr.

4.13 Sonnet 73



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That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

The famous phrase “bare ruined choirs” has been interpreted by Alison Shell as evocative of the ruined monastic institutions left in the wake of the Dissolution of the Monasteries (Shell 2010).. The poet views himself as old, in the late autumn season which is an allusion to the old religion. An image of overall decay grips the reader. There sweet birds once sang. “Yellow leaves, or none, or few” may be read as referring to the diminished amount of Catholic population. The autumn imagery betokens the nearing death and the frailty of life, calling up Catholic themes of *memento mori* (“remember you must die”) and the preparation for the afterlife. The intensified love challenged by mortality suggests faith in resurrection secretly confessed by the marginalised Catholic believers who were still in England in Shakespeare’s time.

4.14 Sonnet 94

They that have power to hurt and will do none...

Sonnet 94’s meditation on restrained power and silent endurance may be read as praise for those who outwardly submit while inwardly maintaining moral and spiritual integrity. Such restraint parallels the concealed resistance of recusants living under persecution.

From Clare Asquith’s viewpoint, this could be read as a coded commentary on those who outwardly appear compliant or powerless such as secret Catholics or dissenters under Elizabethan rule, yet who put up discrete, deliberate resistance. The sonnet’s focus on latent power and potential “ruin” thrusts a political subtext: true strength lies in restraint amid oppression.



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Beatrice Batson (2006) remarks the sonnet's ambiguity; it simultaneously admires and warns, creating a "deniable" space where Shakespeare can comment on power being shielded from direct confrontation. This description of moral restraint and resistance to temptation ties in well with Catholic ideals of virtue, self-control, and steadfastness amid persecution. The sonnet's praise of silent strength can be read as covert admiration for clandestine Catholic stoic endurance.

4.15 Sonnet 97

How like a winter hath my absence been...

The winter imagery in Sonnet 97 may again symbolise emotional, spiritual, and religious desolation, aligning with the metaphor of Catholic hardship during Protestant ascendancy. From another point of view, Shell's (2010) interpretations of desire and hidden emotional truth highlight the pain of enforced separation, which could encode Shakespeare's or the Fair Youth's experience of enforced exile or secrecy, whether they be political, religious, or any other kind.

4.16 Sonnet 104

To me, fair friend, you never can be old...

Sonnet 104's meditation on beauty enduring against time may symbolise the preservation of faith or spiritual truth beneath outward decay. The sonnet's tension between appearance and reality supports readings focused upon concealed identity.

Jason Pearce (2013) rightfully has an esoteric take on this symbolism looking upon this as an exploration of appearances versus reality, a coded meditation on the tension between



spiritual or poetic immortality and physical mortality. Asquith (2005) also rightfully reads the sonnet as a subtle claim for the preservation of identity or faith beneath the eroding forces of time and persecution, a “deniable” hope embedded in seemingly conventional praise.

4.17 Sonnet 111

Thou corrupt'st the youth with thy foul drug...

Sonnet 111's language of corruption, shame, and redemption may be read in relation to Catholic penitential theology, suggesting moral failure followed by hope for spiritual cleansing. Asquith rightfully claims that Shakespeare uses this sonnet to explore themes of moral failure and hope for redemption, embedded within a seemingly personal apology.

The coded nature protects the poet from censure while allowing exploration of a Catholic sense of penance. This adds a spiritual depth to the sonnets often overlooked in secular readings. The “grave where buried love doth live” paradoxically bespeaks both death and spiritual life, things that are reminiscent of Catholic beliefs in resurrection and the sacredness of the body and soul. The imagery of burial and trophies summons the idea of martyrdom and memory.

4.18 Sonnet 126

O thou my lovely boy, who in thy power...

The unusual omission of the concluding couplet in Sonnet 126 may signify mystery, silence, or the ineffability of divine truth. The textual gap may symbolically evoke hidden meanings left deliberately unspoken. Both Batson (2006) and Shell (2010) both insist on how this formal irregularity warns us of a coded meaning, perhaps of the unspoken, ineffable nature of the Fair



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Youth's identity or role. The sonnet praises the youth's "power" over "Time's injurious hand" yet owns up to the dictum that even he will eventually succumb.

We believe that the formal omission of the concluding couplet might stand for the ineffability of divine mystery, something like the "cloud of unknowing" in Catholic mysticism. The "Time's fickle glass" acts as a metaphor for mortality and the ultimate sovereignty of divine time. The gap calls upon the readers to fill in the silence, standing for the unspoken secrets and hidden truths central to the sonnets' shrouded craft.

4.19 Sonnet 129

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action...

Sonnet 129's intense moral condemnation of lust strongly resembles penitential discourse and confessional rhetoric. The language of shame, guilt, and damnation reflects a profoundly theological moral framework and betokens a soul's grappling with sin. Under Asquith's rightful conjecture, the poem might shroud not only sexual guilt but mainly spiritual anguish over apostasy of even Shakespeare's own conformity to the state church, we believe.

4.20 Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks...

This sonnet thus unsettles traditional representations of female beauty and hints at a broader cultural critique embedded in Shakespeare's poetry. Taken at face value, the sonnet is an exquisite love poem. Yet subversive readings alluding to an allegory of Catholic faith



confession may be prompted by certain rhetorical elements. “My mistress eyes seem to give off light” (of faith, we presume), white may allude to the good deeds of the Catholic Church and red may recall the purple symbol of martyrs. Red roses are redolent of the old and beautiful Catholic faith, symbolised by the sun, too. Red are also the Pope’s garments and the books of prayer.

Sonnet 130 famously throws out the Petrarchan idealisation of the beloved’s beauty according to Shell (2010), who interprets this as a challenge to the racial beauty standards of Shakespeare’s day, especially since the “Dark Lady” has been said to represent a woman of darker complexion or foreign origin. We do quite agree with Batson (2006), who observes that Shakespeare’s irony serves both to mock poetic clichés and to affirm a more honest, physical, and potentially transgressive love. We believe that the sonnet’s humour and realism baulk at any neat classification, offering perhaps a veiled celebration of difference.

4.21 Sonnet 145

Those lips that Love’s own hand did make...

The simplicity of Sonnet 145’s style may itself function strategically, disguising coded meaning beneath apparent innocence and stylistic plainness. Sonnet 145 is stylistically distinct from the others, using simpler language and rhythm, almost childlike in tone. This difference suggests a deliberate masking or lowering of complexity. Clare Asquith rightfully interprets this as a strategic move meant as a coded message disguised in simplicity to shun censorship.

The sonnet’s theme of “hate away” and the transformative power of the beloved’s words might suggest a spiritual or political reconciliation hidden beneath plain expression. The play on “hate” and “love” and the theme of mercy mirror Catholic notions of sin and forgiveness,



grace overcoming condemnation. The upshot thereof reads that the sonnet's simplicity could be a deliberate concealment of deeper spiritual meaning.

4.22 Sonnet 146

Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth...
So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.

Sonnet 146 is among the most overtly theological of Shakespeare's sonnets as it brings out its essence in: "Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth." Its emphasis upon interiority, penitence, and triumph over death strongly recalls Catholic devotional spirituality and Counter-Reformation theology.

4.23 Sonnet 147

My love is as a fever, longing still, / For that which longer nurseth the disease...

The fever imagery of Sonnet 147 may symbolise spiritual illness and temptation. The speaker's inner torment resembles confessional discourse surrounding sin, temptation, and repentance. Sonnet 147 is a dramatic exploration of destructive passion. Here, the speaker likens his love to a consuming illness, uttering inner turmoil and self-destructive desire. The "fever" metaphor could also be read within a religious framework, as Clare Asquith might justly argue, symbolising sin, spiritual sickness, or temptation under moral strictures. The metaphor of love as fever and disease falls in with the Catholic concept of spiritual sickness and the struggle against temptation and sin. The sonnet's self-awareness of "madness" mirrors confessional themes of inner distress and repentance. The concluding lines bear witness to this mindset:



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Past cure I am, now reason is past care, / And frantic-mad with evermore unrest; / My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are, / At random from the truth vainly expressed; / For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

We claim that this powerful paradox unmasks the conflict between appearance and reality, faith and doubt, sanity and madness, which can be read as a shrouded expression of forbidden desire and spiritual crisis.

4.24 Sonnet 152

And all my honest faith in thee is lost.
For I have sworn deep oaths of thy deep kindness,
Oaths of thy love, thy truth, thy constancy,
And to enlighten thee gave eyes to blindness,
Or made them swear against the thing they see.

Faith occurs as a loadstar running throughout this sonnet. Yet the poet writhes about in dilemmas alluding to the forsworn oaths of allegiance taken by the old English Catholics forced by the tidal onslaught of Reformation. From our point of view the sonnet refers us to the Acts of Supremacy and of Uniformity imposed by Queen Elizabeth I: „In loving thee thou know'st I am forsworn, / But thou art twice forsworn...”

As we hinted at this before, the charge of perjury echoes powerfully in a recusant context, where Catholics were forced to swear the Oath of Supremacy. The sonnet's bitterness may mirror Shakespeare's own sense of spiritual compromise, a conjecture that tallies with our portrayal of him as a marginalised Catholic negotiating survival in a hostile state.

5. Conclusion

The present paper has examined the troubled historical and religious environment surrounding William Shakespeare's life and has sought to advance a broad range of conjectures concerning the allusive metaphors, similes, and symbolic expressions found throughout his



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sonnets, which may plausibly be interpreted as constituting a shrouded language of Catholicism—a marginalised faith operating beneath the dominant Protestant culture of Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

The analysis has proposed that this encrypted language may have been so skilfully embedded within Shakespeare’s literary practice as to remain perpetually deniable by its author and effectively impossible for Anglican authorities to prove conclusively, thereby allowing Shakespeare to remain shielded from accusations of recusancy or religious dissent. In this respect, the hypothesis advanced herein aligns with Clare Asquith’s argument that Shakespeare’s coded symbolism was deliberately designed to preserve plausible deniability while still communicating deeper truths to sympathetic readers.

The claims developed throughout this study represent a bold experiment in conjectural literary history. Building upon Asquith’s arguments as well as the critical perspectives of Batson, Shell, Breight, Pearce, and others, the paper has argued that Shakespeare may have embedded subtle, systematic, and deniable Catholic code wording within his poetic corpus. Through close engagement with selected sonnets, the study has sought to demonstrate how conjectural reading may illuminate Shakespeare’s recurring preoccupation with guilt, redemption, suffering, spiritual endurance, penitence, and transcendence—motifs that align closely with Catholic doctrine and devotional traditions.

At the same time, the study recognises that such interpretations remain necessarily provisional. The very nature of the alleged code renders it resistant to definitive proof, and thus the argument advanced here must remain within the domain of informed scholarly conjecture rather than incontrovertible historical certainty. Yet this does not invalidate the interpretive enterprise; rather, it underscores the importance of maintaining openness to alternative



possibilities in Shakespearean scholarship, particularly where biographical evidence remains fragmentary and textual meanings remain richly ambiguous.

Ultimately, conjectural thinking remains both a risk and a necessity in Shakespeare studies. Where documentary evidence is scarce and authorial intention elusive, interpretation inevitably requires the careful balancing of textual evidence, historical context, and theoretical reflection. When practised responsibly, conjectural reading enriches our understanding of Shakespeare by preserving the possibility that his works may contain meanings at once personal, political, theological, and spiritual – meanings that may forever remain “incapable of proof,” yet nonetheless worthy of continued scholarly pursuit.

Future research extending beyond the sonnets into Shakespeare’s dramatic works, narrative poems, and extant biographical evidence may yet reveal further clues capable of strengthening – or challenging – the conjectures proposed herein. In this sense, the present study should be understood not as the final word on Shakespeare’s possible Catholicism, but as an invitation to further inquiry into one of the most fascinating and unresolved questions of Shakespearean interpretation.

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Performing Widowhood: Liminality, Agency, and Patriarchal Control in *The Old Law*

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Abstract

This paper argues that the character of Eugenia, in Middleton and Rowley's (and possibly Heywood's) *The Old Law* (c. 1618), threatens patriarchal assumptions about female wit by demonstrating that women can analyse, manipulate, and exploit legal structures through deliberate calculation rather than impulse. Epire's statute condemns men at eighty and women at sixty, a threshold that Eugenia – young wife of the aged Lisander – turns to her advantage. By occupying the widow's "liminal status between death and life, chastity and sexual availability, or past and future" (Kimura 2023, 67), she converts her legal predicament into a performance, rehearsing widowhood before it even arrives. Though legally still a wife, she positions herself as a widow-in-waiting, wielding "dissembling" as an "art" to navigate patriarchal structures for personal gain. Yet the play refuses to reward such self-fashioning: Eugenia's audacious pose as "strumpet", as "whore", is punished by a ten-year ban on remarriage, which suppresses female strategic wit and re-inscribes patriarchal control precisely at the threshold she sought to manipulate, reinstating passive virtue as the approved model of femininity.

Keywords: early modern widowhood; liminality; female agency; dissimulation; Jacobean tragicomedy.

1. Widowhood, Agency, and the Jacobean Stage

In early modern England, a woman's legal and social identity was almost entirely relational: as a daughter or wife, she lived under the legal authority of her father or husband. Widowhood alone suspended this condition, granting formal autonomy through dower, jointure, and the right to act as household head. Nonetheless, widows provoked considerable unease about female agency, economic power, and the social instability these might bring. In short, widowhood could promise a kind of liberation, but not without arousing suspicion.

Recent scholarship has complicated the stereotype of the "lusty widow" by showing that remarriage was often shaped by legal and economic constraint. Barbara Todd (1985) notes that wills and copyhold terms often penalised remarried widows, while Cavallo and Warner (1999) show that similar continental legislation sought to protect heirs by limiting widows' control over property. Yet in England widows retained significant agency: Foyster's 1999 analysis of 1598-1619 London marriage licences showed that nearly one-third of men aged thirty to thirty-four wed widows, and by the 1680s thirty percent of Stepney brides were women entering a second marriage. Mendelson and Crawford (1998) further argue that widowhood was a distinct life stage, allowing women to manage estates or businesses under intestacy law until the 1670 reduction of a childless widow's share. Even after that point, age, resources, dependents, and the stigma of a younger husband continued to shape remarriage decisions.

Given these tensions, it is hardly surprising that the Jacobean stage found widows so theatrically appealing. Jennifer Panek refers to the "saleable dramatic fantasy" (2004, 4) of

the comic widow,¹ a trope exploited by several plays from the period,² allowing male audiences in particular to explore anxieties about property and cuckoldry while also indulging in fantasies of sexual mastery, though female spectators may well have read such scenes through the lens of their own constrained autonomy.

The Old Law (c. 1618), by Middleton, Rowley, and possibly Heywood³, pushes the issue of widowhood in a more unsettling direction. Set in the fictitious duchy of Epire, where Duke Evander decrees death for men at eighty and women at sixty on the grounds that they are no longer of use to the state (Bromham 1984), the play develops what Masten calls a “tragicomedy of euthanasia”⁴ (2007, 1331) from the kind of “improbable hypothesis” Waith identifies as central to the genre (1952, 156). The plot follows the decree’s effects within the families of Simonides and Cleanthes. Simonides welcomes the law as a route to inheritance, while Cleanthes conceals his father Leonides with the help of his wife, Hippolita; around them, sons, lawyers, and spouses try to profit from the anticipated deaths of the elderly. Eugenia, married to the ageing Lisander, feigns grief while preparing for

¹ Widows in tragedy were often imagined in quite different terms: they could embody grief, vengeance, or political instability (e.g., the widowed Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi*). Middleton returns to the dangerous widow in *Women Beware Women* (c. 1621), where Livia wields her autonomy to orchestrate seduction and betrayal, prefiguring the association between widowed freedom and transgressive female intelligence that *The Old Law* punishes in Eugenia.

² For instance, in *The Puritan*, also known as *The Puritan Widow* (1606), the widowed Lady Plus recalls that in her first marriage she held the keys, managed the accounts, and went out as she pleased – memories that, from her new position of autonomy, cast marriage as a constraint she has now surpassed. In Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), Quarlous turns the “widow reward” into a property joke, predicting that a prudent widow will ring-fence her estate so tightly that a husband may inherit little more than a pair of “apostle-spoons”. Middleton, meanwhile, both indulges and critiques the fantasy: in *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1606?), Witgood manufactures a wealthy widow by having a woman assume that identity, while in *The Widow* (c. 1615-17), Lelia accepts only suitors who can match her financial standing, refusing the conventional exchange of youth for wealth. As Panek notes, Middleton offers the lusty-widow fantasy with one hand and deflates it with the other (2004, 162).

³ Although the 1656 printed title-page of the play links it to Philip Massinger, Gary Taylor has more recently contended that the opening section of the final act (V.i.1-347) should instead be attributed to Thomas Heywood, a claim that also casts serious doubt on whether Massinger contributed to the play at all (Masten 2007, 1333).

⁴ The utilitarian implications of this premise have been explored by Schotland (2013), who reads the play as a dystopian thought experiment centred on the forced disposal of the elderly.

remarriage. In the final act, the Duke discloses that the law has functioned as a moral test, and the supposed victims return alive to restore order. More broadly, though, *The Old Law* shifts focus from what a widow stands to lose – the social protection of marriage, the stability of a household position, the economic security attached to a husband's name, for instance – to what a wife might gain when the boundary between wifedom and widowhood blurs: autonomy over property, freedom to choose a sexual and domestic partner, and, crucially, the right to act as an independent legal subject.

Within this framework, Eugenia embodies disruption.⁵ Though legally married, she is already spoken of – and speaks of herself – as a widow in waiting: she flirts with suitors, schemes for her future, and openly considers remarriage while her husband is still alive – thus exploiting liminality rather than being paralysed by it. Wifely virtue becomes, in this context, a mask for calculated self-fashioning. According to Asp, Eugenia embodies “corruption which wears the face of virtue” (1974, 135), a doubleness which unsettles not only the distinction between wife and widow, but also the expected sequencing of marriage, widowhood, and remarriage. Nevertheless, her disruptive power becomes clearer when set against the other characters' responses to the ‘old law’.⁶ Cleanthes protects his father out of filial duty; Simonides and Gnothoes exploit the decree for gain, but do so within its sequential logic – death first, then inheritance or remarriage. Eugenia's manipulation is of a different order: she acts like a widow before becoming one, occupying wifedom and widowhood simultaneously. The threat she poses, therefore, is not widowhood *per se*, nor the pursuit of gain she shares with male characters, but her strategic intelligence, that is, her

⁵ Eugenia's name derives from Greek *εὐγενής*, ‘well-born’ or ‘of good stock’, ironically at odds with how others see her actions (base, greedy, ignoble) and suggestive of her exceptional strategic intelligence.

⁶ The title's meaning is not as stable as it might appear. While in the immediate context of the plot, the ‘old law’ refers to a statute targeting elderly citizens deemed socially or economically useless, Masten (2007) notes that the play's alternative title, *A New Way to Please You*, and the resonance of ‘old law’ with biblical and juridical traditions complicate any single reading. For the purposes of this paper, the primary sense – a law ‘concerning the old’ – is most relevant, but the title's instability itself mirrors the play's overall interest in the manipulation of legal categories.

capacity to expose patriarchal categories as contingent and manipulable. This, rather than any actual sexual transgression, is what the play ultimately identifies as most dangerous to the social order – as the final act confirms, when Eugenia’s punishment targets her mind rather than her body. Yet the play also participates in a familiar early modern conflation between female wit and sexual licence: just as Beatrice’s sharp tongue in *Much Ado About Nothing* or Portia’s legal acumen in *The Merchant of Venice* provoke anxieties about wifely fidelity, so Eugenia’s scheming is framed through the language of sexual corruption even though her transgression is not carnal at all.

The argument unfolds in three stages. First, it examines Eugenia’s strategic performance as a grieving ‘widow-to-be’, focusing on how she manipulates Hippolita and calibrates responses to her suitors in order to convert a precarious position into one of apparent control. Next, it considers the Duke’s final sanction – a ten-year ban on remarriage – as a measure to contain the economic and sexual anxieties provoked by Eugenia’s behaviour. Finally, it argues that such juridical containment answers to the tragicomedy’s logic of delayed resolution, since Eugenia’s agency is momentarily acknowledged only to be reabsorbed into a restored patriarchal framework.

2. Female Responses to the Decree

The Old Law presents four female responses to the decree mandating death for the elderly, each deploying a distinct strategy in the face of crisis. Asp (1974) interprets the play’s resolution as a moral test that exposes false virtue and rewards true loyalty, effectively sorting the female characters into the conventional categories of virtue and vice. Masten’s (2007) editorial commentary,⁷ focused as it is on patriarchalism and the fifth commandment, leaves these categories largely unexamined. A closer look, however, suggests that Eugenia alone engages in systematic strategic thinking. Her exploitation of legal interstices sets her

⁷ All quotations from *The Old Law* are taken from Jeffrey Masten’s edition (in Taylor and Lavagnino 2007, 1331-1396). Act, scene, and line references follow this edition throughout.

apart from the others, whose responses – filial devotion, comic victimhood, and marital self-sacrifice – are more conventional and, therefore, less disruptive to the status quo.

Hippolita embodies the virtuous response.⁸ Though not directly threatened by the decree – her husband Cleanthes is still young – she is drawn into its logic through her eighty-year-old father-in-law Leonides. Her role is paradoxical: she defends not her own father but her husband's, stretching loyalty beyond filial duty and suggesting that female virtue need not be bound to blood. When Leonides resolves to submit to the law, she resists with ritualistic intensity, pitting life against statute and affection against fiat. Leonides, in turn, praises her as if she were his own child: "Law were above nature, / Were there more such children" (I.i.373-74). In collapsing the categories of daughter and wife, Hippolita embodies loyalty as a threshold identity: neither daughter nor wife exclusively, but both at once, and so able to sustain patriarchal continuity at its point of rupture. She exemplifies female virtue through intensified duty, and the play rewards her, accordingly, in the end. Yet, as Barker observed, this exemplary position proves unstable. Hippolita's devotion makes her vulnerable to manipulation: it is her sympathy for another woman's apparent grief that leads her to reveal Leonides's hiding place to Eugenia, nearly costing him his life. In this sense, the play suggests that feminine virtue, however attractive, carries its own dangers: its openness can be turned against itself, so that its effects may prove as damaging as those of deliberate malice (Barker 1958, 105, in Asp 1974, 110, n. 1). Hippolita is rewarded in the end only because the Duke's test remains a fiction; had the threat been real, her trust would have been fatal.

Agatha, Gnothoes's elderly wife, occupies the opposite extreme, stripped of social worth and reduced to comic relief. Already condemned at sixty, she is immediately erased by her husband, who mocks her protests, bribes clerks to inflate her age, and wastes no time

⁸ Hippolita recalls the Amazonian queen of Greek myth and Shakespeare's *Hippolyta* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In both cases, formidable female power is domesticated and integrated into patriarchal society, prefiguring the restrained agency of Middleton and Rowley's character, whose own power is similarly channelled into domestic and filial loyalty.



preparing for remarriage. His mockery reduces her to derogatory stereotypes of postmenopausal femininity – “witches”, fraudulent practitioners of “physic”, “bawds” (III.i.280-83) – each a distortion of roles once associated with older women: the wise woman is thus recast as a witch, the healer dismissed as a killer of “good subjects” (281), and maternal nurture reduced to sexual procurement. Her attempt to feign pregnancy with a stuffed cushion turns her body into a prop for masculine entertainment: when she declares “I am with child” (IV.i.129), the response is laughter rather than sympathy, even though the audience might well respond with greater ambivalence to a woman whose husband is plotting her death. The deeper irony, however, lies in the fact that Agatha’s temporal predicament has already been manipulated by her husband. By bribing the parish clerk to alter the church-book, Gnothoes advances her recorded age, reducing her remaining life from twelve months to one (III.i). If the church-book converts biological time into juridical fact, Agatha has no access to it: her husband controls the document, the clerk accepts his money, and her only counter-move attempts to reassert bodily time against a legal calendar that has already been fixed against her. When the cushion falls, so too does her last claim to temporal agency; what might have been tragic struggle – the fight of a living wife against a law that has already marked her for death – is deflected into farce: in Agatha, wifehood collapses into redundancy, emptied of meaning once its reproductive and domestic functions are spent.⁹

Between these two extremes stands Eugenia,¹⁰ who refuses both absorption into patriarchal continuity and dismissal into ridicule. With a husband already condemned by the “old law”, she seizes her suspended condition as an opportunity for self-fashioning. Her

⁹ The consensus among social historians is that for early modern women, old age could begin as early as forty with the onset of menopause, marking their transition from valued reproductive members of society to economically and socially marginal figures. See Schen 2001, 13-30; Froide 2001, 89-110; Botelho 2004, esp. 89-112 and 125-58; Toulalan 2016, 333-59; Pelling 1991, 74-101; Mendelson and Crawford 1998, 169-203.

¹⁰ Asp (1974) reads Eugenia explicitly as Hippolita’s foil: Middleton places a calculating female counterweight against dutiful passivity and, importantly, treats both as structurally consistent characters whose clash tests the social fabric.



impatience is plain from the outset: "I shall be troubled / This six months with an old clog; would the law / Had been cut one year shorter!" (II.ii.1-3). Her husband, Lisander, is framed as a "clog" (2), a dead weight holding her back from enjoying youth. She promptly shifts the burden of care onto Parthenia (Lisander's daughter) – "make some spoon-meat for your father, / And warm three night-caps for him" (3-4) – and then recoils at the very thought. Almost in the same breath, she replaces this vision with another, one of the most vivid in the play, imagining herself "tumbling in cold baths" (11) and whitening her skin with "bean-flour bags" (12); all rituals designed to restore her youth and desirability. The fantasy expands into a lively banquet scene, in which "seven of the prop' rest men i'th' dukedom" (14) compete for a kiss she values so highly it must be guarded for weeks. Confinement becomes excess, and the weakness of her aged husband is reimagined as a festive contest of masculine rivalry and the subsequent precondition for renewed erotic possibility. Her conclusion – "This is a life for nineteen" (18) – states the contrast directly: she should be living in pleasure, not sitting near the deathbed of an octogenarian. Nor does she keep this insight private. When Parthenia enters, Eugenia offers what amounts to a lesson in temporal strategy: "But always take age first to make thee rich; / That was my counsel ever, and then youth / Will make thee sport enough all thy life after. / 'Tis time's policy, wench" (128-31). Tellingly, "time's policy" frames the exploitation of temporal intervals not as impulse but as a female art that can be taught. Parthenia's reply – "An honest man's worth all, be he young or grey" (138) – supplies the expected moral correction, but does not refute Eugenia's logic; it simply refuses to engage with it. In this sequence, widowhood is reconceived as a deferred gratification, and the Duke's decree as a schedule regulating that pleasure. From this point, Eugenia begins to act as though she were both wife and widow, claiming the freedom of the latter while still bound to the former. In so doing, she proves most disruptive, for she refuses to treat wifedom and widowhood as sequential categories, demonstrating instead that they can overlap, and that performance can turn liminality into a resource.

Antigona, finally, represents the limit-case of female response to the above decree. For her, marriage and selfhood are one and the same.¹¹ When her husband Creon is sentenced, she insists the edict tolls for her too, pledging to die “arm-in-arm” (I.i.276) with him. Her temporal logic is the inverse of Eugenia’s: Eugenia stretches the interval between decree and death to maximise advantage; Antigona, by contrast, tries to compress it, condensing her remaining years into “days, / To hours, or minutes” (273-74) in order to synchronise her death with Creon’s. Time, for Antigona, is not a resource but a distance to be abolished. Yet this absolute devotion does not hold. As Creon is led to execution, she breaks into open protest – “’Tis cursèd tyranny!” (II.i.137) – revealing the strain placed on such idealised self-sacrifice. The play itself grants Antigona little more than this single gesture: she is the least developed of the four women, as though *The Old Law* has limited interest in a response that, while extreme, poses no structural threat.

These four responses throw Eugenia’s approach into relief. Hippolita intensifies prescribed duty; Agatha fades to comic irrelevance; Antigona embraces self-annihilating loyalty. Eugenia alone thinks ‘through’ the law and develops strategic countermeasures. Yet the differences also turn on how each woman handles time. Dunnum (2025) argues that the Duke’s law imposes a chrononormative regime designed to regulate succession and reproduction, and that characters subvert it in various ways – forging records, compressing intervals, performing youth – each targeting the content of time. Eugenia’s strategy differs in kind, and it is here that Dunnum’s reading, acute as it is, stops short. He calls her “the perfect citizen of Epire and the perfect vehicle for its law” (Dunnum 2025, 239), one who embraces its chrononormative values, and in one sense he is right: she does endorse the system’s equation of wealth with strategic remarriage. But Dunnum treats this alignment as ideological rather than structural – his interest lies in the values she endorses, not in how

¹¹ The name Antigona directly recalls Sophocles’ *Antigone* (Masten 2007, 1341), emblematic of female rebellion; however, in *The Old Law*, the association turns ironic, as Antigona’s total submission to patriarchal law inverts the classical archetype.

she manipulates the temporal categories through which such values operate. Unlike the others, who alter time's content, Eugenia exploits its structure. She performs widowhood while still legally married, showing that the categories of wife and widow can overlap rather than simply succeed one another. The law assumes that time-defined social identities are mutually exclusive and externally verifiable; Eugenia, by contrast, exposes this assumption as a fiction, not by resisting the system but by working within its exact deadlines, treating the months before Lisander's execution as a futures market in which she can negotiate her remarriage while still formally a wife. This is why she alone is punished not for cheating the clock but for demonstrating that the clock's categories were never as fixed as the law required them to be.

3. Strategic Theatricality

If Hippolita stands for loyalty and Agatha is reduced to uselessness, Eugenia responds to the Duke's edict by turning it into theatrical opportunity. More than any other character, she grasps that her survival depends on role-playing, and she shifts between identities with calculated ease. She explicitly names her practice "dissembling", feigning the part of the grieving wife only as long as it serves her purpose. Yet the same theatricality that grants her temporary power also hastens her undoing, for once her performance threatens the sanctioned script, the Duke steps in to reassert it, pulling Eugenia back into line. The gesture recalls the Duke's sudden reappearance in *Measure for Measure*, another play in which disguised sovereign authority reasserts control over subjects who have somehow improvised beyond their assigned roles – and one that Middleton knew intimately, having revised it.¹² The Duke's decree, however, was always a moral test rather than a genuine law, so every character's response was being observed and evaluated from the start. Eugenia's performance most fully exposes what the test was designed to reveal: not mere selfishness

¹² The scholarly consensus, established through the textual work of the Oxford Middleton project, now attributes *Measure for Measure* to a Middleton adaptation of c. 1621.

or opportunism – the male characters display those too – but, as already stated, a systematic capacity to analyse and exploit the structures of patriarchal authority.

The point is sharpest when she tricks Hippolita into betraying Leonides's hiding place, having explicitly outlined her method beforehand:

Art, I must use thee now.
Dissembling is the best help for a virtue
That ever woman had; it saves their credit often. [*She seems to weep.*]¹³ (II.ii.139-41)

Three points are worth pausing over here. First, calling on “Art” shows that she conceives of deception as a skill and not just a whim, echoing early modern theories of strategic dissimulation.¹⁴ Second, she reverses the conventional moral valence: dissembling “saves [women's] credit”, recasting deceit as a form of virtue. Third, the stage direction “[*She seems to weep.*]” exposes the gap between inner feeling and outward display, letting the audience in on her skilful performance. That gap widens when she deploys calculated excess to trigger sympathy. Aware that Hippolita's virtue makes her vulnerable to emotional appeals – especially from another woman seemingly constrained by the same patriarchal forces – Eugenia performs suffering so convincingly that Hippolita reveals the secret of Leonides's

¹³ Kimura notes that early modern audiences viewed such displays with suspicion: “[The widows'] histrionic, often violent, gestures enable them to command the stage and overwhelm the audience” (Kimura 2023, 69). She further observes that “There was even fear that widows' lamentation was only feigned to attract new lovers” (75).

¹⁴ Early modern dissimulation was theorised as a disciplined art requiring rigorous self-analysis and a repertoire of techniques such as reticence, taciturnity, and strategic ambiguity (Snyder 2009). For male courtiers, the practice was celebrated as legitimate: Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) presents it as a refined art of self-presentation, and Torquato Accetto's *Della dissimulazione onesta* (1641) offers one of the earliest systematic defenses of concealment as an honest strategy for those lacking direct power. However, women were largely excluded from this credit. Some moralists, such as Charron, policed women's frankness as ‘unbecoming’ and naturalised female concealment, refusing to acknowledge it as rational mastery (see Snyder 2009). Contemporary conduct literature reinforced this distrust: Juan Luis Vives's *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1524) urges plain, truthful speech and forbids ‘subtle and crafty’ behaviour, effectively proscribing dissimulation; William Whately's *A Bride-Bush* (1617) similarly reinforces wifely subordination and condemns behaviours which unsettle that order. See also Janet Clare (1990) on how authority policed suspect performances and speech.

concealment; but as soon as she exits, Eugenia drops the mask: “Easy fool, / Thou hast put thyself into my power forever” (II.ii.200-01). Solidarity is exposed as a trap, and grief as a weapon turned to tactical advantage. In a system that makes women compete for a limited stock of social capital – marriage, property, male protection – solidarity between women is structurally precarious. Hippolita’s openness and Eugenia’s exploitation are not opposite moral dispositions but complementary results of the same patriarchal economy, which offers women so narrow a field of action that one woman’s gain necessarily comes at another’s cost. With the information secured, Eugenia immediately recruits Simonides as her instrument, scripting his role with epigrammatic precision: “He you shall strike; your stroke shall be profound, / And yet your foe not guess who gave the wound” (III.ii.313-14). She is no longer merely performing: she is directing others in a plot of her own authorship.

Her composure under pressure is equally revealing. When Cleanthes confronts her directly, labelling her a whore, her responses are studiously impassive: “Do you call, sir?” and “How do you, sir?” (262;264), as though receiving social courtesies rather than insults. She refuses to acknowledge Cleanthes’s words as injuries, treating patriarchal naming as mere noise. Her summary – “All this is nothing to a mind resolved; / Ask any woman that, she’ll tell you so much” (291-92) – implies that any woman with sufficient resolution can neutralise the force of male speech: words wound only when the listener grants them authority.

With Hippolita duped, Eugenia deploys the same art of ambiguity with her suitors, keeping options open through deliberate equivocation:

Excuse me, gentlemen, 'twere as much impudence
In me to give you a kind answer yet,
As madness to produce a churlish one.
[...]
I set no time,
Nor is it mannerly to deny any. (93-97)

By balancing “impudence” against “madness”, she holds herself between extremes and gains freedom to act. Widowhood is, in this moment, staged as a role in rehearsal, with Eugenia’s suitors reduced to spectators of her self-staging.

The contrast with her husband Lisander, whom Rowe calls a “grotesque example of ‘mixt monstrousness’” (1975, 197), sharpens the line between physical disguise and social performance. But Eugenia has orchestrated the scene from the start, inviting the courtiers to watch – “Laugh softly, gentlemen, and look upon him” (III.ii.44) – and managing the performance when it threatens to collapse: “‘Slight, an you laugh too loud, / We are all discovered, gentlemen” (70-71). She is at once narrator, director, and audience, staging her husband’s humiliation as entertainment for her suitors. The distinction she draws is mocking in its precision:

I’m sure his head and beard, as he has ordered it,
Looks not past fifty now; he’ll bring’t to forty
Within these four days, for nine times an hour at
least,
He takes a black lead comb and kembs it over.
Three quarters of his beard is under fifty;
There’s but a little tuft of fourscore left
All of one side, which will be black by Monday. (36-42)

Her exact counting – “nine times an hour”, “three-quarters of his beard” – underscores how mechanical and external Lisander’s artifice is: he treats disguise as a quantitative problem, believing that perfecting the surface will suffice to deceive. Eugenia, by contrast, manipulates perception, stages ambiguity, and orchestrates interactions to control her suitors; the audience, meanwhile, privy to her strategy through asides and stage directions, witnesses the mechanism of that control. In the end, Lisander’s disguise fails because it depends on visible signs alone; Eugenia succeeds, for a time, because she commands the invisible codes of behaviour and expectation.

Her final act of defiance marks both the culmination and the limit of this strategy. Confronted by Cleanthes for betraying Leonides, she discards the mourning mask and speaks in the language of calculation:

Now, coz, we're even; an you be remembered
You left a strumpet and a whore at home with me,
And such fine field-bed words which could not cost
you
Less than a father. (IV.ii.215-18)

Eugenia reduces betrayal to a form of calculable exchange, treating blood, honour, and property as negotiable currency, with "father" as the ultimate price. And when Cleanthes later raises his sword, Eugenia commands her suitors to defend her – no longer comic wooers, but her private militia. The scene peaks with her notorious declaration of appetite, delivered as if in an aside, which lays bare her self-conscious theatricality: "'Tis dainty, next to procreation fitting: / I'd either be destroying men or getting" (V.i.255-56). Crucially, her insistence – "I will not lose so glorious a revenge / Not to be understood in't: I betray him, / And now we're even; you'd best keep you so" (IV.ii.224-26) – makes clear that she wishes her performance to be recognised as strategy, not passion. Yet this is her undoing: a strategy that insists on being admired as such ceases to be manipulation and becomes defiance – and defiance can be punished.

However, the play will not allow her to dominate the stage. In Act V, the Duke declares the decree a moral test and punishes Eugenia with ten years of forced widowhood, locking her into the role she tried to master but now must endure. The punishment is both theatrical and legal, for it overwrites her improvisation with an official judgment. In this sense, Eugenia's fault stems not from miscalculation but from overreach, as she attempts to appropriate the playwright's power, only to be reminded that she remains part of the cast, her freedom to manoeuvre cut off by a patriarchal script that reclaims control over her body and voice.

4. The Duke's 'New Law'

In Act V, Eugenia's plan comes to an end – though not as she envisioned: she achieves neither clear victory nor tragic downfall; instead, she becomes trapped in a new liminal state, suspended between social recognition and banishment. This resolution comes through the Duke's final intervention, staged as a *deus ex machina*, which rewrites the play's framework, turning time – once Eugenia's chief resource – against her.

The Duke's proclamation enforces control through the rhetoric of law: wives who "shall design the[ir] husbands' death to be soon rid of them and entertain suitors in their husbands' lifetime [...] Shall not presume, on the penalty of our heavy displeasure, to marry within ten years after –" (V.i.318-26). So prolonged a prohibition¹⁵ aims to neutralise female agency altogether; the verb "design" locates the offense in careful planning, marking the female mind as the real threat. Under the 'new law', widowhood becomes a form of legal half-life, a 'civil death' in which women are denied all social agency and confined to symbolic existence. As noted by Asp, the ending stages a moral trial in which false virtue is unmasked and true loyalty rewarded, so that order is restored at the expense of those, like Eugenia, who expose its contradictions. Eugenia's strategic wit complicates this reading, since the same qualities that make her the play's most intellectually formidable character also ensure her erasure: the ten-year ban and her vanishing from the stage mean her example will not circulate. The irony is that even in defeat, Eugenia continues to think strategically – "That law's too long by nine years and a half; / I'll take my death upon't; so shall most women" (327-28) – while the Duke's law makes her calculation worthless,

¹⁵ There is no clear evidence of a fixed decade-long interdiction in contemporary law or custom. Roman tradition recognised an *annus luctus* (roughly a year, sometimes framed as ten months) mainly to prevent paternity confusion. English ecclesiastical practice did not impose a universal waiting period, and prescriptive advice tends to moralise against haste rather than specify a set term. Against this backdrop, the play's ten-year ban reads unmistakably as punitive hyperbole.

extinguishing the possibility of change by fixing widowhood in a protracted in-between state.

The asymmetry sharpens when Eugenia's punishment is set beside the male offenders'. Simonides, for instance, is given the chance to reform after his manipulation of the law:

Simonides: Fathers, reverend fathers, as you ever hope to have good sons and heirs, a handful of pity.
[...]
Creon: Well, sir, rise to virtues! We'll bound you now.
You that were too weak yourselves to govern,
By others shall be governed (569-81).

The language casts his transgression as part of a learning process within the existing male-led system, and his cunning is treated as a youthful misstep that can be remedied.¹⁶ Gnothoes's case sharpens the disparity. Labelled as 'the Clown' in the play's speech prefixes, his subplot works as the comic parallel to the main plot's treatment of the decree: his violations and open manipulation of the law far exceed Eugenia's, yet the generic conventions of the clown role absorb his transgressions into farce, and his punishment is comparatively mild, amounting to nothing more than a return to his first wife. His closing lament – "All hopes dashed, the clerk's duty's lost, venter gone, my second wife divorced, and (which is worst) the old one come back again" (528-30) – reads as humorous resignation rather than moral reckoning. It is clear that both men exploit the law as systematically as Eugenia, but their offences are dismissed as momentary lapses, while hers are treated as a dangerous and socially threatening insight.

¹⁶ Contemporary educational treatises reinforce this assumption. Roger Ascham's *The Schoolmaster* (1570), for instance, argued that young men's intellectual errors stemmed from inexperience rather than fundamental incapacity, calling for correction rather than suppression. The play's treatment of Simonides echoes this model, framing his opportunism as an immature expression of legitimate masculine reasoning to be redirected, not punished.

Eugenia alone faces erasure through indefinite social suspension because she demonstrates that women can think strategically, understand the mechanisms of power, and act by calculation rather than from impulse. Tellingly, the Duke does not refute her reasoning; he rewrites the rules instead, making such reasoning impossible. As a result, unlike the male transgressors of the law, who are merely disciplined and reabsorbed, Eugenia is obliterated: she vanishes after protesting her punishment, as if too disruptive even to appear onstage – thus excluded from confrontation, denied return, and barred from the comic closure that reconciles others. Her last words are a refusal: “Of all the rest, I’ll not be judg’d by her” (332) – rejecting Hippolita’s authority to the end. The play gives her no exit direction, no farewell, no stage business. Gnothoes is granted an elaborate comic lament that allows him to process his defeat publicly and remain onstage through the final resolution; Simonides kneels, pleads, and is forgiven; even the Cook and Butler speak. Eugenia, by contrast, is written out not only of the social order, but also of the play itself. The stage enforces what the Duke’s sentence prescribes: silence.

However, the void she leaves is quickly filled by Hippolita, whom the Duke identifies specifically as “wife of Cleanthes” (V.i.330), defining her entirely through relational identity and installing her as the embodiment of the restored patriarchal order. The Duke interprets Hippolita’s fainting at the sight of her father-in-law’s return as a sign of virtue – “One faints for spleen and anger; she, for grace” (339). Bodily weakness becomes the token of moral strength, while strategic female wit can only be read as corruption.

This resolution works because *The Old Law* is a tragicomedy – despite the 1656 edition’s designation of it as an “Excellent Comedy” – and tragicomedy allows for precisely this kind of suspension. Tragedy would have granted Eugenia a proper death scene that acknowledged her wit even in punishment; comedy would have offered her reintegration into society, usually through marriage or another conventional closure. Tragicomedy, by contrast, permits a suspended resolution, which, in this case, enables the Duke’s sentence. Eugenia is not killed, nor forgiven, nor married off; she is simply frozen in place. The play



itself articulates this doubleness directly: Gnothoes observes that “one goes out to wedding, another goes to hanging” (87-88) and that the two are formally alike. In *Epire*, comic and tragic endings are interchangeable for everyone except Eugenia, who receives an ending that is neither. Her real offence, then, is not the incontinence alleged by the Duke (V.i.329) – a charge the play allows its male characters to embody freely – but the intelligence that exposed the law’s loopholes. Thus, the Duke’s closing couplet – “The good needs fear no law; / It is his safety, and the bad man’s awe” (623-24) – reasserts a rigid moral order that leaves no room for Eugenia’s ambivalent position. The couplet traps her between guilt and virtue, and freezes her on the edge of the movement “from death to life, the past to the future, and tragedy to comedy” (Rose 1988, 159, qtd. in Kimura 2023, 157). She is prevented from crossing the threshold she tried to manipulate; what she perceived as agency is, in the end, reclaimed as control. For a moment, Eugenia envisions what a different dramaturgy written by female wit might look like; but *The Old Law* is not ready for such a script, and tragicomedy ensures it never gets performed.

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Empathy Unbound:

gli Albori dell'Antispecismo nella Dieta Naturale

di Percy Bysshe Shelley

Carmen Luciano

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Abstract

Percy Bysshe Shelley è fra gli autori più conosciuti, noti, studiati e stimati della seconda generazione dei poeti del Romanticismo inglese. La sua vasta produzione scritta – un ampio lascito d'eredità culturale a cui dà vita nella sua itinerante, breve esistenza – oltre a contemplare opere celebri e notevolmente apprezzate che dimorano nelle librerie e nelle biblioteche di tutto il mondo, ha accolto anche testi di utilità sociale dalla visione 'ecocentrica', ancora del tutto attuali grazie all'influente messaggio che veicolano. La lunga Nota 17 di *Queen Mab*, che il poeta ampliò nel *pamphlet A Vindication of Natural Diet*, e il successivo saggio *On the Vegetable System of Diet*, le cui stesure avvengono attorno al terzo lustro dell'Ottocento, sono testi rimasti spesso in penombra. Uniti dal leitmotiv della difesa dell'alimentazione vegetale e dalle ragioni etiche, morali, sociali e politiche collegate al non consumo di corpi animali, questi saggi sono ancora oggi poco conosciuti, o – quando presi in oggetto – trattati senza tenere sufficientemente in considerazione il sentimento principe che li caratterizza: l'empatia. In questo articolo, basato su un'attenta ricerca condotta a livello accademico, s'intende mettere in risalto la sensibilità di Shelley verso coloro che egli definisce *fellow animals* e che decide di non mangiare sin dalla giovane età, nonché le ragioni 'protoantispeciste' che risiedono alla base dei suoi scritti in difesa di tutte le creature del pianeta.

Keywords: veganismo; diritti animali; etica; empatia; dieta naturale; antispecismo.

Quando si parla di ‘antispecismo’, neologismo coniato attorno al primo decennio degli anni 2000 ed entrato ufficialmente nei vocabolari nel primo ventennio¹, si fa riferimento a un pensiero e ad un movimento che si oppone allo ‘specismo’, ossia alla convinzione che la specie umana sia superiore alle altre, tanto da poterne disporre a piacimento, arbitrandone la vita e le libertà, oltre a sceglierne – in base ai profitti desiderati – la motivazione e la durata della loro permanenza al mondo, imponendone infine la morte. La visione ‘ecocentrica’, che pone al centro di tutto la vita in ogni sua forma, in opposizione all’antropocentrismo che predilige l’essere umano, è parte integrante di questo movimento sociale, politico e culturale, secondo il quale non esistono differenze fra esseri umani e non-umani. Tale pensiero è strettamente collegato inoltre al ‘veganismo’², movimento diramatosi dal ‘vegetarianismo’ nel 1944: assieme ad esso, infatti, promuove l’idea che gli animali non siano cibo, bensì creature senzienti meritevoli di rispetto, favorendo uno stile alimentare basato su soli cibi di origine vegetale e diffondendo un *modus vivendi* empatico e non crudele.

Se il secolo attuale è caratterizzato da una fiorente lotta determinata alla conquista del riconoscimento dei diritti animali (basti pensare alla nascita delle prime associazioni animaliste e più recentemente all’apertura di ‘santuari’ e rifugi di creature salvate dallo sfruttamento e dalla macellazione a livello globale) non può non essere dovuto al terreno fertile nel quale in epoche precedenti sono stati gettati i semi di un cambiamento radicale, ad opera d’una ‘egregora’ di persone dalla spiccata sensibilità. Percy Bysshe Shelley, sebbene il suo prezioso contributo in merito sia stato a lungo trascurato, ha fatto parte di quelle persone dai tratti ‘antispecisti *ante litteram*’.

Quando fra il 1813 e il 1815 pubblica il *pamphlet A Vindication of Natural Diet* in difesa dell’alimentazione vegetale, estensione della Nota 17 della sua discussa opera *Queen Mab*, l’interesse sociale verso uno stile alimentare che rifiutava il consumo di animali era già ampiamente diffuso da decenni, tanto da aver conquistato anche lui sin da adolescente. Il

¹ In Italia la consacrazione lessicografica è avvenuta nel 2019 con l’inserimento del termine nel vocabolario *Treccani*.

² Il neologismo *vegan* fu coniato nel 1944 attraverso un processo di *middle-clipping* dal termine *vegetarian* da Donald Watson ed Elsie Shrigley, fondatori della *Vegan Society* inglese.



giovane poeta infatti beneficia dell'influsso positivo di autori precedenti, che si erano espressi con pubblicazioni a favore di quella che veniva definita *cool diet*. Testi che egli consulta e cita nel suddetto elaborato. Fra questi, Plutarco, con i suoi scritti in lingua greca sul mangiare carne, il giacobino John Oswald (1760-1793) con la sua opera tardo-settecentesca, incentrata sull'empatia, intitolata *The Cry of Nature; or, An Appeal to Mercy and to Justice, on Behalf of the Persecuted Animals* (1791), e Joseph Ritson (1752-1803), antiquario, con il suo *An Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food, as a Moral Duty* (1802). Shelley gode della positiva influenza anche di due medici, suoi contemporanei, coi quali allaccia un legame di amicizia, e che frequenta personalmente durante alcuni anni di vita trascorsi con accanto Harriet Westbrook, sua prima compagna: Dr William Lambe (1765-1847), autore – fra i vari volumi pubblicati – di testi scientifici sulla correlazione fra consumo di animali e malattie fisiche, e del Dottor John Frank Newton (1767-1837) che pubblica *The Return to Nature; or, a Defence of the Vegetable Regimen* (1811) e che sostiene l'importanza del consumo di alimenti vegetali abbinati a sola acqua pura.

La pubblicazione della prima opera shelleyana in difesa dell'alimentazione vegetale, che egli definisce e ritiene naturale per la specie umana, avviene successivamente l'aver abbracciato in prima persona tale regime alimentare, in uno dei momenti più significativi trascorsi distante dalla famiglia. Il severo padre, Sir Timothy Shelley, avrebbe voluto farlo internare (cfr. Hogg 1858a, 32) in una *private mad-house* a seguito dell'espulsione dalla prestigiosa Università di Oxford, subita per aver fatto circolare, nel 1811, un testo scritto assieme all'amico Thomas Jefferson Hogg intitolato *The Necessity of Atheism*, ritenuto oltraggioso verso la morale cattolica dai dirigenti dell'Ateneo del tempo.

Hogg, che più avanti nel 1858 diventa autore di una ricca biografia dedicata a Shelley, regala una testimonianza preziosa, e forse unica per i suoi contenuti d'informazioni sulle scelte alimentari del poeta, principalmente attribuite dai critici non alla sua empatia bensì a ragioni salutarie o politiche. "We have forsworn meat, and adopted the Pythagorean system. About a fortnight has elapsed since the change, and we do not find ourselves any worse... we are delighted with it" (Westbrook in Clark 1939, 70), scrive in una lettera Harriet

Westbrook il 14 marzo 1812 all'amica Elizabeth Hitchener, per spiegarle che lei e il giovane poeta hanno abbracciato l'alimentazione definita 'pitagoriana' qualche decennio prima della nascita del neologismo *vegetarian*. Shelley invece, a Hogg, in una lettera datata 27 dicembre dello stesso anno, rivela che "my health is much improved by it" (Shelley 1964, 347).

In *A Vindication of Natural Diet*, testo rimasto per molto tempo relegato ai margini della sua produzione scritta e solo recentemente approfondito da critici contemporanei, dando esempio di capacità argomentativa da libero pensatore, Shelley affronta il tema del non consumo di corpi animali, e dunque del rifiuto della *blood diet*, toccando varie argomentazioni: morali, sociali, politiche, ambientali, ma principalmente etiche. Introducendo la figura mitologica di Prometeo, che avrebbe portato il fuoco agli esseri umani, il poeta spiega che questo elemento naturale fu utilizzato in modo improprio per ammorbidire il *rigor mortis* dei corpi e renderli masticabili per la dentatura umana che, a suo dire, basandosi su studi di anatomia comparata, ben differisce da quella dei veri predatori carnivori. Secondo Shelley, che come è stato già espresso, beneficia degli studi e dell'influenza positiva del dottor John Frank Newton (egli, assieme all'intera famiglia composta da diciassette persone di ogni età, testa i vantaggi dell'alimentazione vegetale dando inizio a un esperimento della durata di tre anni), del dottor William Lambe e dei testi di Plutarco, questi *unnatural appetites* conducono l'umanità a corruzione fisica e mentale, che porta alla malattia e all'infelicità. Argomentando dal punto di vista socio-politico, Shelley afferma che alimentarsi con le carni degli animali a cui viene negata la vita significava sprecare risorse in termini di materie prime vegetali coltivate e disponibilità del suolo, ma anche nutrire un certo atteggiamento prevaricatorio che sfocia in comportamenti immorali verso altre etnie e popolazioni, per rivalità commerciali e ricerca di vantaggi economici.

The quantity of nutritious vegetable matter, consumed in fattening the carcase of an ox, would afford ten times the sustenance, undepraving indeed, and incapable of generating disease, if gathered immediately from the bosom of the earth. The most fertile districts of the habitable globe are now actually cultivated by men for animals, at a delay and waste of aliment absolutely incapable of calculation. (Shelley 1988a, 87)

La conclusione del saggio *A Vindication of Natural Diet* viene redatta da Shelley quasi come un suggerimento medico in difesa di quelli che definiva *fellow animals*, a tutela della loro vita e anche della salute umana: “Never take any substance into the stomach that once had life” (Shelley 1988a, 90).

Se in questo primo saggio che promuove la nutrizione vegetale come dieta naturale umana, adatta a ogni stadio d’età, troviamo l’empatia come ragione fra le ragioni per cessare di mangiare animali, nel secondo componimento *On the Vegetable System of Diet* – testo ancora più raro, riaffiorato attorno al 1930 – Shelley cerca di risvegliare in chi legge la compassione. Egli definisce gli animali – che l’essere umano a suo avviso consuma come cibo in maniera del tutto innaturale e controproducente per la propria salute – al pari di povere creature sottomesse a un ‘contaminante’ dominio umano. Esistenze caratterizzate da sentimenti e relazioni sociali che vengono annichiliti in nome del profitto. Creature che inoltre, depauperate delle proprie caratteristiche etologiche frutto di secoli di perfezionamento dettato dalla naturale evoluzione, diventano esistenze infelici alla mercé delle malattie, la cui morte viene anticipata solo dal coltello del macellaio. Shelley argomenta la sua posizione prendendo come esempio il maiale e la pecora, risultato di allevamento e coercizione, mettendoli a paragone con il cinghiale e la capra selvatica, due animali forti e fieri. Inoltre, denuncia gli orrori della macellazione degli animali ‘da cortile’, senza dimenticare la sofferenza di quelli acquatici gettati vivi in acqua bollente:

Sows big with young are indeed no longer stamped upon until they die, and sucking pigs roasted alive; but lobsters are slowly boiled [to death] and express by their inarticulate cries the dreadful agony they endure. Chickens are mutilated and imprisoned until they fatten, calves are bled to death that their flesh may appear white: and a certain horrible process of torture furnishes brawn for the gluttonous repasts with which Christians celebrate the anniversary of their Saviour’s birth.– What beast of prey compels its victim to undergo such protracted, such severe and such degrading torments? (Shelley 1988b, 94)

Per Shelley, nessun’altra bestia predatrice condanna le sue vittime a subire tormenti così dilungati e atroci quanto l’essere umano, che ritiene per natura un animale frugivoro. In



aggiunta, come già indicato da John Oswald nel suo saggio menzionato *The Cry of Nature* da cui egli trae spunto per la stesura dei propri testi, il poeta evidenzia come i macellai siano noti per la loro violenza, nonché per la loro sadica capacità di 'scherzare con la sacralità della vita': per tale ragione al suo tempo erano interdetti dal partecipare attivamente al giudizio di esseri umani sottoposti a giudizio in occasione di processi. L'invito che rivolge a lettrici e lettori è quello di abbandonare il consumo di corpi senza esitazione, dando all'alimentazione vegetale un'opportunità, in nome del nobile principio della giustizia nei confronti di quelle creature che egli definisce *brethren* (cfr. Morton 1994, 75). *On the Vegetable System of Diet* viene concluso dal poeta con pensiero emblema della sua forte empatia: sarebbe meglio per un essere senziente non nascere affatto, che esistere per patire la sofferenza più assoluta (cfr. Shelley 1988b, 96). Una frase lapidaria che, già da sola, è in grado di confutare ogni tesi sostenuta circa la mera ragione salutistica alla base delle sue scelte alimentari.

I componimenti di Shelley in difesa dell'alimentazione vegetale, e dunque degli animali, quando non omessi nelle collezioni delle sue opere, sono stati per decenni oggetto di analisi interpretative volte alla ricerca delle motivazioni che lo avevano portato a un cambiamento così significativo. Alcuni critici letterari sostengono la tesi che il poeta abbia abbracciato tale regime alimentare per questioni meramente politiche e sociali, in quanto essere 'pitagorici' era una sorta di 'status' ai suoi tempi; altri, avanzano l'ipotesi che la ragione del rifiuto di consumare corpi di altre specie risieda nella sua paura di ammalarsi, o per sfuggire a malattie veneree come la sifilide (cfr. Jones 2016, 79). Interpretazioni, quelle appena elencate, che poco si accorgono dell'evidente sensibilità di Shelley. I reali sentimenti che hanno mosso questo autore e giovane uomo a prendere le difese dei *fellow animals*, scegliendo – nonostante le aspre critiche di alcuni amici e conoscenti – di alimentare sé stesso e i suoi figli con cibi vegetali possono essere rintracciati in un'approfondita lettura della biografia che l'amico Thomas Jefferson Hogg dedica al poeta. Nei due volumi editi e pubblicati nel 1858, che sarebbero dovuti essere seguiti da un terzo e un quarto volume se Sir Timothy Shelley non si fosse opposto per ostacolare il ricordo dell'incompreso figlio,

sono riportati momenti di vita e avvenimenti salienti ai quali non è stato dato grande rilievo dalla critica. Hogg dedica un copioso numero di pagine all'alimentazione dello stimato Shelley, chiarendo che, occorre ribadirlo, egli non riferisce mai apertamente ciò che lo porta a cambiare regime alimentare. Probabilmente, come messo in evidenza nello studio di chi scrive (cfr. Luciano 2024), ciò avviene per divergenza in termini di livello di sensibilità rispetto a chi lo circonda: lo stesso amico biografo dichiara di essersi avvicinato all'alimentazione vegetale partecipando alle squisite cene degli amici che l'avevano adottata con convinzione, pur continuando a praticare per piacere personale l'uccisione degli animali:

I sought exercise and amusement in shooting, and I devoted much time to that diversion, as I did for several years. I shot, during this season, game which I was not to eat. My way of gaining an appetite was in direct opposition to my mode of satisfying it. A striking incongruity – a patent contradiction; and such my existence – at once blood-thirsty and bloodless – would certainly have been, if I had taken up my line of feeding on the principles of Pythagoras, or of the Brahmins, or perhaps upon any principles whatever. But I was commonly contented to leave their fine, fixed principles to wiser heads than my own; to slay or to scare partridges from sunrise to sunset, for three or four days in every week; and to return home at dusk and refresh and restore myself, first, with vegetables and fruit, and finally with copious potations of tea. (Hogg 1858b, 469)

I due volumi che Hogg scrive come omaggio all'amico Shelley, che ripudia la caccia tanto da aver convinto lo stimato Edward Williams (col quale trova la morte, assieme al giovane Charles Vivien, nel mar Tirreno a bordo della goletta Ariel l'8 luglio 1822) a sospendere la sua passione per la *big game*, caccia agli animali di grossa taglia in voga in India, sono ricchi di aneddoti che avvalorano la tesi di una scelta alimentare vegetale consapevole e fortemente motivata dal sentimento di empatia verso chi viene ingiustamente consumato.

Hogg, che ha modo di vivere da vicino la quotidianità del poeta frequentando assieme a lui l'Università di Oxford, lo rappresenta a lettrici e lettori come un ragazzo sensibile del tutto insofferente alle ingiustizie, sia verso le persone che verso gli animali. Fra le pagine dei due volumi pubblicati dall'editore Edward Moxton è possibile venire a conoscenza di

momenti di vita quotidiana e di azioni in difesa delle altre specie poco, o talvolta mai, ricordati nei testi dedicati al poeta.

Un esempio attinente è rintracciabile nella situazione in cui Shelley, durante il periodo universitario, critica un ragazzo che sta picchiando selvaggiamente un asino sfruttato per trasportare la sua merce (cfr. Hogg 1858a, 120), o nel suo fuggire distante, coprendosi le orecchie con le mani, alla presenza di un commerciante ambulante desideroso di vendere molluschi da poco uccisi ed intento a gridare “Mackarel, fresh mackarel!”, “muscles! lilywhite muscles!” (Hogg 1858a, 296-297). Altri momenti di difesa degli animali emergono in episodi raccontati in lettere e corrispondenza privata: anche questi, spesso omessi o tralasciati.

Quando Shelley si trova a visitare la Campania, in Italia, si oppone fermamente all’uso dei cani in esperimenti condotti per i visitatori alla ‘Grotta del Cane’ di Agnano (NA), come ricordato da Elisabetta Marino nell’articolo *I Coniugi Shelley in Campania* (cfr. Marino 2011, 106). Gli animali erano impiegati per intrattenere i passanti e trarne così guadagno dallo spettacolo offerto: al pubblico era mostrato che modo degli esseri senzienti perdessero i sensi e fossero prossimi alla morte respirando le esalazioni caratteristiche della grotta. I cani venivano poi ‘risvegliati’ dalla condizione comatosa e immersi nelle acque del mare adiacente, non senza conseguenze in termini di salute e condizioni psicofisiche. Shelley, pur incuriosito dalla Grotta del Cane che attirava molti turisti, si rifiuta di assistere allo spettacolo di sottomissione animale e non permette agli intrattenitori di tormentare alcuna creatura. Difatti, scrive il 25 febbraio 1819 all’amico Thomas Love Peacock:

The Grotto del Cane, too, we saw, because other people see it; but would not allow the dog to be exhibited in torture for our curiosity. The poor little animals stood moving their tails in a slow and dismal manner, as if perfectly resigned to their condition, a cur-like emblem of voluntary servitude. The effect of the vapour, which extinguishes a torch, is to cause suffocation at last, through a process which makes the lungs feel as if they were torn by sharp points within. So a surgeon told us, who tried the experiment on himself. (Shelley 1883, 104)

Appare evidente che per un amante della libertà come Shelley, il cui motto è “Above all things, Liberty” (Hogg 1858a, 203), che già all’età di diciotto anni matura una capacità

riflessiva profonda³, il pensiero che degli esseri senzienti perdano ogni diritto appaia intollerabile. Per tale ragione ha occasione di restituire la libertà ad alcune creature nelle quali si imbatte e alle quali era stata sottratta: “Indeed, Shelley is reported to have purchased crayfish from a street vendor only to release them into the Thames (Dowden 1887), which demonstrates his concern over animal welfare” (Jones 2016, 21), si legge in un testo di Michael Owen Jones. Oltre ai gamberi d’acqua dolce, liberati nel Tamigi, il giovane poeta durante la sua vita spezza le catene della prigionia a uno scoiattolo catturato da un improvvisato venditore a Chamonix. Questa liberazione avviene assieme a Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, con la quale è in viaggio. John Buxton, in *Byron and Shelley. The History of a Friendship*, riporta: “In one of the villages they passed through they were offered a squirrel in a cage, and, in order to rescue it, Shelley bought it. The frightened little creature, which had been caught only three days before, was given to Mary to carry. It promptly bit her finger so that she dropped it. However, they caught it again somehow, and this time entrusted it to Shelley” (Buxton 1968, 31-32). Della creatura restituita nuovamente alla natura, Mary scrive in una lettera: “It appeared at length resigned to its fate when we put it on a railing, where it paused an instant, wondering where it was, and then scampered up its native trees” (Shelley in Buxton 1968, 32).

La forte sensibilità di Shelley verso ogni creatura non si estende solo sulle specie più grandi, come quelle di cui si è parlato fino ad ora in questo scritto. Il poeta appare capace di rispettare ogni forma di vita, incluse quelle più piccole, tutt’oggi ritenute poco significative o addirittura ‘infestanti’ tanto da venire eliminate senza pietà. La sua empatia ‘creaturale’, oltre a renderlo così umile da paragonarsi a un *glow worm* nella poesia messo accanto al *sun* che è per lui l’amico Lord Byron, lo porta a scrivere nella sua nota *The Sensitive Plant*, proprio riguardo agli insetti: “And all killing insects and gnawing worms, And things of obscene and unlovely forms, She bore in a basket of Indian woof, Into the rough woods far aloof, In

³ In una lettera datata 10 dicembre 1810 scrive, da Field Place: “I think it is to the benefit of society to destroy the opinions which can annihilate the dearest of its ties” (Shelley 1964, 27).



a basket, of grasses and wild flowers full, The freshest her gentle hands could pull For the poor banished insects, whose intent, Although they did ill, was innocent” (Shelley 1899, 39).

Alla protagonista dalle gentili mani del suo componimento, che pubblica nel 1820, fa accompagnare gli insetti che mangiano i fiori verso cespugli distanti, senza far negare loro la vita. Con ogni probabilità, questo è configurabile in un accorgimento-specchio del sensibile animo dello stesso autore. La sua attenzione estesa anche nei riguardi degli insetti è rintracciabile in una sua lettera scritta fra Bagni di Lucca e Firenze, datata 20 agosto 1818 e indirizzata a Mary: egli riferisce alla moglie che nelle dimore sovente non trovava zanzariere, capaci di tenere distanti le zanzare estive che gli ronzavano nelle orecchie durante il sonno: “The only thing that incommodes me are the gnats at night, who roar like so many humming tops in one’s ear, and I do not always find zanzariere” (Shelley 1883, 43). Si potrebbe affermare che *although they did ill, he knew they were innocent*.

Analizzate le sue tre opere in difesa della dieta vegetale (Nota 17 di *Queen Mab, A Vindication of Natural Diet, On the Vegetable System of Diet*) con tutte le ragioni da lui elencate per cessare di cibarsi dei resti dei *fellow animals*, valutati gli aneddoti vissuti in prima persona e raccontati dall’amico Thomas Jefferson Hogg nella biografia dedicata a Shelley pubblicata nel 1858, ed approfondita la corrispondenza privata del poeta, emerge la figura di un giovane uomo mosso negli intenti e non dall’ego, non dalla necessità di guarire da presunte malattie o per mere ragioni salutistiche (non a caso, sebbene egli sostiene assieme al dottor John Frank Newton l’importanza di alimentarsi con cibi vegetali accompagnati da sola acqua pura, durante le cene con ospiti presso la sua dimora a tavola il vino è presente, ma non i cibi di origine animale⁴), bensì da una forte compassione che lo ha portato alla stesura di poesie e testi caratterizzati da notevole sensibilità. Un poeta, un essere umano così vicino alla natura, non solo da riuscire a sublimarla nei suoi componimenti poetici, ma anche da difenderne ogni sua creatura nei saggi pubblicati in un’epoca che condivide con la nostra

⁴ “Flesh, fowl, fish, game never appeared; nor eggs bodily in their individual capacity, nor butter by the gross: the two latter articles were admitted in cookery it is true, but as sparingly as possibly, and their presence was provisional, interlocutory, under protest, as culinary aids not approved [...]. Cheese was under the ban – anathematized, excommunicated” (Hogg in Paterson-Morgan 2016, 102).

una certa ostilità verso chi vive in modo empatico. Considerato tutto ciò, Shelley può essere ritenuto un precursore non solo dell'attuale movimento 'antispecista', ma anche pioniere di uno stile di vita definito oggi *cruelty-free* e *vegan* che riconosce agli animali il loro diritto all'esistenza, e non li relega nel gradino più basso di una fittizia, immaginaria scala gerarchica d'importanza frutto di costruzioni sociali umane. Il suo esempio e i suoi testi hanno sicuramente contribuito in modo significativo a rendere fertile il terreno per lo sbocciare della *Vegetarian Society* attorno alla seconda metà dell'Ottocento, e della *Vegan Society*, diramatasi dalla prima, un secolo dopo. Ciò è confermato dal cambiamento alimentare abbracciato da George Bernard Shaw e da Mahatma Gandhi, che ebbero modo di leggere i suoi profondi ed illuminanti scritti.

In conclusione, il biocentrismo, o 'ecocentrismo', che affiora nelle parole e nei pensieri del poeta, dimostra il suo grande rispetto per la vita in ogni sua forma. Rispetto che riesce a scuotere ancora oggi le coscienze di chi si avvicina alla lettura del suo lascito letterario e poetico, in una società tutt'ora ben distante da quella da lui vaticinata in *Queen Mab*, nella quale nessuno si nutre più a discapito dell'esistenza altrui. "I wish no living thing to suffer pain" (Shelley 1820, 34): questa celebre esternazione⁵, inserita nel suo capolavoro *Prometheus Unbound*, non può essere altro che il motore del tatto, della compassione e della sensibilità che lo hanno contraddistinto nelle sue scelte. Quando parliamo di Shelley, dunque, in qualsiasi contesto ed ambito, è opportuno ricordarlo non solo come un poeta di rilievo dalle odi alle meraviglie visibili e invisibili del mondo, come quella del vento occidentale, ma soprattutto come un libero pensatore capace di non fingere di non sentire *the cry of Nature*. Un uomo capace di creare con le parole pura bellezza scritta, che si è sottratto dal distruggere le multiformi, tangibili e ineguagliabili opere d'arte realizzate dalla natura.

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⁵ Frase a cui è stato dato ampio valore da Franco Lonati, cfr. Shelley 2018.



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*The Paradigm of Silence in Diasporic Fiction:
The Case of Abdulrazak Gurnah*

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Abstract

Silence occupies a central position in diasporic fiction, where experiences of displacement, trauma, and fractured belonging often resist direct articulation. In Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *The Last Gift* (2011), silence emerges as a complex narrative strategy through which migrant subjects negotiate loss, fragmented identities, and postcolonial shame. The two novels portray characters whose lives are shaped by omissions, fabricated stories, and selective acts of remembrance, revealing how traumatic memory remains suspended between remembering and forgetting. In Gurnah's fiction, storytelling and reticence coexist, while the creation of imaginary homelands exposes the emotional precariousness of migrant existence. Ultimately, the tension between what is narrated and what remains unsaid reveals how postcolonial belonging and memory are continually reshaped by trauma, shame, and omission.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah; *Admiring Silence*; *The Last Gift*; postcolonial shame; silence.

“The origin of a story is always an absence”.
Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002, 230)

Diasporic belonging and fragmented memories

Memory occupies a central position in diaspora studies, where attachments to the place of origin are often regarded as a defining feature of displaced communities. As William Safran observes, “Diasporas retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements” (2007). Yet such recollections are rarely stable or unproblematic. To employ Salman Rushdie’s seminal notion, “imaginary homelands” emerge from the interplay of loss, remembrance, and idealised visions of one’s native country, often generating tensions and contradictions in diasporic self-representation (1991). Accordingly, diasporic fiction frequently explores complex forms of belonging that transcend fixed national frameworks and challenge coherent notions of identity (Frank 2008, 18-19).

The dialectic between home and unhomeliness permeates much exilic and diasporic writing, illuminating experiences of estrangement and precarious belonging. Migrant narratives often foreground what Avtar Brah defines as “homing desire” (1996): not the simple wish to return home, but the search for forms of attachment beyond the idea of origin as a stable point of reference. As Brah observes: “Diasporic identities are at once local and global. They are networks of transnational identifications encompassing ‘imagined’ and ‘encountered’ communities” (192). Language reveals the connections between emotions and space by transforming places into affective landscapes shaped by memory. Recent work in affective geographies has further highlighted the ways in which place is invested with emotional meaning (Berberich, Campbell and Hudson 2013). Drawing on Yi-Fu Tuan’s reflections on place attachment (1974), diasporic experience may be understood through the interplay of distance, loss, and memory. Diaspora consequently entails an ambivalent relationship to home, experienced simultaneously as presence and absence, belonging and dislocation.

Migrations between East Africa and Great Britain, as well as movements within the Indian Ocean world, are at the core of Abdulrazak Gurnah's narratives. The Nobel Prize-winning Zanzibari-born British writer recreates the geographies of the Swahili coast through narratives shaped by mobility, loss, and historical transformation (Hodapp 2024). Throughout his work, storytelling and silence operate as complementary narrative modes through which characters confront traumatic pasts, negotiate belonging, and make sense of displacement. Rather than signifying mere absence or muteness, silence functions as a repository of unspoken histories, a response to trauma, and a means of mediating the tensions between past and present. In this way, Gurnah's fiction exposes both the burdens of colonial and postcolonial histories and the limits of language in articulating them.

It is especially on Gurnah's employment of silence, and on the dialectic between speech and reticence deriving from migrants' post-traumatic conditions, that this contribution focuses. As major trauma scholars have argued (LaCapra 1994; Caruth 1996), traumatic experiences are marked by a constant oscillation between remembering and forgetting: painful memories are suppressed in order to survive, yet they repeatedly resurface in fragmented and disordered forms. Silence consequently becomes a crucial mechanism for coping with trauma and displacement. For characters uprooted from their homelands and forced to inhabit unfamiliar and often hostile environments, language itself may become a source of alienation rather than communication. Gurnah's paradigm of silence may also be related to Gayatri Spivak's reflections on the silencing of subaltern voices within hegemonic discourses (1988). Silence may function not only as a form of marginalisation, but also as a strategy of self-preservation and resistance.

In *By the Sea* (2001), one of Gurnah's most celebrated works, Saleh Omar's initial muteness upon arriving in England offers a particularly revealing example of how silence and language intersect in Gurnah's fiction. Saleh's silence is not an inability to speak English; it is a form of withdrawal that functions as a protective shell against the overwhelming impact of displacement and loss. Saleh states "I knew the meaning of silence,

the danger of words” (12), acknowledging the ambivalent power of language, which may both reveal and conceal traumatic experiences. Focusing on *By the Sea* and *Desertion* (2005), Helff (1999) argues that communication, multilingualism, and the various forms of translatability that emerge across cultures are central to Gurnah’s literary project (162). His characters inhabit multilingual and transcultural spaces in which reticence is not excluded but acquires meaning and agency. In Gurnah’s works, silence assumes multiple forms, ranging from colonial oppression and postcolonial shame to the difficulty of articulating experience, as well as to narrative strategies based on omission, fabrication, and intertextuality. The coexistence of English, Swahili, and Arabic further underscores the importance of translation and cultural mediation within the contact zones of the Indian Ocean area.

The autobiographical dimension of Gurnah’s fiction is essential to understanding his narrative strategies. In conversation with Susheila Nasta (2004), Gurnah reflects on the ways memory is transformed through narrative:

You don’t always remember accurately and you begin to recall things you didn’t even know you remembered. Sometimes such gaps are filled in so convincingly that they become something ‘real’ as opposed to something constructed. In that way the stories take on a life of their own; they develop their own logic and coherence. (353)

The stories migrants tell are often shaped by acts of reconstruction through which painful experiences of displacement are reworked. Gurnah’s characters display anguish, melancholy, and frustration generated by a condition of suspension between different places, cultures, and temporalities. Their narratives are dictated by the intimate need to renegotiate identity and belonging, while inhabiting “half-lives”: divided existences shaped by separation, loss, and the impossibility of finding a stable sense of belonging either in the homeland or in exile. The desire to reshape painful memories often leads Gurnah’s characters to blur the boundaries between silence, omission, and fabrication, particularly in relation to family histories and the unresolved legacies of the past.

Storytelling, reticence, and concealment

Building on previous readings of silence as both an “unspoken” narrative paradigm (Kaigai 2013) and a form of resistance (Fabris 2012), this article examines how silence in Gurnah’s fiction also articulates postcolonial shame, self-concealment, and the impossibility of fully narrating diasporic experience. According to Kimani Kaigai (2013), the narrative strategies of Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novels *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift* reveal the paradigm of the unspoken, the dynamic foil for a positive signifier (129), in the sense suggested by Stuart Hall (1985). Indeed, drawing upon his personal history as a migrant, Hall suggests that “positively marked terms ‘signify’ because of their position in relation to what is absent, unmarked, the unspoken, the unsayable. The meaning is relational within an ideological system of presences and absences” (109).

As Susan Sontag observes, “silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue” (1964). Rather than signifying mere absence, silence acquires multiple meanings and functions, often deriving its force from the interplay between narration and reticence. At the same time, silence cannot be separated from relations of power. Within dominant Western traditions, speech has frequently been associated with authority and agency, whereas silence has been interpreted as a sign of marginality, passivity, or exclusion. This issue becomes particularly relevant in postcolonial contexts, where, as Spivak (1988) argues, subaltern voices are often mediated or silenced by hegemonic discourses.

Yet in Gurnah’s fiction silence may function not only as a mark of marginalisation, but also as a strategy of self-preservation, concealment, and resistance. It gives expression to the unspoken legacies of colonialism, the burdens of trauma and displacement, and the difficulties of articulating painful or shameful experiences. In both *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *The Last Gift* (2011), silence is closely intertwined with storytelling: omissions, reticence, and fabricated narratives shape the protagonists’ attempts to negotiate memory, belonging,



and selfhood. Meaning consequently emerges not only from what is narrated, but also from what is withheld, requiring readers to reconstruct connections, piece together fragmented stories, and give significance to the gaps that structure the narrative.

Admiring Silence and *The Last Gift* present stories that are complex on two levels: first, because the narrators struggle to articulate traumatic experiences; second, because the voices recounting them are hesitant to disclose family histories. Storytelling in Gurnah's fiction is therefore inseparable from various forms of silence. As Kaigai (2013) observes, silence functions not only as a textual feature but also as a catalyst for interpretation. Meaning emerges through the tension between disclosure and reticence, as readers piece together fragmented narratives and engage with what characters do not, cannot, or refuse to say. Silence thus operates both within the text and beyond it, generating a dialogue between narrative, context, and readers' interpretation (129-130).

Silence appears in the title itself of *Admiring Silence*, derived from Robert Louis Stevenson's *In the South Seas* quoted in the first epigraph.¹ The novel centres on an unnamed narrator who migrates from Zanzibar to Britain, and gradually constructs his life through omissions, fabrications, and partial disclosures. For seventeen years he remains absent from his homeland, maintaining his connection to it largely through the stories he tells his partner Emma and her family, many of which are shaped by his desire for acceptance. The return to Zanzibar ultimately exposes the tensions between narration and concealment that have sustained his diasporic existence.

Questions of silence, family secrets, and self-narration are further developed in *The Last Gift*, which establishes an important intertextual connection with *Admiring Silence* through the narrator's father. A marginal figure in the earlier novel, the protagonist's father re-emerges as Abbas, whose life story becomes central to the later narrative. While the earlier novel focuses on the silences generated by migration and self-fashioning, *The Last*

¹ "He is an admirer of silence in the island; broods over it like a great ear; has spies who report daily; and had rather his subjects sand than talked". R.L. Stevenson, "The King of Apemama", *In the South Seas* (1890).



Gift shifts attention to the concealed histories of the family. Abbas's long silence about his past, his first marriage, and his departure from Zanzibar structures the novel. Decades after settling in England with Maryam, a diabetic crisis leaves him temporarily unable to speak, transforming silence from a voluntary practice of concealment into a physical condition that precipitates the belated narration of his life story.

Admiring Silence and *The Last Gift* share a marked emphasis on storytelling as a way of constructing and reconstructing the characters' lives, yet these stories are full of gaps, silences, half-truths, and lies. The two novels engage with the politics of voices marginalised by dominant narratives, interweaving speech and silence. While *Admiring Silence* relies almost entirely on the first-person voice of its unnamed narrator, *The Last Gift* combines several first-person perspectives with an omniscient narrator, creating a more polyphonic structure. Through these different narrative configurations, Gurnah explores the various forms of silence and silencing that shape both individual lives and family histories, producing a palimpsestic account of subjective experiences.²

In *The Last Gift*, silence is closely connected with hidden histories and the complexities of family relationships shaped by migration. It becomes a force that structures both the narrative and the lives of the characters. One of its most significant manifestations is Abbas's deliberate concealment of his past. For decades, he lives quietly in England with his wife Maryam and his children Jamal and Hanna, without disclosing the circumstances that led him there. This carefully constructed barrier stems from a combination of shame, fear, and the desire to protect both himself and his family from the consequences of earlier choices. The resulting atmosphere of secrecy creates a sense of "apartness" within the family, particularly for Abbas's English-born children, who feel disconnected from their heritage. Hanna expresses a desire for "a story that has a beginning that is tolerable and open, and not one that is tripped with silences" (Gurnah 2011, 44).

² Several of these issues have also been discussed in Cilia (2025).

Abbas's collapse and subsequent aphasia ironically force a confrontation with his long silence. His inability to speak in his final days compels Maryam and his children to confront his troubling silences: "Ba's silences were sometimes dark" (32). The physical silence becomes a catalyst for the unearthing of the past. Furthermore, the silence surrounding Maryam's own history mirrors Abbas's reticence, though it arises from different circumstances. Her reticence derives not from concealment but from the partial and uncertain knowledge of her own past. The anxieties and ambiguities surrounding her early life contribute to the broader atmosphere of withheld histories that permeates the family. Similar feelings affect Jamal and Hanna who, despite having been born and raised in England, experience a persistent sense of displacement and a longing to reconnect with a heritage shrouded in silence. Their situation highlights one of the novel's central concerns: the difficulties faced by second-generation migrants in constructing a coherent sense of self while confronting the gaps, omissions, and unresolved histories inherited from their parents.

Trauma and shame in *Admiring Silence*

Experiences of violence, loss, and displacement often give rise to silences that function both as forms of self-protection and as acknowledgements of the inadequacy of language to convey traumatic experience. Such silences may also emerge between generations, reflecting the difficulty of transmitting painful histories and the enduring impact of colonial legacies. While this pattern recurs throughout Gurnah's fiction, *Admiring Silence* presents a more ambiguous case, in which reticence frequently becomes a deliberate strategy of self-fashioning. In this novel silence is a deliberate choice, a kind of performance. One of the most striking uses of silence is the protagonist's intentional omissions and inventions regarding his past. Arriving in England as a student, he consciously chooses to remain silent about significant aspects of his life in Zanzibar and recreates a simplified narrative for his English acquaintances. This performative silence becomes a fundamental aspect of his



adopted English identity. While he develops a genuine affection for Emma and her family, his inability to fully share his past creates a subtle but persistent barrier. The silences in their conversations, the unspoken questions, and the parts of his life that remain deliberately vague contribute to a sense of incompleteness in their understanding of him. The narrator systematically withholds crucial aspects of his existence from both his English and Zanzibari worlds: “The truth was that I had not written home about Amelia, the other truth was that I had not written home about Emma, either. As far as they were concerned back there in Nativity, neither Emma nor Amelia existed” (Gurnah 1996, 89). Omission and fabrication thus become central strategies in the construction of a diasporic self suspended between different worlds. Indeed, the boundary between lies and silences is often blurred, since acts of deception depend upon the suppression of truth.

The protagonist’s inward reticence is equally significant. As he becomes increasingly detached from Zanzibar, he develops a persistent emotional numbness, avoiding memories, feelings of guilt, and the implications of his decision to remain in exile. Yet the novel also explores the limits of this carefully maintained strategy of concealment. The arrival of his mother’s letters and his eventual return force him to reassess the omissions that have sustained his life abroad and to confront the consequences of displacement.

Postcolonial political tensions are likewise marked by forms of reticence and suppression. Although the narrator remains primarily focused on his personal experience, the novel repeatedly evokes an atmosphere of corruption, intimidation, and latent violence characterising post-revolutionary Zanzibar. He is approached by influential governmental figures who present him as essential to their projects, whose dubious nature he only partially understands. His mother, however, immediately perceives the threat concealed behind their apparent cordiality, warning him: “You don’t know these people [...] They’ve gone crazy with malice. Look at how dry their faces are. God emptied their hearts of pity, *astaghfirullah*” (158). The novel thus presents the postcolonial state itself as a force that discourages open speech, while the narrator’s reluctance to engage with these forms of

political intimidation reflects both anxiety and a desire to distance himself from the troubling legacies of his homeland.

The novel therefore presents the postcolonial state itself as a silencing force, sustained by intimidation, secrecy, and fear. In this respect, Gurnah links the narrator's reticence to the lingering shadows of the Zanzibar Revolution and the legacy of repression that followed it. This atmosphere of intimidation is anticipated by the second epigraph of the novel, drawn from Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* (1177): "Your Self's grown gross, / dog that sleeps and feeds". The image evokes a condition of passivity and self-silencing that reflects the narrator's hesitation to engage with the oppressive climate produced by postcolonial power.

The reluctance to articulate these political realities is closely connected to broader dynamics of postcolonial shame, which permeate both personal and collective experiences. As Courtois (2026) has argued, shame occupies a crucial place in Gurnah's narratives, shaping forms of self-representation, concealment, and reticence.³ Recognising its significance is therefore essential to understanding the function of silence in Gurnah's fiction, as well as in postcolonial literary production more broadly (Attwell, Pes, and Zinato 2019). Emerging from histories of domination and inequality, postcolonial shame often manifests itself as discomfort with one's origins, language, or cultural background, and may result in a reluctance to speak about the past or to fully embrace one's heritage in a social environment shaped by colonial hierarchies.

The protagonist of *Admiring Silence* experiences a submerged sense of shame about his Zanzibari past when confronted with the perceived superiority of English society. As he admits: "The shame was intense for a few minutes but it soon passed and I became used to my lies" (Gurnah 1996, 33). His recourse to mimicry within the often hostile context of Britain represents an attempt to gain voice and agency, but it also entails a profound

³ In his analysis of *Theft*, Courtois reads Badar as an embodiment of internalised postcolonial shame, characterised by a persistent sense of inferiority and dependence inherited from colonial relations of power (2026, para. 21).

dissociation from his social and cultural background (Steiner 2009, 99, 105). At moments, he imagines himself fully integrated into English society: “At times I forgot myself, and I imagined that I looked as they did, and had lived the same life that they had lived. [...] But this was only at times [...] For my alienness was important to all of us – as their alienness was to me” (Gurnah 1996, 61–62). Mimicry thus reveals not only a desire for assimilation, but also an acute awareness of difference.

The experience of forced migration or asylum seeking can be accompanied by feelings of shame, of being unwanted or a burden on the country of arrival. As Courtois (2026) suggests, postcolonial shame often finds expression in forms of concealment, reticence, and fractured self-representation. Shame can lead to silence about one’s past and arouse a desire to become invisible, revealing how colonial legacies continue to shape identities, relationships, and acts of narration. In this context, silence becomes a testimony to the enduring burden of a history marked by colonial domination.

According to Federico Fabris (2012), silence in Gurnah’s fiction may also be understood as a pragmatic act of individual resistance. He argues that *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift* portray characters in conditions of marginalisation and disempowerment who use reticence as a means of resisting oppressive and racist structures. In *Admiring Silence*, however, silence becomes not only a form of resistance but also a space for negotiating identity, allowing the protagonist to counter self-effacement and assert agency. The narrator masks his silences through the stories he tells both himself and others, particularly Emma’s parents, Mr and Mrs Willoughby. These narratives take the form of inventions devised to shield him from the sense of alienation that characterises his life in Britain; at the same time, they reproduce and parody stereotypical representations of colonial migrants, as well as familiar motifs drawn from imperial adventure narratives.

The fact that the protagonist remains unnamed is significant: he is not recognised as a full member of the English community and occupies an uncertain social position:



At times, I felt invisible to them. My voice sounded strange when I spoke in their midst, as if I was speaking in an incomprehensible tongue. I found myself losing track, confusing words, and becoming tongue tied. When they talked about me (or even to me), it felt that they were pitying me, that I was a victim of unavoidable natural forces, a cyclone or a cholera epidemic or an inherited deformity. (Gurnah 1996, 30)

The protagonist's anonymity suggests that he is one among many marginalised subjects, migrants, exiles, and colonial others, whom the narrator ironically evokes as "hubshis, abids, bongo-bongos, say-it-loud-I'm-black-and-I'm-proud victims of starvation and tyranny and disease and unregulated lusts and history, etc." (10). Significantly, the first-person narrative begins with this omission, foregrounding a subjectivity marked by uncertainty, displacement, and an unresolved sense of belonging.

The narrator's reticence is also rooted in personal experiences that precede his migration to Britain. His father's abandonment of the family and his upbringing with a stepfather leave lasting feelings of shame and emotional vulnerability. Many of the narratives he constructs for Emma's family are therefore not simply inventions, but attempts to present his life in a more acceptable and coherent form. By reshaping the past, he seeks both to escape painful memories and to reproduce, often ironically, elements of colonial discourse. Recounting stories about his parents, his friends, and his country, he "suppress[es]", "change[s]" and "fabricate[s]" (62) crucial details of his own experience

The narrator's reliance on storytelling and his increasing entanglement in his own fabrications also reveal the difficulties of articulating the historical legacy of the Indian Ocean world. Unable to explain aspects of his social and cultural background to his English interlocutors, he constructs exaggerated narratives of European benevolence and African backwardness, reproducing and parodying colonial stereotypes. These inventions further reinforce the novel's unreliable narrative texture, a feature that, as Olaussen (2013) observes, links Gurnah's fiction to broader literary representations of the Indian Ocean world (66).

Abandonment is a recurring motif in Gurnah's fiction and plays a crucial role in the dynamics of family life, both at a literal and symbolic level. In *Admiring Silence*, the narrator is marked not only by his father's earlier departure, but also by his own repeated acts of

withdrawal from those closest to him. Like several of Gurnah's protagonists, he inhabits a position that oscillates between leaving and being left behind, revealing the emotional complexity of abandonment and its enduring consequences for both those who depart and those who remain.⁴ At the end of the novel, he does not know how to break the "fragile silence" (Gurnah 1996, 217) that pervades him. In addition to the profound sense of detachment he experiences in England, his ties with his family in Zanzibar remain uncertain and fragile. Zanzibar and England thus become equally inadequate as places of belonging. Having travelled between Africa and Europe in search of a home, he gradually comes to realise that home is not a physical location but an inner condition that must be negotiated rather than recovered. As Mohineet Kaur Boparai (2022) observes, "When he comes to admire silence and being comfortable alone, he has reached home" (96).

Aphasia and family secrets in *The Last Gift*

In *The Last Gift*, silence operates differently than in *Admiring Silence*. Abbas loses the ability to speak after a diabetic crisis. Yet the novel gives access to his thoughts through an omniscient narrator who opens the frame narrative and sets the plot in motion. Although this narrative voice encompasses the story as a whole, focalisation frequently shifts to Abbas's wife and children. Readers are therefore required to reconcile these different perspectives and, from a mosaic of individual stories, construct an inevitably partial understanding of Abbas and the aspects of his life that remain concealed (Kaigai 2013, 133). The novel's multiple focalisation reinforces this process. Abbas's memories, Maryam's recollections, and the perspectives of Jamal and Hanna never fully coincide, producing a polyphonic narrative in which no single voice can claim complete authority. Family history emerges only through the juxtaposition of partial and often incomplete accounts.

⁴ In *Desertion* (2005), as signalled by the title, abandonment operates at both an intimate and a historical level, shaping family relations, love affairs, and the legacies of colonial encounters.



Readers learn how painful Abbas finds the loss of speech caused by his illness, and we are told that, once he recovers his voice, he is “no longer able to contain his eagerness to tell” (Gurnah 2011, 149). Although he had previously claimed that he remained silent because “there was no one to tell anyway” (152), he eventually records his life story on tape, overcoming his fear of verbal self-disclosure. Abbas’s trajectory is marked by a transition from voluntary silence to pathological muteness, a shift that ultimately compels him to confront memories he had long attempted to suppress. The tape occupies an ambivalent position within the narrative: it is both the silent recipient of his confession and the medium through which his story can be transmitted to others. In this way, the recorded testimony becomes a form of belated storytelling through which Abbas seeks to come to terms with his past. As the narrator observes at the beginning of the novel, he “had left things for too long and there was no one to blame but himself” (1). The confession is therefore inseparable from feelings of guilt, particularly those arising from his decision to abandon his first wife, his unborn child, and the family. This tendency towards abandonment, together with the silence it generates, recurs throughout Gurnah’s fiction and shapes the emotional lives of both those who leave and those who remain.⁵

The protagonist of *The Last Gift*, although he has kept silent voluntarily for almost four decades, finds himself physically unable to speak. Abbas’s silence oscillates between present and past, originating in the act of abandonment that shaped the rest of his life: “One day, long before the troubles, he slipped away without saying a word to anyone and never went back” (1). There is a marked irony in this formulation: the apparently simple act of leaving “without saying a word” generates a silence that will dominate Abbas’s life for more than forty years. His prolonged reticence is not simply the result of forgetfulness but a deliberate attempt to keep painful memories at bay. As he eventually acknowledges: “I thought I would keep quiet about all that for as long as I could. I thought if I started to talk I would

⁵ Some of the issues discussed in this section, particularly the relationship between silence, aphasia, memory, and storytelling in *The Last Gift*, are examined more extensively in Brazzelli (2021).



not be able to stop” (242). Silence therefore functions as a defensive strategy through which he seeks to contain feelings of guilt, loss, and shame. Only later does Abbas fully recognise the burden imposed by this choice: “I committed an unkind and thoughtless act, and silence was a way of coping with the memory of it, offering a deadpan face to the burden of it” (253). Yet Abbas’s silence does not imply forgetting. On the contrary, he admits: “I can’t remember anything, I tell her, but it is a lie, I remember many things and I remember them every day, however hard I try to forget” (243). The novel thus reveals the paradox at the heart of his reticence: silence becomes a way of coping with memories that remain painfully present despite his attempts to suppress them.

The tape becomes the medium through which the truth about Abbas’s unspoken past is gradually revealed. More importantly, it transforms a lifetime of silence into an act of communication, allowing stories that had remained suppressed for decades to circulate within the family. Abbas is not, however, the only character who takes refuge in reticence. Maryam also withholds from her children the truth about her estrangement from her adoptive parents, while Jamal and Hanna grow up with only fragmentary knowledge of their family history. Pervaded by a sense of displacement and uncertainty about their origins, they experience a form of alienation within their own family. It is only through listening to the tape and engaging in dialogue with their mother that they begin to reconstruct the missing parts of their past and to imagine a future journey to Zanzibar, their “imaginary homeland”. Abbas’s long silence is rooted in the shame of having abandoned his first wife and unborn child, as well as in the guilt associated with severing all contact with his family of origin.

After listening to the tape containing her father’s memories and learning the truth about her origins, Hanna begins to overcome her sense of uncertainty and to reconcile herself with her roots. Jamal, too, is profoundly affected by the silences that permeate his family history. Unlike his sister, however, he responds not with frustration but with attentive listening, seeking to piece together the fragmented narratives of his parents’ lives.

Fascinated by the ways stories are transmitted, transformed, and reinterpreted, Jamal gradually assumes the role of an interpreter of family memory. Unlike Hanna, who seeks direct answers, he patiently listens to fragments, omissions, and contradictory accounts, attempting to reconstruct coherence from partial disclosures. In this respect, Jamal emerges as a figure who mirrors the work of the writer, assembling a coherent story out of silences and scattered memories. Significantly, at the end of the novel he announces: "I'm writing a short story. Another father story. Such a predictable immigrant subject" (Gurnah 2011, 279). The reconstruction of Abbas's life thus becomes the material from which narrative itself is produced. Through Jamal, *The Last Gift* acquires a metafictional dimension, reflecting on the processes through which migration, displacement, family histories, and even silences are transformed into storytelling.

Between speech and silence

As exemplified in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift*, diasporic literature reveals silence as a multifaceted strategy of concealment, affecting both personal histories and colonial legacies. At the same time, Gurnah's novels complicate the idea that diasporic identity is grounded in a stable or shared memory of the origins, since remembrance itself appears fragmented, partial, and deeply shaped by trauma, shame, and omission. Through omissions, reticence, and acts of fabrication, the protagonists seek to achieve a fragile stability in their lives, while attempting to negotiate painful histories that resist straightforward narration. In Gurnah's fiction, silence does not simply indicate absence or muteness, but becomes a complex mode of engaging with displacement, loss, and fractured belonging. Strategies such as concealment, replacement, fabrication, and irony emerge as crucial narrative devices through which the unsaid is articulated rather than merely represented. Often subtle and understated, irony exposes the contradictions underlying both personal and collective narratives, revealing the distance between lived experience and the stories characters tell about themselves. At the same time, the



significance of silence ultimately depends upon the active participation of readers, who are required to reconstruct connections, interpret omissions, and negotiate competing versions of the past. The two novels thus show that diasporic subjectivities are shaped not only through acts of remembering and storytelling, but also through what remains concealed, partially disclosed, or impossible to narrate.

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L'abisso illetterato delle città.

Periferie, urbanistica e spazi queer nelle cronache di Pedro Lemebel

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Abstract

Le cronache di Pedro Lemebel rappresentano un chiaro esempio di ricostruzione dei processi storico-politici a partire da una riformulazione semantica della realtà contemporanea. Lo scrittore cileno fornisce, attraverso le proprie opere, una serie di coordinate ideali riconducibili all'ambito delle scienze sociali, tra cui l'urbanistica. In termini di interconnessione tra il concetto di città, nei suoi aspetti politici e antropologici, e azione (meta)letteraria la sua descrizione di Santiago si propone come raffigurazione dell'alterità, osservata e pensata a partire dai margini del corpo sociale e, di conseguenza, come espressione del paradigma ibrido transmoderno. La sua ricostruzione dello spazio pubblico e intra-letterario si configura, in sostanza, da un lato come modello di rappresentazione micropolitica e dall'altro come strumento di opposizione alle strategie di controllo e manipolazione, messe in atto prima dal regime dittatoriale di Augusto Pinochet e, successivamente, dalle sovrastrutture transnazionali degli apparati neoliberali.

Keywords: urbanistica; micropolitica; *queerness*; gentrificazione; migrazione.



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1. Prologo

Nell'introduzione alla monografia *La città tra romanzo e studi urbani*, Alfredo Alietti (Alietti 2017) riflette sull'interconnessione tra città e azione letteraria evidenziando una possibile coincidenza tra la nascita del concetto di città, l'apparizione delle prime etnografie urbane e l'inizio della modernità. Nello stesso studio, l'urbanista Romeo Farinella descrive questo processo di interpretazione dei fattori costitutivi dell'urbanistica a partire da tre specifici punti di osservazione: il peso delle fenomenologie urbane – intese come insieme delle percezioni, delle pratiche vissute e delle esperienze soggettive dello spazio – nella trasformazione intrinseca della città; il confronto tra ordinamento architettonico e pratiche del cambiamento civico, vale a dire tra la pianificazione formale dello spazio e le modalità con cui esso viene concretamente attraversato e modificato dai soggetti; e, infine, la dimensione quotidiana e fisica della città stessa, in quanto organizzazione materiale degli spazi nella loro riproduzione nel tempo¹.

Nella scrittura di Pedro Lemebel questa triplice intersezione sembra configurarsi come espressione di una prassi letteraria che si colloca oltre le strutture della teorizzazione, giacché il suo approccio politico, ideologico e attitudinale alla scrittura riflette la crisi non solo della modernità, ma anche della postmodernità: se la cronaca nella sua versione più tradizionale è il prodotto di una *rappresentazione* moderna e la neocronaca di molti autori del XX secolo (Monsiváis, Galeano) presenta tratti tipici della *simulazione* postmoderna, Lemebel supera la decostruzione post-storica e compie un ulteriore passo avanti verso la *significazione iperrealista* propria della visione transmoderna. Le città che descrive in molte sue cronache (principalmente Santiago del Cile) sono al medesimo tempo l'oggetto e la sua stessa rappresentazione, secondo una dinamica che nella teoria transmoderna viene indicata come *trasparenza plenipotenziaria soggetta al paradigma dell'informazione*. In sostanza, se la città postmoderna è una simulazione dell'urbe che

¹ A tale proposito, cfr. Booth 1998; Park 1992.



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accetta la perdita di significato, nella narrazione urbanistica di Lemebel il superamento delle dinamiche di cambiamento, impulso e innovazione si traduce in un perenne progetto trans-storico in conseguenza del quale in ogni spazio si scorgono tracce di auto-trascendenza della ragione, di necessità di partecipazione al potere e di stimolo all'emancipazione. La città transmoderna di Lemebel è il luogo delle contraddizioni in cui si sovrappongono elementi perennemente contrastanti e che determinano un approccio alla sua dimensione che non può essere univoco a causa della sua complessità. Non si tratta di un universo, ma di un multiverso in cui si combinano azione letteraria, riferimento politico e ricerca socio-psicologica. Di fronte a questa complessità, come afferma Rosa María Rodríguez Magda:

Ci sentiamo segnati dalla schizofrenia di odiare e amare allo stesso tempo lo spazio putrido e accogliente del cemento, la fogna che inietta nelle nostre vene il vapore allucinato della sopravvivenza. (...) Siamo urbani per pura nostalgia, poi per sopravvivenza, nella geografia pulsionale di costruire e preservare la nostra presenza nello spazio. Perché le città cambiano e vengono dimenticate, cessano di prosperare nei loro anfratti per chiunque le calpesti (Rodríguez Magda 1989, 251-252, traduzione propria).

2. Spazio urbano, corpo e marginalità

Vale la pena riflettere, in particolare, su uno dei temi a cui allude la filosofa spagnola, ovvero quello del cambiamento. La città, così come è descritta nelle cronache, sembra presentarsi come entità organica e quindi soggetta a un processo di mutazione continua. Questo approccio appare molto chiaro nell'analisi del rapporto tra spazio sociale e corpo proletario - dove lo spazio sociale si identifica con la dimensione suburbana di Santiago e il corpo proletario è espressione della marginalità queer - fornita da Diana Palaversich:

Nelle sue due raccolte di cronache, *La esquina es mi corazón* (1995) e *Loco afán* (1996), Pedro Lemebel descrive la Santiago non raffigurata nei bollettini di notizie e nei discorsi del "miracolo" economico cileno, una Santiago popolata da esseri emarginati sia dalla loro posizione socioeconomica che dal loro orientamento sessuale. Dalla sua prospettiva di "altro" omosessuale, Lemebel ridisegna la mappa di Santiago a partire dai suoi margini, rivelando e ridefinendo siti e soggetti che sono stati trascurati sia dall'alta cultura che dai mezzi di



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comunicazione: gli autobus, gli stadi di calcio, i cinema di serie B, i parchi, i sobborghi della classe inferiore, le *locas*, la categoria più vilipesa e disprezzata degli omosessuali latinoamericani, e coloro che vivono con l'HIV e l'AIDS (Palaversich 2002, 264, traduzione propria).

La studiosa nordamericana sottolinea qui un aspetto essenziale della rappresentazione dello spazio nelle cronache, ovvero la definizione dello stesso non solo in senso fisico e urbanistico ma in termini culturali e antropologici, in relazione ai quali i rappresentanti delle aree marginali esprimono i caratteri rappresentativi della realtà sociale subalterna. Non si tratta di descrivere i ghetti o i quartieri poveri, ma di un'operazione molto più complessa e profonda, che consiste nella ricostruzione di una mappa di urbanismo umano. Questa città-umana è, in tal senso, rappresentazione della complessità del corpo, con i suoi elementi centrali e le sue parti marginali, trascurate, dimenticate, lontane dal cuore e dal cervello, ed è proprio a partire da queste parti - le zone in cui il subconscio collettivo, per dirla in termini junghiani, relega le sue ombre - che Lemebel costruisce il suo discorso descrittivo dello spazio vitale di Santiago. Le sue storie, i suoi personaggi, si muovono a partire dalle aree del corpo urbano irrimediabilmente segnate dalle ferite del passato; la sua voce di cronista scopre gli ematomi lasciati dal processo storico cileno e svela ciò che è nascosto dietro la maschera rispettabile di un paese che cerca di negare l'esistenza delle sue stesse ombre. In tal senso, lo spazio fisico sembra configurarsi come espressione di una mistificazione della verità storico-sociale per scopi di adeguamento alle esigenze del mercato economico e finanziario. Agustín Pastén rende chiaro questo aspetto attraverso un interessante confronto tra la definizione della metropoli in Fuguet e Lemebel in cui evidenzia le dinamiche di organizzazione del camuffamento della realtà socio-urbana come strategia di marketing:

In un momento della storia nazionale in cui numerose organizzazioni internazionali non si stancano di presentare il Cile come il paese più sicuro, il più adatto per fare affari e il meno corrotto dell'America Latina, Lemebel non desiste dai suoi sforzi per rappresentare spazi urbani



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disumanizzati ed emarginati che, o sono stati vittime della logica del mercato, o semplicemente si rifiutano di accettarla (Pastén 2009, 22, traduzione propria).

L'atto finale di questo processo si configura in ciò che María José Sabo descrive come "sbiancamento" (Sabo 2014) del corpo, umano e urbano: le macchie scompaiono per effetto di una falsa eliminazione delle ombre, le quali tuttavia continuano a esistere sotto lo strato sottile e fragile della propaganda nazionale, sia durante la dittatura di Pinochet, che nella fase della transizione democratica. Paradigma perfetto di questa dinamica è la creazione da parte delle istituzioni di nuovi quartieri o di agglomerati residenziali imitativi del modello yankee. Nella cronaca *Los albores de la Florida* (Lemebel 1998, 248), per esempio, l'autore lascia intendere che la creazione di queste aree avrebbe come obiettivo l'eliminazione di qualsiasi spazio, concreto o ideale, di esercizio della critica sociale e politica. Le strade che separano le villette del quartiere, i suoi negozi, le scuole, il centro commerciale e la discoteca, infatti, non costituiscono veri luoghi di aggregazione sociale, ma servono solo ad amplificare la volontà del potere di risolvere, attraverso il meccanismo desiderio-soddisfazione-frustrazione – ossia tramite la strategia consumistica del bisogno indotto – il senso di solitudine e di emarginazione dei cittadini. Allo stesso tempo, risulta interessante la descrizione de La Florida come espressione di un microcosmo – e quindi di una realtà di carattere sociale e di natura micropolitica in senso foucaultiano – in cui tutti gli elementi riproducono in forma ridotta e grottesca le caratteristiche della classe alta. Tutto ciò che appartiene a questo mondo è il risultato di una falsificazione del reale e di una riduzione semantica degli assi che definiscono l'appartenenza alla realtà borghese. Nella descrizione dell'autore, gli abitanti de La Florida non sono cittadini ricchi, ma "ricchi poveri", vittime di un sistema che manipola il desiderio creando esigenze piccolo-borghesi, il cui raggiungimento ha come effetto, da un lato, una perenne schiavitù verso quello stesso sistema finanziario al quale sono costretti a ricorrere per realizzare i propri ideali consumistici, dall'altro, una falsa idealizzazione della classe sociale di appartenenza o, meglio, di quella a cui si tenta disperatamente di appartenere.



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3. Trasformazioni urbane e rappresentazioni del potere

Riprendendo il triplice approccio di Farinella, possiamo osservare come le osservazioni di Lemebel sul quartiere La Florida si sviluppino attraverso un parallelismo tra il *prima* e il *dopo* carico di valore simbolico. L'eliminazione dello spazio naturale è descritta in modo critico non solo in relazione alla costituzione materiale di un mondo soggetto alle logiche del mercato economico, ma anche come espressione di una mutazione dello scenario sociale che ha in sé il deterioramento del rapporto uomo-natura. Lo spazio destinato a La Florida sarebbe, secondo Lemebel, uno spazio rubato al paesaggio e, in modo particolare, alla contemplazione dei poveri: *unica cartolina di natura accessibile agli operai, che sonnecchiavano nel torpore dei pioppi e dei queltehues mentre si dirigevano verso le loro baracche* (Lemebel 1998, 248, traduzione propria).

Un esempio simile è quello dell'area urbana conosciuta come Las Condes, proposto nella cronaca *El pueblito se llamaba Las Condes* (Lemebel 1998, 219). In questo caso, l'intervento sul paesaggio appare ancora più significativo in quanto la nuova agglomerazione non nasce in uno spazio disabitato, bensì come trasformazione di un piccolo villaggio popolare in un'enclave protetta e ben separata dalla presenza proletaria, a uso e consumo dei ricchi. La ricostruzione di questo mondo isolato dalla realtà, descritto come un luogo magico delle fiabe, un parco tematico del delirio e dell'eccesso neoliberista, ha il suo elemento chiave nella descrizione, squisitamente letteraria, del sindaco: una sorta di Mago di Oz il cui potere – basato sulla manipolazione delle coscienze – è ammirato da tutti i cittadini.

L'episodio centrale della narrazione è qui, infatti, un'operazione di pura prestidigitazione: il sindaco/mago, con l'aiuto dell'Aeronautica Militare, ricorre a un sistema di pioggia artificiale per eliminare lo smog che impedisce ai ricchi abitanti di godere a pieno del paesaggio della cittadina, con le sue *torri e sperimentazioni architettoniche: edifici quadrati e piramidali come modellini di specchio destinati a riflettere l'immagine narcisista del Cile attuale* (Lemebel 1998, 219, traduzione propria). Questo



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episodio non è frutto di immaginazione dell'autore, bensì un fatto reale e, in quanto tale, denuncia, da un lato la paradossale appropriazione da parte dei ricchi di mezzi e spazi pubblici a fini privati e, dall'altro la tendenza a perseguire il benessere individuale attraverso dinamiche di ingiustizia sociale. Ciò che si realizza qui, in sostanza, è una forma estremizzata di quello "sbiancamento" a cui ho fatto riferimento in precedenza:

Lo 'sbiancamento' (...) di certi spazi della città, della memoria e della storia dittatoriale, ha portato alla costituzione dell'immaginario cileno neoliberista delle ultime decadi (...). In questo senso, il modello di arricchimento conservatore e socialmente diseguale del Cile, spinto dal modello economico imposto negli ultimi decenni, è descritto da Lemebel come una pittura bianca che si applica sugli edifici antichi, testimoni della storia, come una pulizia sistematica di piazze e spazi pubblici che cerca di cancellare ogni traccia terzomondista (Sabo 2014, 1-2, traduzione propria).

Attraverso questo processo di mutazione cellulare del corpo urbano, la strategia neoliberista pare puntare alla mistificazione della realtà economica e sociale del paese e al tempo stesso a favorire dinamiche di affermazione di una falsa coscienza politica che inevitabilmente lasciano tracce nella pianificazione territoriale. È quanto sembra suggerire Lemebel nella cronaca intitolata *El barrio Bellavista* (Lemebel 1998, 229), in cui il famoso quartiere di Santiago è descritto nei suoi aspetti più paradossali e contraddittori. Ci troviamo di fronte alla rappresentazione di una sorta di zona franca, un punto di intersezione tra la parte alta e la parte bassa della città, non solo in senso geografico, ma anche in relazione al contrasto tra le classi sociali. Lo scrittore evidenzia la progressiva omologazione – in senso pasoliniano – delle diverse culture che confluiscono in questo spazio urbano e lo fa con un atteggiamento critico nei confronti di questo processo, come si evince dalla malinconica descrizione del vecchio carattere popolare del quartiere, ormai progressivamente cancellato a favore di un sostanziale appiattimento culturale, affine a quello di altri quartieri pseudo-alternativi del mondo (Soho, Montmartre). Lo scenario descritto è quello di uno spazio che pretende di rappresentare un possibile equilibrio tra le forze politiche in opposizione all'interno del sistema politico nazionale, ma che finisce per



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configurarsi come luogo di una falsa coscienza di classe, che nega o tenta di occultare i reali contrasti tra mondi inevitabilmente incompatibili.

Lo stesso contrasto appare evidente nella cronaca *La República libre de Ñuñoa* (Lemebel 1998, 159) benché con una declinazione diversa del paradigma sociale descritto nelle cronache precedenti. In questo caso, infatti, Lemebel volge lo sguardo verso la classe medio-borghese, descritta come apparentemente progressista ma di fatto soggetta a un lento e inarrestabile adattamento alle istanze conservatrici del sistema politico che si è imposto nel paese a partire dalla dittatura. La caratterizzazione di questa tendenza si sviluppa attraverso un efficace parallelismo tra la mutazione del corpo urbano e quella dell'organizzazione sociale, attraverso un processo di armonizzazione di spazi fisici e mentali che trova nella piazza di Ñuñoa il proprio punto di confluenza. I protagonisti di questo cambiamento radicale di prospettiva sono descritti dall'autore come ex giovani idealisti della sinistra benestante, e fondamentalmente borghese, che con gli anni si sono trasformati in quella stessa componente sociale che, nel loro fervore ribelle giovanile, avevano combattuto con tutti i mezzi:

sono gli stessi sognatori-idealisti che ora si ritrovano a *Las Lanzas* in Plaza Ñuñoa a ricordare i vecchi tempi. Oggi lì si può trovare lì, senza il fazzoletto indiano, sostituito dalla cravatta da funzionario ministeriale. Comodamente installati nel nido borghese che tanto avevano odiato (Lemebel 1998, 161, traduzione propria).

4. Spazio urbano, disuguaglianza e vita quotidiana

Altro luogo emblematico di questo contrasto sociale è il Paseo Ahumada (Lemebel 1998, 179). La famosa strada di Santiago non è descritta semplicemente come punto di incontro tra classi alte e basse; Lemebel ricorre in questo caso alla metafora di una vena in cui rifluisce sangue diverso a seconda della provenienza del suo flusso optando per la rappresentazione paradigmatica di una situazione socialmente generalizzata. Il contatto diretto tra le due realtà sociali che si incrociano lungo questa importante strada determina



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un contrasto socio-culturale che l'autore descrive attraverso l'esempio di due bambini, uno ricco e l'altro povero, che incrociano i loro sguardi per un istante. In un passaggio letterario di forte pathos emotivo, Lemebel si fa interprete del pensiero di quello povero, del suo desiderio di essere come l'altro, della sua voglia di mangiare un gelato come quello che ha visto nelle mani del bambino più fortunato di lui, ma ci fornisce anche una commovente rappresentazione della prospettiva di sua madre, che con determinazione si sforza di insegnargli a accontentarsi del poco che lei può offrirgli: un cubetto di ghiaccio comprato dall'unica vicina di casa in possesso di un congelatore.

In alcuni casi sono fenomeni di tipo naturale a mettere in evidenza le disparità sociali. Nella cronaca *La inundación* (Lemebel 1998, 182), una bufera colpisce le zone de La Punta, las Perdices, el Carmen y las Mercedes fungendo da detonante per una riflessione sulle differenze di classe in virtù degli effetti delle forti piogge sulle abitazioni di ricchi e poveri. L'intenzione dello scrittore, attraverso la descrizione delle case popolari, ottenute con grande sforzo dalle famiglie proletarie in seguito a numerose pratiche e sussidi abitativi, sembra essere quella di mettere in evidenza la falsa volontà del governo della transizione postdittatoriale di garantire condizioni di vita dignitose a tutti i cittadini, laddove appare evidente la semplice intenzione di costruire sulla pelle delle classi più svantaggiate una propaganda falsamente democratica. La descrizione delle complesse relazioni di questo corpo urbano con le sue cellule più marginali si arricchisce di riflessioni ancora più profonde in *Madre Legua* (Lemebel 2012, 277). Ci troviamo di fronte, in questo caso, a un autentico racconto cosmogonico: la suggestiva descrizione della nascita di un quartiere destinato ad accogliere i poveri e il cui nome Lemebel associa sempre ad aggettivi femminili e materni (*Doña Legua, Mamá Legua...*). L'autore sembra voler trasmettere, in questo modo, il senso di protezione che questo spazio esercita sui cittadini più poveri, mettendo in evidenza, allo stesso tempo, l'impossibile conciliazione tra la povertà e il controllo istituzionale di una realtà sociale che dal punto di vista del potere viene percepita come una costante minaccia, in quanto si configura come perenne



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denuncia di un fallimento nell'ordinamento del complesso sociopolitico nazionale. L'autore descrive le continue incursioni della polizia all'interno dell'agglomerato urbano di Leguas, nella maggior parte dei casi per motivi futili e sempre in presenza dell'occhio censore della televisione pubblica. Quell'occhio esterno, che non si limita a registrare gli eventi ma sembra anche interessato a esercitare un controllo sistematico e a esigere una condanna, costituisce una rappresentazione perfetta della tendenza, in parole foucaultiane, a *sorvegliare e punire*, così come della necessità da parte dei ricchi di potersi sentire rassicurati dal fatto che il cancro della povertà rimarrà sempre sotto controllo e non potrà estendersi ai loro *quartieri recintati, sorvegliati, dove non tutti possono entrare* (Lemebel 2012, 279, traduzione propria). Di fronte al fuoco incrociato che si determina in questo contesto, l'atteggiamento dell'autore vira verso un'esaltazione, di sapore pasoliniano, dei valori semplici e puri della povertà nella sua forma più incontaminata e libera dalle sovrastrutture del potere.

Cosmogonica è anche la descrizione dell'area di Santiago conosciuta come Zanjón de la Aguada. Dalle prime righe dell'omonima cronica (Lemebel 2003, 13), appare evidente una profonda partecipazione emotiva da parte dello scrittore, trattandosi del quartiere in cui lui stesso è cresciuto. Lemebel ne ricostruisce la fondazione a partire dagli anni Quaranta, con uno stile fortemente intimista, in cui l'uso delle metafore si addolcisce e si dà più spazio all'afflato poetico che al virtuosismo linguistico. Queste caratteristiche dello stile, tuttavia, non avversano l'impetuosità demistificatrice dei contenuti: Zanjón de la Aguada è uno dei molti spazi del disequilibrio sociale e dell'ingiustizia, un mito della sociologia popolare santiaguina, non solo in relazione al risentimento post golpe e alle frustrazioni antilibertarie della dittatura. Probabilmente, questa zona della città costituisce il paradigma più rappresentativo di un sistema sociale che non è mai riuscito a fornire soluzioni reali alla questione della povertà e dell'esclusione. A tale proposito, l'autore affronta due questioni fondamentali. In primo luogo, quella dell'emergenza abitativa, descritta come una traversia biblica per le classi svantaggiate: si tratta di una problematica



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che assunse dimensioni particolarmente considerevoli negli anni Quaranta dello scorso secolo, quando molte famiglie emigravano verso la capitale, dal nord e dal sud del paese, per cercare migliori condizioni di vita. In secondo luogo, Lemebel ricorda come, a causa degli sfratti coattivi perpetrati dalla polizia, molte famiglie della stessa Santiago furono costrette a rifugiarsi in quella terra di nessuno che solo in quel momento cominciava a trasformarsi in un agglomerato urbano. La descrizione di questi due aspetti contribuisce alla definizione di quel contrasto tra le istituzioni e la parte più debole della popolazione che nelle sue molteplici sfaccettature rappresenta uno dei topos del discorso lemebeliano. L'autore penetra ancora più a fondo nelle contraddizioni di questo contrasto nella cronaca *La esquina es mi corazón* (Lemebel 1995, 29). Si tratta di un vero e proprio *J'accuse* diretto al classismo che la transizione democratica non ha saputo (o non ha voluto) risolvere. L'autore non si limita qui a descrivere le condizioni di un generico quartiere povero, ma entra direttamente nelle case, penetra attraverso l'attrezzatura divisoria che l'architettura popolare ha inventato come supporto precario dell'intimità, per testimoniare la convivenza impossibile nella ristrettezza degli spazi, fisici e mentali, e l'attrito che obbliga le persone a contrapporsi tra loro senza tregua in uno stato di pressione psicologica permanente. Non c'è traccia qui del poetico sentimento della dimensione lumpen che si avverte in *Madre Legua* e il riferimento al contrasto tra le classi basse e alte è appena abbozzato: ci troviamo, semmai, di fronte alla descrizione di una condizione sociale del tutto interna al mondo marginale, che non lascia scampo e che obbliga a confrontarsi con una dimensione di inarrestabile conflitto. È interessante osservare in questo caso la stretta corrispondenza tra la conformazione dello spazio architettonico e le relazioni umane in un contesto di determinismo territoriale: le pareti sottili, gli spazi angusti, l'affollamento, contribuiscono al profilarsi di una dimensione claustrofobica in cui l'infrazione della legge si configura come realizzazione di una profezia autoavverante.



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Sembra che questo urbanismo di cassettiere sia stato pianificato per accentuare, attraverso l'accumulo umano, la follia della vita, di per sé violenta, degli emarginati nella ripartizione dello spazio urbano (Lemebel 1995, 34, traduzione propria).

Lo spazio urbano è, come in tutte le sue cronache, anche uno spazio umano e si configura pertanto come espressione di diverse dimensioni esistenziali tra cui un posto importante è occupato dal fattore temporale. La condivisione spaziale non è solo manifestazione della distribuzione fisica tra le persone nei luoghi architettonici, ma anche delle componenti che costituiscono i modelli della disposizione cronologica del vivere quotidiano. La tesi intrinseca che l'autore sembra voler proporre, in questo caso, è che al di fuori del meccanismo ontologico dettato dalle logiche capitaliste, i fattori della ripartizione dei compiti quotidiani nei diversi momenti della giornata vengono annullati e il tempo finisce così per perdere il suo valore di riferimento.

E il new kid ancora dorme (...) badando a malapena alle grida che gli trapanano la testa. Alzati merda che sono le dodici! Come se quell'ora potesse essere per lui un riferimento di tipo lavorativo, una misura borghese di produzione da bravi uomini operosi, che alle dodici hanno già svolto mezza giornata di lavoro (Lemebel 1995, 32, traduzione propria)...

5. Consumo, non-luoghi e spazi queer

Ci troviamo di fronte a una dinamica di forze opposte che da un lato si caratterizza per la contrazione dello spazio fisico vitale, e dall'altro per una dilatazione dell'elemento temporale che si configura come sua controparte. La contrazione dello spazio architettonico è un elemento presente in molte cronache di Lemebel, con riferimenti a vari periodi della storia di Santiago. In *El barrio Dieciocho* (Lemebel 2003, 190), per esempio, sono descritte le caratteristiche dell'urbanistica povera degli anni '20, rapportate a quelle dell'area aristocratica: da un lato le famiglie costrette a vivere in un'unica stanza che fungeva da sala da pranzo, cucina e camera da letto, dall'altro le case a tre piani con biblioteca, soggiorno e sale per i banchetti. Il paradosso della convivenza tra questi mondi opposti si manifesta in tutta la sua crudeltà la notte in cui per la prima volta arriva in città



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la luce elettrica (ovviamente solo nelle case dei ricchi). La folla dei poveri si raduna nelle strade per osservare, da lontano, il compiersi del miracolo. Tuttavia, dal punto di vista dei ricchi l'attesa spasmodica della gente che guarda dalla strada assume la connotazione di una minaccia all'intimità della loro casa. Lemebel fornisce un esempio molto significativo dello squilibrio sociale che costituisce l'asse centrale di questo racconto descrivendo una donna aristocratica la quale, dopo aver scoperto la presenza del popolo in strada, si dirige disperata verso uno dei suoi servitori affinché si affretti a chiudere tutte le tende:

Così, il miracolo della luce fu solo per pochi, pochi occhi castani che brindarono con meschinità all'evento. Il resto, la grande massa popolare, dovette aspettare diversi anni perché la miseria giallastra di una lampadina rallegrasse i loro tuguri (Lemebel 2003, 192, traduzione propria).

In altre cronache, come nella già citata *Los albores de la Florida*, questo divario sembra colmato da un'emergente classe media semi-colta. Si tratta, però, di un accorciamento delle distanze puramente illusorio che vede in certi luoghi della geografia urbana di Santiago alcuni dei suoi simboli più rappresentativi. È il caso dei centri commerciali, uno dei tanti territori transnazionali in cui pare affermarsi l'illusione di un potere economico di fatto inesistente. I personaggi di Lemebel si limitano a guardare le vetrine nelle zone del commercio destinate alle masse per "fingere" di comprare qualcosa che in realtà non possono permettersi. In *Socorro, me perdí en un mall* (Lemebel 2003, 209), questo meccanismo appare particolarmente chiaro². Il testo combina vari elementi che si intrecciano tra loro per descrivere alcune delle caratteristiche delle politiche commerciali contemporanee che a loro volta si presentano come metafora delle profonde contraddizioni del falso benessere del sistema capitalista. In primo luogo, ci troviamo di fronte a un luogo simbolo della nuova architettura urbana, ma anche suburbana, della città globalizzata. Il centro commerciale, l'aeroporto del consumismo, è il nucleo dell'alienazione nel quale si perdono totalmente due tipi di relazioni ontologiche

² A tale proposito, cfr. Jameson 1983.



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fondamentali per la vita dell'essere umano: da un lato, la connessione interdipendente tra forma e uso delle cose (gli oggetti venduti non realizzano realmente l'obiettivo per cui originariamente sono stati progettati) dall'altro la profonda interrelazione tra uomo, azione umana e natura. In questo senso è interessante osservare come lo scrittore descriva l'assoluto allontanamento dei giovani, e in modo particolare dei bambini, dalle più elementari leggi che regolano l'equilibrio di tutte le cose naturali per effetto di una progressiva sintetizzazione dei prodotti messi in vendita nei grandi magazzini in una forma che non ha più nulla a che vedere con la loro sostanza originaria. L'autore si chiede se coloro che frequentano i mall sappiano che la frutta viene dagli alberi e le uova dalle galline e il suo interrogativo, ironico ma non del tutto, è espressione di una reale preoccupazione di fronte all'inarrestabile distorsione del reale nell'incantesimo spettacolare del teatro consumistico. In fin dei conti, il centro commerciale può essere interpretato come la rappresentazione simulacrica di un sottomondo a immagine e somiglianza della società occidentale. Si tratta di un territorio transnazionale in cui confluiscono tutti gli effetti e i difetti dell'impianto economico globalizzato, in primo luogo la pantomimica esposizione del benessere illusorio e, di conseguenza, il classismo proprio di tutti gli organismi politici in cui non è stata raggiunta una reale coesistenza delle dinamiche sociali. Il risultato è che gli ingressi e le uscite di questo sottomondo sono sottoposti al controllo dei rilevatori antifurto e delle guardie di sicurezza che regolano la presenza del pubblico secondo un principio di disuguaglianza.

...quella polizia classista che si dedica a perseguire la gente di colore con aspetto da povero, spiandoti nei corridoi per vedere se rubi qualcosa. Quelle guardie del supermercato che accolgono le vecchie signore ricche come regine e le accompagnano portando loro i pacchi fino alle auto (Lemebel 2003, 210, traduzione propria).

In pratica, il sistema di ispezione del territorio transnazionale ripete le formule di protezione dello *status quo* capitalista, includendo in questo processo quelle dinamiche di



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sorveglianza e punizione che hanno l'obiettivo di liberare la sovrastruttura consumistica da qualsiasi minaccia per i suoi ingranaggi, in apparenza perfettamente puliti e funzionanti.

Come si è potuto osservare, il movimento discorsivo di Lemebel in relazione alla conformazione urbanistica della città va sempre dai margini verso il centro. E nei margini sociali si colloca anche la sua rappresentazione di quella parte del movimento LGBTQIA+ non ancora assoggettata al processo di assimilazione riformista di carattere anglosassone che, soprattutto negli anni Novanta, produce un profondo cambiamento nelle sue dinamiche politiche. Questo processo passa attraverso varie fasi, una delle quali consiste in una forte ipervirilizzazione della persona omosessuale di sesso maschile come forma di adesione all'etero-norma. Lemebel rifiuta dichiaratamente questo processo, per ragioni antropologiche, senso di appartenenza a una realtà subalterna e motivi politici. Il suo mondo è quello delle *locas*, le checche denigrate, povere, lumpen, costrette sempre a vivere nella marginalità dello spazio urbano clandestino. Uno spazio pubblico che è anche quello della prostituzione e della conquista sessuale vissuta lontano dallo sguardo censore del mondo esterno eterosessuale e patriarcale. È lo spazio descritto in *Homoeróticas urbanas*, cronaca presente nella raccolta *Loco afán* (Lemebel 1996, 87), in cui si testimonia l'esistenza di luoghi della città socialmente negati in ragione delle realtà politicamente dirompenti che custodiscono. Si tratta di non-luoghi in cui le *locas* vivono le passioni clandestine dei loro corpi desideranti, spazi urbani in cui si radicalizza una necessità di fervore intimo mai smarrita nel corso del tempo, in quanto, come sottolinea Lucía Guerra Cunningham, rappresenta un elemento costante di tutte le civiltà di tipo patriarcale repressivo.

Seguendo la tipica assiologia eterosessuale del patriarcato, le case nella scacchiera geometrica della città furono progettate esclusivamente per la famiglia, per uomini e donne uniti in alleanze matrimoniali che avrebbero procreato una nuova popolazione per l'Impero. Struttura stretta e rigida che esclude, fin dalle sue origini, l'omosessuale il quale, nascondendo e camuffando la sua vera identità, utilizzò gli angoli e i vicoli che quello stesso spazio urbano gli forniva per trasgredire i divieti imposti dall'ordine spagnolo (Guerra Cunningham 2000, 75, traduzione propria).



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A partire dalla diffusione dell'HIV, l'inasprimento delle politiche repressive verso il movimento LGBTQIA+ rendono lo spazio urbano omoerotico un luogo ancora più oscuro, stigmatizzato e isolato dalla vita cittadina. A tale proposito, Lemebel sembra voler rafforzare un'opposizione tra lo spazio urbano (con i suoi non-luoghi della pratica omoerotica e gli ambienti più marginali) e la provincia rurale, espressione di una più genuina adesione a valori precedenti alla diffusione di ciò che in varie occasioni l'autore ha definito una tragedia di "importazione yankee".

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Exploring Marginalization: Metaphors and User-Generated Language in Migration Discourse

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Abstract

This study examines usage of migration-related metaphors and scenarios in British tabloid and broadsheet comment sections. It demonstrates how the writers' arguments are supported by modified scenarios and aspects of the original domain. With an emphasis on mixed metaphors, the study also investigates the connection between conceptual metaphors and argumentation topoi. Additionally, the corpus data demonstrate that when language users use concrete metaphorical linguistic formulations, they often employ specific lexical words that are connected with a restricted area of the source domain. It is therefore not surprising that the discussion of migration might at times seem somewhat conventionalized, especially in sociopolitical echo chambers.

Keywords: migration discourse; critical discourse analysis; conceptual metaphor theory; user-generated language; online comment sections.

1. Introduction

The large influx of people crossing the Mediterranean to seek protection under the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention has become a major political issue in many European countries, including Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy and the U.K. In the U.K., the immigration debate has been closely tied to the Brexit discussion, as both touch on national sovereignty, mobility rights, economic prosperity and national security (Cap 2019). Images of overcrowded boats and refugee camps have frequently appeared in national media, especially during the Brexit referendum period. The rise of anti-migrant sentiment in Europe has coincided with growing support for right-wing populist parties like UKIP in the U.K. and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany (Sola 2018). Therefore, media coverage of the 'migration crisis' has attracted attention from human rights organizations and migration policy institutes (Threadgold 2009).

Research has noted that the media has played a key role in portraying the arrival of refugees in Europe as a 'crisis'. Critics have pointed out several problematic practices in this coverage: the use of discriminatory metaphors (e.g. 'tidal wave' or 'invasion'); confusion between terms like 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', and 'economic migrant'; an overrepresentation of conservative political voices compared to refugees themselves; the frequent depiction of refugees as threatening young men; the spread of fear through vague predictions about refugee numbers; and the use of 'us vs. them' language.

In linguistics, two main research approaches have emerged for studying migration discourses. The first, rooted in critical discourse analysis (CDA), focuses on power dynamics in language. The second, based on cognitive linguistics (CL), particularly conceptual metaphor and conceptual blending theory, aims to reveal ideological patterns in the way in which migration is represented. Over the past decade, there has been increasing integration of CL concepts into CDA, with many studies exploring the synergy between the two approaches (e.g. Cap 2019; Charteris-Black 2006; KhosraviNik 2009, 2014; Stockwell 2001).

This study examines the use of metaphorical language in readers' comments on migration-related articles from *The Guardian*, *BBC*, *Daily Mail* and *The Sun/Sunday Express*, focusing on how metaphors are adopted, continued, and used argumentatively. It aims to show that metaphors used in both news articles and readers' comments shape public discourse and perceptions of migration, especially when discriminatory metaphors are involved, potentially reinforcing negative attitudes. It also explores readers' engagement with metaphors, discussing their acceptability and intentionality, and scrutinizes how readers extend, mix, or re-contextualize metaphors, offering insights into the argumentative strategies in the migration debate and contributing to metaphor theory.

2. Data, research questions and methodology

News articles and comment sections published in British national newspapers during the so-called European migration crisis were chosen as the object of analysis. These articles, sampled from the newspapers' web pages during July 2018–December 2019, represented a relatively equal proportion of broadsheets having a more liberal, leftwing editorial position (e.g. *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *BBC News*) and a right-wing focus (e.g. *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun/The Sunday Express*).

Most of the comment sections were attached underneath the articles for public access (although, years later they were 'gated' – requiring registration to comment thereon). A few discussions were outsourced to Twitter¹, but political actors posted provocative quotes/statements on their own Twitter page and linked them to the news article itself. Readers did not require registration on Twitter to follow the discussion on the internet. The corpus in size included 20 articles and more than 7,000 reader comments of various lengths, from single words to lengthy arguments.

¹ Twitter officially changed its name to X in July 2023.

Inclusion criteria for the corpus were: 1) The article and comment section must have had at least one metaphorical expression concerning migration. 2) Since metaphors are often used in arguing the migration debate and since the interrelation between conceptual metaphors and argumentative topoi is of great interest, the news texts needed to contain various issues associated with migration (refugee camps, human trafficking, migration statistics, economic effects of migration, national security, integrative measures) to ensure that a range of topoi was encountered. 3) To comprehensively understand metaphors' role in the migration debate, topic-related and meta-discussions that focused on language were considered.

The research study was informed by the following research questions: 1) Which migration-related metaphors (conceptual metaphors and metaphorical linguistic expressions) embodied in the news articles were adopted in the comments sections, and to what end? 2) What role do metaphors play in argumentative topoi, particularly in anti-migration discourse, and what exactly is the discourse purpose behind mixed metaphors?

To identify metaphorical expressions in the corpus, the metaphor identification procedure (MIP) initially proposed by the Pragglejazz Group (2007) and modified by related research groups such as metaphor identification procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) (Steen et al. 2010) and deliberate metaphor identification procedure (DMIP) (Reijnierse et al. 2017) was used. When a word was found to have been used indirectly and its use could possibly be justifiable by a cross-domain mapping of a more fundamental meaning of the same word, it was classified as having been metaphorically used (Steen et al. 2010, 25). The metaphors were grouped according to the conceptual ideas they were based on and examined in respect of linguistic forms. Another related question was whether they pertained to certain argumentative themes, including economic burden, national security threats and cultural differences. Particularly interesting metaphorical usages, such as new creations, mixed metaphors and invited metaphors were considered in further qualitative analysing.

3. Results

3.1 *Conventionalised metaphors*

Considering that human migration is a recurrent issue and that the logic behind it, the responses of the in-groups towards it and the discourses with which it is associated, have been strikingly similar over the years, most of the metaphors in my data on the topic of migration are conventionalised metaphors (Figure 1).

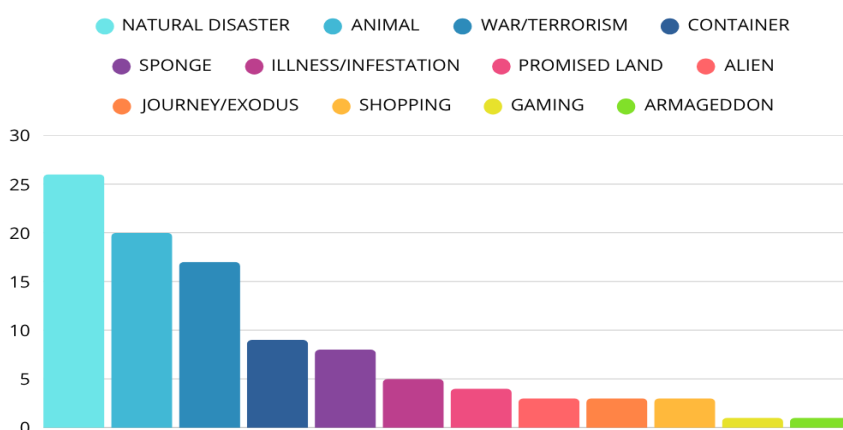


Figure 1. Common source domains in the British migration discourse

The domains of natural disaster and war are the most used in the corpus to discuss the process and possible effects of migration. Notably, metaphors of natural disasters rely on water-related risks, as well as the forces and effects of various magnitude, including tsunami references that convey the image of a slow but steady in-flowing presence (e.g. flow, pour in; turn off the tap). Limitations in the scope of mapping a specific type of natural disaster have been observed, and across the language representations, there is a pool of individual concrete lexical items that act like a resource that users of the language replicate, namely

influx (N), *flow/inflow* (N), *wave/tidal wave* (N), *flood/flooding* (N), *pouring* (V), *floodgates* (N), *flooding* (V), *tide* (N), *stream* (V) and *sweeping* (V).

The prevalence of this metaphorical language increased and was eventually established in the migration discourse. Likewise, most war-related metaphors convey images of an invasion by a foreign force, such as *invasion* (N), *be invaded* (V), *invaders* (N), *army (of refugees)* (N), *country under siege* (PP), *besiege* (V) and *intrusion* (N). In this case, the semantic role played by the host country is that of a patient or an affected entity, indicated by the prevalence of the passive voice constructions with the verb *invade*. The host country is far more active in the self-destruction scenario (with only a few instances in the corpus); in this case, the noun self-destruction attributes the crisis at hand to political actors such as British left-wingers or E.U. representatives.

The invasion metaphor emphasizes that migrants are becoming a source of conflict and perhaps includes a perception of the out-group's moral inferiority (Taylor 2021, 465). In a diachronic study on the rhetoric of migration, Taylor (2021, 463) observed that the metaphor of liquid/natural disaster has a longer history than the invasion metaphor, which was only conventionalised in the 1940s. Natural disaster and war metaphors are used in arguments in favour of restrictive immigration policies and have positive correlations with the topoi of physical danger, cultural threat and economic burden. They are employed to justify political activism and even violence towards migrants. Various measures (and projections regarding the future of Britain/Europe in case no measures are undertaken) are implied depending on the level of intensity the scenario of the respective source domain concealed. For example, comments concerning tsunamis and floods are more likely to be accompanied by Armageddon-type water predictions, as observed in Examples (1a,b), whereas the invasion allusions are more likely to be found in conjunction with the prophecy of the devastating destruction of Britain/Europe and its ideals, whereby the political entities of Britain/Europe are being objectified or personified, as in Examples (1c,d).

(1a). “It’s started a few years ago and *the tsunami* that is going to hit billions of people is already beginning. [...] Somehow Ms. Merkel does not see the handwriting on the wall and seems very interested in foolishly taking care of German problem of short duration that *will sink all in the EU*” (*Guardian*, comment section, 20 Sept 2019; emphasis added).

(1b). “[...] accepting this reality is happening will eventually see *our vessel sink with all lost, fix the leak, fix the Middle East before it all spills over into Europe*” (*Guardian*, comment section, 4 Sept 2019; emphasis added).

(1c). “A *Muslim Invasion* that *will change the face of Europe* forever. *Destroyed*, the freedoms hard fought for millennia, gone” (*Guardian*, comment section, 20 Sept 2019; emphasis added).

(1d). “I do not understand why politicians try to *destroy Europe, European culture and our values, this is invasion*” (*Daily Mail*, comment section, 5 Sept 2019; emphasis added).

Although the above-mentioned natural disaster and war metaphors are found in both the sub-corpora i.e. the sub-corpus derived out of more liberal, left-inclined news outlets and the sub-corpus derived out of more conservative, right-inclined papers, animal comparisons are quite prevalent in the *Daily Mail* and *Sun* sub-corpora, purely based on racist ideologies. Regarding the argumentative topoi, animal metaphors show a positive correlation with arguments of migrants as a financial threat to the social welfare system of the host state (argument of economic burden) and a strategy of direct dissimulation of the in-group and out-group cultural values (cultural threat) (Charteris-Black 2014, 135; Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 48).

Historically, animal comparisons and imagery supported the morality of social exclusion and were intentionally juxtaposed to encourage the perpetration of aggressive

deviations towards unknown persons (Andrighetto et al. 2016, 630). The same applies in the corpus under analysis as shown in Examples (2a, c). Exclusion and aggression towards a particular social group can be achieved easily with less moral limits provided that this group is described as non-human, inferior and harmful. Complete dissimulation is also expressed via xenonyms like illegal aliens, alien culture and alien holding centres (referring to refugee camps). Even in the value system found in the 'Great Chain in Being', aliens are actually found to fall outside the life we know (cfr. Hawkins 2001, 44). As indicated by Comment (2d) below, migrants are in the category of 'aliens', whose exact meaning includes an underlying racist ideology.

(2a) "build it [...] and they will come [...] are the French that thick? [...] flatten it [...] and remove *the vermin*" (*The Sun*, comment section, 11 Nov 2018; emphasis added).

(2b) "@Bella I agree 100%! Why are these illegal immigrants allowed to just walk into Europe and demand that we look after them? They should either be denied entry or *rounded up* and deported ASAP. ...WE DON'T WANT THEM FFS!" (*The Sun*, comment section, 11 Nov 2018; emphasis in italics added).

(2c) "If you don't want them, protect your borders. we don't want your criminal *parasite* refugees" (*The Sun*, comment section, 11 Nov 2019, Trev Stans; emphasis added).

(2d) "Actually we can stop calling them migrants now because this lot are actually illegal *aliens* either by choice or design" (*The Sun*, comment section, 11 Nov 2019, David Willey; emphasis added).

3.2 Novel creations and less established metaphors

Regarding the topic of the push- and pull-factors and terms like refugee, asylum seeker and economic migrant, religious metaphors (e.g. the land of milk and honey, the Promised Land), mythological metaphors (e.g. the Irish myth of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow), and more secular, consumerist-driven metaphors (the country shopping, the asylum shoppers) are very popular in the text corpus examined. Particularly, the shopping context appears to have had another lease of life within the discursive arena of Brexit. According to Moore, (2013), the peak usage of the term asylum shopping occurred in the U.K. newspapers between 2001 and 2003; a time when further expansion of the Schengen zone, inception of the E.U.-wide fingerprint database EURODAC and the Dublin Regulation dominated the news; since then the term has continually declined until 2011.

The subject of the migration drove the Brexit referendum, and the two discourses that became intertwined explained why the shopping metaphors reappeared. In the shopping context, Europe is perceived as a shop with several items (countries) on sale from which the costumers (the migrants) can freely choose. German Chancellor Merkel is said to have advertised some of the E.U. countries' benefits to entice migrants to journey to Western European countries such as Germany and the U.K. Merkel's famous positive adage, 'We will manage (*Wir schaffen das*)', is said to have been a catastrophic mistake in antimigration speeches either as general statements or in interviews with leaders like Nigel Farage and Donald Trump.

(3a) "These people are not fleeing. They are country shopping for the best welfare they can find. Sympathy is becoming non-existent for these chancers and violent, demanding thugs" (*Guardian*, comment section, 20 Sep 2018).

(3b) "And Italy, Germany, Spain, France and all the other countries that were not good enough for them on their journey to the promised land of milk, honey" (*Daily Mail*, comment section, 30 July 2017).

(3c) “Congratulations to Frau Merkel for her absolutely absurd statement welcoming all migrants to the EU. People smugglers throughout Africa, the Indian sub-continent and the Middle East now have the perfect sales aid in persuading people to engage their services to get to the promised land” (*Guardian*, comment section, 20 Sep 2019).

(3d) “If we left the EU and stopped handing out free houses and benefits then they’d have nothing to come here for. As long as there is that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow then they will continue to come. We’ve not got the money or resources to help everyone, we’ve got our own problems here in the UK with work-shy scroungers” (*Daily Mail*, comment section, 30 July 2019).

3.3 Mixed metaphors and their argumentative function

The fact that mixed metaphors are used comparatively often is striking. However, it should be mentioned that this paper is rather liberal in its definition of metaphors that can be categorised as ‘mixed’. Barnden (2016) explains parallel and serial mixing as follows. Whereas parallel mixing implies that the same Target A is conceived both as B and as C more or less simultaneously in a stretch of discourse, with B and C being sharply divergent source subject matters, the serial mixing involves ‘metaphor chaining’, i.e. A is viewed as B whereby B is seen as C (Barnden 2016, 76). This study does follow Barnden thoroughly, but is nevertheless aligned with it, namely in the analysis that a single source can be used to conceptualise multiple targets (more or less) simultaneously. In most of the examples of mixing recorded in this corpus, the source domains that are the exponents of a mix are well-established domains in the discourse history of migration metaphors. We encountered combinations of container/natural disasters, natural disasters/invasions, invasions/animals, animals/national body, etc.

In most cases, these mixed metaphors are initially imagistically incongruent, as Kövecses (2016, 5) puts it, and a variety of questions are asked: Why is such seemingly incompatible pairs chosen at a specific stage of the discourse? Are the disjunctions unique to the reader so that they can find meaning in the intended message? Just how far can the formation of such mixed metaphors (and discourse participants' responses thereto) be capable of contributing to the raging debate over the mental activity of metaphors? The two theories of linguistic and cognitive metaphor have encountered the challenges of accounting with the reasons why metaphors are mixed in the discourse, and even more so, why the mixing seldom leads to disruption of communication, or even lack of comprehension. It has been suggested that in cases in which verbal metaphoric expressions actually activate the underlying conceptual system about which they converse, participants should be barred from blending metaphors with incompatible elements of semantic and pragmatic meaning – corresponding linguistic terms concerning the same conceptual metaphor should rather be used (cfr. Kövecses 2016, 3; Muller 2016, 38).

Several reasons have been postulated to explain the incidence of mixed metaphors, each reason focusing on varying meaning of levels (e.g. clause level, distribution of metaphoric expressions across conversation turns), context (e.g. immediate co-text, wider discursive context) and cognition (e.g. imagistic (in)congruence, (non-)deliberateness of metaphor use). Kimmel (2010, 110) adds that, most mixed metaphors have been processed without trouble since the grammar of the text imposes minor effort to conceptualize mixed metaphors. Kimmel asserts that the more remote and peripheral the clauses are in which the conflicting metaphors transgress, the less need there will be to organise them. Similar arguments were presented by Cameron (2016), who, having analyzed the use of mixed metaphors in the flow of situated talk, claims that they aid in speech segmentation. She contends that metaphor clusters do not appear to present an impediment to meaning but must instead be regarded as discursive resources that can help advance discourse dynamics of migration metaphors in the flow of singly-constructed meaning or, alternatively, can be

successfully mixed to form more elaborate and more/less coherent metaphorical scenarios, or that they can be accompanied by a shift in a discursive topic.

According to Cameron, as a discourse-dynamics scholar, it is a kind of illusion seen out of discourse when it is opined that our multiple metaphors sometimes collide (Cameron 2016, 29). A similar conclusion is made by Müller (2016), who also pays attention to the meaning and purpose of metaphors in specific discourse situations. Müller deduces that mixing metaphors is the result of paying closer attention to less familiar attributes of the metaphoric meaning as informed by the study of dynamic and flexible attention people give to meaning as it follows the contingencies of the communicative experience they live in (Müller 2016, 31) – the metaphor mixing shall be used to alter the pattern of semantic salience to produce alternate forms and levels of activated metaphoric meaning (Müller 2016, 32).

Although it is not always clear how to make a decision in favour of the available corpus examples regarding 1) whether such metaphors are metaphors in the first place (a situation in which the definition of a mixed metaphor [as suggested by Steen 2011, 2017] comes in handy), and 2) whether the reader is expected to conceptually unify both pieces of information in the mixed metaphor (i.e. whether the involvement of information is generally conceptualised as such by discourse participants). To begin with, we can consider those cases whereby mixing involves the syntactical integration (e.g. NP postmodified by PP) or that which is directly linked to one another (e.g. subject [agent] + verb [action performed by the agent]).

(4a) Describing them as warm was correct – unpalatable to the hand wringers and do-gooders but there is no stopping them – like *an army of locusts*” (*Daily Mail*, comment section, 30 July 2018; emphasis added).

(4b) “This is an invasion and not a crisis. It’s like *a swarm of crickets invading* Europe, causing mayhem and upset in our western societies” (*Guardian*, comment section, 20 Sep 2019; emphasis added).

(4c) “How else can you describe *the hordes of pests that are mustering* with intent to invade the UK” (*Daily Mail*, comment section, 30 July 2018; emphasis added).

The above paradigms of animal + invasion mixing exemplified are not cognitively demanding – we cannot see indications of perceived incongruity under the subsequent comments. This could be due to several reasons: First, verbs such as invade and muster can be used with both humans and animals. An ACOCA collocates search confirms that human and (army, troop, soldier, enemy, neighbour) and animal agents (insect, ant, bee, coyote, snail, worm) can occupy the noun slot in front of invade. We likewise find the verb muster (to gather in a place) in both military (muster the army, militia, squad, infantry) and farming (mustering horses, sheep, cattle, storks) contexts. Thus, it is immaterial to suggest that the source or target concept of animal metaphors pertaining to immigrants is more salient when processing the mixed metaphor as both can be easily integrated with lexical items of the invasion domain. Second, they may be conversant with the Biblical phrase an ‘army of locusts’ (Joel 2, NIV), and it is easy to create an image of a locust army dressed for battle.

5) “This is all caused by Merkel [...] she *threw the doors wide open*, so they all started to flood there, now she *slams them shut* and leaves all the countries en route to Germany to face the consequences” (*Guardian*, comment section, 20 Sep 2018; emphasis added).

This mixture of confinement and natural calamity is likewise quite unobjectionable and stretches over a half dozen clauses, reminding us of a rather workmanlike script. While the German government broadcasts such a policy as open house, throwing the doors to their



country wide open (permitting refugees to enter Germany without due bureaucratic process), it shuts the doors in the face of migrants, providing them with an incentive to wade into the country in large numbers). Mixing container and water metaphors is rather effective as only a certain volume of water can fit into a container without breaking it; likewise, anybody on board (the in-group in our case scenario) could drown when too much water occupies a limited space. This mixed metaphor does not appear to interfere online processing imagistically since the compatibility of the two conceptual metaphors enables the possibility of having both simultaneously activated and suited to one situational scenario. The same cannot be said the same about the following mixing example:

(6) “European civilization is being killed off now by these useful idiots of the West who support and demand permissiveness and openness towards the mass immigration influx which is engulfing Europe. The idea of making it carbon-emission free is remarkable, but it is just that, an idea, and an idea that lacks a practical step and a clear direction” (Guardian, comment section, 20 Sep 2018).

Though the metaphors of a natural disaster (wave) and invasion (is invading) are normal in the migration discourse, a combination of both is likely to cause cognitive dissonance. The verb ‘invade’ and noun ‘wave’ are not often jointly used, thus impeding easy visualization. Why then, does a noticeable number of incidences of metaphors in the corpus appear as such mixed metaphors? Considering the co-text of the metaphor in the turns ‘these useful idiots of the West’ ‘who are [...] destroying European civilization’ along with the contents of further turns by the same author, the probable interpretation of the mixed metaphor appears to be the reinforcement of the threat scenario. In other words, the aim of dramatic effect permits the merging of two apparently incompatible metaphors, which can traditionally be observed concomitant with the topoi of threat/danger and quantity/ numbers. This makes

the argumentative purpose seem to matter more than the internal logic of the mixed metaphor per se.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

The study of the current corpus revealed that most of the metaphors in recurring cultural discourses such as the migration debate can be classified as discourse metaphors – readers' comments are laced with metaphorical phrases that have become standardised in this discourse and refer to broadly stable metaphorical mappings as major framing strategies (Zinken et al. 2008). In the actual news reports and feature articles, writers repeatedly used a limited range of tokens associated with natural disaster and invasion scenarios. One may enquire about the degree to which aspects of the source domain which may have historically provided incentives to the metaphor remain sensitive to discourse participants. An answer to this question would necessitate empirical psycholinguistic enquiry and it would be fascinating to ascertain whether different cohorts of the discourse participants (i.e. the participants with a democratic or a migrant background and those belonging to the ingroup) offer divergent ratings on such metaphors, e.g. in terms of their perceived discriminatory impact.

Considering the British migration discourse from a diachronic perspective, one might notice that the prevalence of the definite conceptual metaphor changes over time. Moore (2013) demonstrated that the term of asylum shopping emerged in the political and media discourse on migration at the end of the 80s, frequency of use peaking in the early 2000s following which it became background again. Moore found that the fluctuating popularity of this metaphor can be explained by the need to work with the prevailing discourses of the time (EURODAC, E.U. asylum policy) and by hidden culture-specific logics linked to both Britain's postcoloniality and neoliberal modernity (Moore 351, 354–60). The shopping metaphor seemingly making a comeback in migration debates since 2014/2015 leaves one

to ponder the circumstances of its reappearance. I suggest that the tight interfusion of the latest immigration rhetoric with the Brexit discussion led to the reappearance of the shopping situation. The new or at least less popular metaphors would largely be observed in the comment sections below the line.

Mixing of metaphors was also prevalent in these sections. Mixed metaphors in the corpus under study appeared to be rather argumentative in nature. In most cases, the most common reason behind combining two conventionalised conceptual metaphors was the metaphor of exaggerated enlargement. The arguers used hyperbole to emphasise their point and express their attitude towards migration and pro-migrant policies. This could be argued in support of discourse-dynamics accounts of metaphor (mixing), according to which metaphoric meaning is not a fixed product but develops during discursive processes, and according to which the importance and activation of specific aspects of the source and target domains largely depends on the co-text and context of the metaphor under consideration (cfr. e.g. Cameron 2016; Müller 2016).

In other words, the source domain does not appear to be previously endowed with a meaning focus that can subsequently be projected onto the target domain, but the foci that end up being used in the projection process do so in the discourse co-text and context, in the interplay of source and target, and through the dynamic manifestation of salience structures and shifts (cfr. also Kövecses 2013, 16–7).

Mentioning some (positive or negative) aspects of the source idea, the topos-related argumentation scripts were activated and later taken up in further roles of the discussion. In particular, the topoi of desirability and menace, to an extent very frequent in the discourse on migration (e.g. Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Baker et al. 2008; Charteris-Black 2014), became active by focusing the attention of the discourse participants on certain elements of meaning. One of the unexpected results deals with an uptake of metaphors in readers' comments. The data could not confirm the hypothesis that the metaphors of migration that have been used in the news articles can directly influence the rhetoric of the below-the-line debates that

would follow. Although it is undoubtedly true that the idea about equivalence of some of the conceptual metaphors and metaphorical expressions happened to be shared between the two sub-corpora, the concrete trigger effects between articles and related comment sections could not be registered. Both the said metaphors used in comments written by the readers appeared to be mostly shaped by the topoi of the argumentation on migration.

Nevertheless, the fact that mass media texts target a large part of the population, and to a certain extent also prescribe private discourse on migration makes it onerous to answer the question of what exactly stimulated the use of metaphor X at a given phase of the discourse. The literature on modern migration rhetoric – including migration metaphors – is extensive, and judging by the findings of other authors, there seems to be a tendency to delineate migrants through negative metaphors in public discourse. A few exceptions in which metaphors construe migrants more favourably, e.g. as guests, as valuable commodities or as victims in need of assistance, are referenced in Taylor's (2021) diachronic study on migration metaphors in the *Times Online* corpus and in Boeva's (2016) analysis of British and American news sources.

Such representations were absent from the present corpus, though, which ties in with Taylor's observation that the guest metaphor is mainly used to refer to past migration movements rather than recent or current ones, and with Bennett's (2016) hypothesis that the nature of the migration discourse always shifts in reaction to specific events. There is preliminary evidence on the existence of disparities between the self-representation metaphors migrants employ and those of migration metaphors embraced by the mainstream media (cfr., e.g. Catalano 2016). Consequently, it would be useful to have more direct migrant voices represented in news agendas and the mainstream discourse on the issue, including perspectives on how to metaphorically discuss and frame the concept.

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Framing the Other: The Representation of Muslims in Post-Colonial Indian Cinema

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Abstract

Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has long been a powerful medium for shaping cultural narratives and public perceptions. This paper explores the portrayal of Muslims in Indian cinema, focusing on the dynamics of “othering” that have emerged in the post-colonial context. Through a critical analysis of select films *Sarfarosh* (Matthan, 1999), *Fanaa* (Kohli, 2006), *Kurbaan* (D’Silva, 2009), and *New York* (Khan, 2009) this study examines how cinematic representations have often marginalized Muslim characters, depicting them through stereotypes that reinforce communal biases and socio-political divides. Drawing on theories of othering and post-colonial critique, this paper argues that these portrayals are not merely reflective of societal prejudices but also actively contribute to constructing and perpetuating these biases. By scrutinizing the narratives, character arcs, and visual cues used in popular films, the study highlights the nuanced ways Muslims are positioned as the “Other” within the national imaginary. Furthermore, this paper situates the discussion within the broader framework of South Asian cinema’s engagement with global cosmopolitanism, interrogating how international market forces and local socio-political contexts intersect to shape these cinematic narratives. The aim is to uncover these representations’ ideological underpinnings and suggest pathways for future inclusive and diverse portrayals. Ultimately, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of cinema in reflecting and shaping societal attitudes, advocating for a more nuanced and empathetic representation of marginalized communities in Indian cinema.

Keywords: othering; Indian cinema; Muslim representation; post-colonial; stereotypes.

Introduction

The depiction of Muslims in Indian cinema, particularly within the context of Hindi cinema, has evolved significantly in response to the shifting sociopolitical landscapes of various eras. During the 1950s and 1960s, often referred to as the Nehruvian era, films mirrored the state's promotion of a "tolerant" secularism. This period frequently showcased an idealized Muslim world, characterized by the portrayal of *nawabs* and the upper-class Muslim elite, whose grandeur and distinct cultural practices were depicted with reverence. However, the 1970s and 1980s marked a notable departure from this idealized representation, as a new politics of minority representation began to emerge. During these decades, the portrayal of aristocratic Muslims dwindled, and a trend emerged that linked Muslim characters with Mumbai's underworld, aligning them with criminality.

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a profound shift with the rise of the Hindu right-wing movement, culminating in the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992. This event, coupled with the ensuing communal violence across India, represented a critical juncture in contemporary Indian history. The Babri Masjid demolition and the subsequent riots became pivotal themes in Indian cinema, leading to the emergence of the "Muslim political" genre—a cinematic space where religion and politics were intricately intertwined. The proliferation and visibility of these films were further amplified following the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by Al-Qaeda members. Bollywood's engagement with these themes often depicted an ideological conflict between the nationalist protagonist and the "jihadi terrorist," contributing significantly to the construction of a monolithic and often antagonistic Muslim identity.

Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, stands as one of the most influential cultural industries globally, with its narratives deeply embedded in the social and political fabric of the nation. Over the decades, Bollywood has played a crucial role in

shaping public consciousness, often acting as a mirror reflecting societal values, fears, and aspirations. However, this mirror does not always present an unbiased or inclusive reflection. Instead, it has, at times, been a medium that perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces existing power dynamics, particularly in the representation of marginalized communities.

One of the most poignant examples of this phenomenon is the portrayal of Muslims in post-colonial Indian cinema. Despite the community's significant contribution to the nation's cultural and historical tapestry, Muslims have frequently been depicted as the "Other" in Bollywood narratives. This process of othering—a concept rooted in post-colonial theory—serves to marginalize and alienate Muslim characters, often reducing them to mere stereotypes that echo broader socio-political anxieties.

This paper delves into the intricate dynamics of Muslim representation in Indian cinema, examining how popular films such as *Sarfarosh* (Matthan, 1999), *Fanaa* (Kohli, 2006), *Kurbaan* (D'Silva, 2009), and *New York* (Khan, 2009) contribute to constructing and perpetuating communal biases. By analyzing these films, this study seeks to uncover the ideological underpinnings of these portrayals and explore how they resonate within both local and global contexts. Furthermore, the paper will situate these representations within the broader discourse on South Asian cinema's engagement with global cosmopolitanism, highlighting the intersection of international market forces and domestic socio-political realities.

Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the power of cinema in shaping societal attitudes, advocating for a more nuanced and empathetic representation of marginalized communities, particularly Muslims, in Indian cinema.

Literature Review

The representation of Muslims in Indian cinema has been a subject of considerable scholarly attention, particularly in the context of post-colonial discourse and cultural

studies. The cinematic portrayal of Muslims as the “Other” has been critically analyzed through various lenses, including those of stereotyping, communalism, and the socio-political dynamics of the Indian nation-state.

One of the foundational frameworks for understanding these representations is the concept of “othering,” which has its roots in post-colonial theory. Scholars such as Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), laid the groundwork for examining how the West constructs the East as the “Other,” a notion that has been adapted to analyze intra-national dynamics within post-colonial societies like India. Said’s framework has been instrumental in understanding how Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has often positioned Muslims as a marginalized and exoticized community, reinforcing the dichotomy between the dominant Hindu “self” and the Muslim “other.”

Further building on Said’s ideas, scholars like Rachel Dwyer and Jyotika Viridi have examined the evolution of Muslim representation in Indian cinema. Dwyer, in her analysis of Bollywood, highlights how the portrayal of Muslims has shifted over time, reflecting broader socio-political changes. During the Nehruvian era, for instance, Muslims were often depicted as noble and aristocratic, embodying the secular ideals of the new Indian state. However, as Viridi notes in *The Cinematic ImagiNation* (2003), these representations began to shift in the 1970s and 1980s, with Muslim characters increasingly portrayed as criminals or members of the underworld, mirroring the growing communal tensions in the country.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the subsequent rise of Hindu nationalism marked a significant turning point in the portrayal of Muslims in Indian cinema. Scholars such as Anupama Chopra and Shubhra Gupta have documented how this period saw the emergence of a new genre of films that intertwined religion and politics, often depicting Muslims as antagonistic figures involved in terrorism or extremist activities. This trend was further exacerbated in the post-9/11 era, as global discourses on terrorism began to influence Bollywood narratives. Films like *Sarfarosh*

(1999) and *Fanaa* (2006) are often cited in this context for their portrayal of Muslim characters as threats to national security, reinforcing the stereotype of the Muslim “terrorist.”

Critical to this discourse is the work of Tejaswini Ganti, who explores how Bollywood’s global reach has influenced the representation of marginalized communities, including Muslims. Ganti argues that the intersection of global market forces and local socio-political realities has led to the production of films that cater to both domestic and international audiences, often at the expense of nuanced and empathetic portrayals of minority groups. This commodification of Muslim identity in cinema has been criticized for perpetuating harmful stereotypes and contributing to the marginalization of the community both within and outside India.

Additionally, scholars like Priya Jaikumar and Shohini Ghosh have engaged with the implications of these cinematic representations for communal harmony and social cohesion in India. Jaikumar, in her work on post-colonial Indian cinema, emphasizes the need for a more inclusive cinematic discourse that recognizes the diversity and complexity of Muslim identities in India. Ghosh, on the other hand, critiques the simplistic binary of “us versus them” that is often perpetuated in Bollywood narratives, calling for a more critical engagement with the socio-political contexts that shape these representations.

In sum, the existing body of literature underscores the complex and often problematic nature of Muslim representation in Indian cinema. The prevailing trend of portraying Muslims as the “Other” not only reflects but also reinforces societal prejudices, contributing to the broader discourse on communalism and identity politics in India. This literature review sets the stage for a deeper analysis of specific films like *Sarfarosh*, *Fanaa*, *Kurbaan*, and *New York*, which are examined in this paper to illustrate how these cinematic narratives continue to shape and influence public perceptions of the Muslim community.

Analysis and Discussion

The primary research problem addressed in this paper is the persistent “othering” of Muslims in Bollywood films, which reflects and perpetuates societal biases and communal divides. This issue is rooted in the historical and socio-political dynamics of post-colonial India, where cinema has often served as a tool for constructing national identity. The problem is exacerbated by the global reach of Bollywood, which allows these representations to influence not only domestic audiences but also international perceptions of Muslims.

Another significant research problem is the lack of nuanced and empathetic portrayals of Muslims in mainstream Indian cinema. Instead of reflecting the diversity and complexity of Muslim identities, these films often resort to reductive stereotypes, particularly in the portrayal of Muslims as terrorists or extremists. This trend raises concerns about the role of cinema in shaping public consciousness and its impact on communal harmony in India.

The portrayal of Muslims in the selected films – *Sarfarosh*, *Fanaa*, *Kurbaan*, and *New York* – serves as a critical lens through which to examine the broader issue of Muslim representation in Indian cinema. These films, produced in the post-liberalization era of the 1990s and 2000s, are particularly illustrative of how Bollywood narratives have evolved in response to the changing socio-political landscape.

The Dynamics of ‘Othering’:

In *Sarfarosh* (1999), the Muslim character is depicted as an antagonist linked to cross-border terrorism, reflecting the post-Kargil War anxieties and the rising anti-Pakistan sentiment in India. This portrayal aligns with the broader trend of associating Muslims with violence and disloyalty to the nation, a theme that is further explored in *Fanaa* (2006). In *Fanaa*, the male Muslim protagonist is a terrorist who exploits his

love interest, a blind Hindu woman, symbolizing the betrayal of trust and the dangers posed by “the enemy within.”

Similarly, *Kurbaan* (2009) and *New York* (2009) engage with the post-9/11 global narrative of Islamophobia, portraying Muslims as either victims of racial profiling or perpetrators of terrorism. In *Kurbaan*, the film explores the dual identities of Muslims in the diaspora, where characters oscillate between being peace-loving citizens and radical extremists. *New York* delves into the complexities of Muslim identity in the post-9/11 world, yet it ultimately reinforces the notion of Muslims as suspects within the global war on terror framework.

These films employ visual and narrative strategies that emphasize the “otherness” of Muslim characters, often through their attire, language, and actions, which are contrasted with those of the Hindu protagonists. This process of othering not only marginalizes Muslim characters but also reinforces communal divides by presenting Muslims as fundamentally different from and opposed to the national “self.”

Socio-Political and Global Contexts:

The portrayal of Muslims in these films cannot be divorced from the socio-political contexts in which they were produced. The 1990s witnessed the rise of Hindu nationalism and the subsequent hardening of communal identities, which was reflected in the increasingly antagonistic depiction of Muslims in cinema. The Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 and the communal riots that followed marked a turning point in Indian cinema, where Muslim characters began to be depicted more frequently as threats to the secular fabric of the nation.

The post-9/11 global landscape further influenced Bollywood's portrayal of Muslims, as seen in *Kurbaan* and *New York*. These films tapped into the global

discourse on terrorism and security, aligning Bollywood's narratives with international trends in media representation. However, this alignment often came at the cost of reinforcing stereotypes and simplifying the complex realities of Muslim lives, both in India and abroad.

Implications for the National Imaginary:

The persistent portrayal of Muslims as the "Other" in Bollywood films has significant implications for the national imaginary. By framing Muslims as threats to national security and social cohesion, these films contribute to the exclusion of Muslims from the imagined community of the Indian nation. This exclusion is not just symbolic but has real-world consequences, as it fuels communal tensions and justifies discriminatory practices against Muslims in various spheres of life.

Moreover, the global reach of Bollywood means that these representations shape perceptions of Muslims beyond India's borders, contributing to the broader narrative of Islamophobia. The portrayal of Muslims in Indian cinema thus becomes part of a larger discourse that links Muslim identity with terrorism and violence, further entrenching negative stereotypes.

Toward Inclusive Representations:

To address the research problems identified in this paper, it is crucial for Indian cinema to move toward more inclusive and diverse representations of Muslims. This requires filmmakers to move beyond simplistic binaries of good versus evil and to explore the multifaceted identities of Muslims in India. Films like *My Name is Khan* (2010) and *Gully Boy* (2019) offer examples of more nuanced portrayals, where Muslim

characters are depicted with depth and complexity, highlighting their struggles, aspirations, and contributions to society.

By challenging the dominant narratives and offering alternative representations, Indian cinema can play a pivotal role in fostering greater understanding and empathy between communities. This shift is not only necessary for promoting social cohesion within India but also for countering the global narrative of Islamophobia.

Conclusion

The representation of Muslims in post-colonial Indian cinema, particularly in Bollywood, reveals a complex and often troubling narrative that mirrors broader societal tensions and political shifts. Over the decades, the cinematic portrayal of Muslims has evolved from depictions of a once-celebrated aristocracy to a more insidious association with violence, criminality, and terrorism. This shift not only reflects the changing socio-political landscape in India but also contributes to the reinforcement of communal biases that perpetuate the “othering” of Muslims within the national imaginary.

The analysis of films like *Sarfarosh*, *Fanaa*, *Kurbaan*, and *New York* underscores the powerful role that cinema plays in shaping public perceptions and constructing cultural narratives. These films, while engaging with contemporary issues of nationalism, security, and identity, often resort to reductive stereotypes that simplify the complex realities of Muslim lives. In doing so, they risk perpetuating harmful ideologies that alienate and marginalize a significant portion of the Indian population.

Yet, the discourse on Muslim representation in Indian cinema is not without hope for change. The growing awareness and critique of these portrayals, both within academic circles and among filmmakers, signal a potential shift towards more

inclusive and empathetic representations. Films that challenge the dominant narratives and offer more nuanced depictions of Muslim characters are beginning to emerge, providing a counter-narrative that emphasizes shared humanity over divisive stereotypes.

In conclusion, the task ahead for Indian cinema is to move beyond the simplistic binaries that have long defined its portrayal of Muslims. By embracing the diversity and richness of Muslim identities, filmmakers can contribute to a more inclusive and harmonious vision of Indian society – one that reflects the true plurality of its people. The power of cinema lies not only in its ability to reflect reality but also in its potential to shape a more just and equitable future.

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Trauma and Transformation in Batman

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Abstract

Trauma makes people better or worse than their original selves. A system of values crumbles. The individual is re-defined and re-invented. Sometimes the 'new man' is so transformed that he/she is completely different from the initial person. The lesson offered by the Batman stories is that the traumatized individual takes either of the following paths: he/she is motivated by the tragic experience to do good (Batman's model), or he/she is embittered by it and, considering the whole world guilty for his/her personal misery, channels all the energies to make everybody else suffer indiscriminately in the same way (the villains' path). Trauma, however, does not engender transformation on its own. As a matter of fact, it rarely provokes extreme reactions whatsoever; therefore, the question 'What turns people into heroes, and what turns others into monsters?' is justified, and the response is more complex than only taking trauma into consideration. In this article, we aim to provide an answer to this question by analysing the transformation undergone by three characters in the Batman mythos, such as the Dark Knight himself, Catwoman, and the Joker, set against the background of their respective traumas. In our approach, we seek to investigate how trauma is reflected and refracted in the cultural and artistic form of comic books, animations, and films, specifically within the Batman imaginary. Our purpose is to examine the ways in which these products of popular culture articulate and model responses to trauma, as well as the forms of guidance they can offer for real-life experience. Our point of focus is the *Batman* mythos because personal tragedy fundamentally shapes the destinies of all its characters, whether heroes or villains.

Keywords: Batman; Catwoman; Joker; trauma; family.

1. Introduction

Traumatic Essence: “Sometimes it's only madness that makes us what we are.” (*Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, November 1989)

Although very freely used as a concept, trauma is not discussed anywhere in terms of definition and description in the official document issues of the American Psychiatric Association, the world's leading authority in this field. The latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (referred to as DSM-5-TR from now on), issued by the American Psychiatric Association in 2022, only refers to it in the context of the consequences it produces on the human psyche. Most notably, we infer from the diagnostic criteria of PTSD (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder) what trauma actually is: “Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” (DSM-5-TR 2022, 302) This is practically the only explicit description of trauma in psychiatry's main and official instrument, although one does get more than other 1,000 pages on the disorders that trauma engenders. But even with that little, we deduce that trauma is an assault – or a threat thereof – on a person's life, bodily integrity, and sanctity, or exposure thereto.

The rationale behind the choice of these particular characters – Batman, the Joker, and Catwoman – to illustrate the reconfiguration of the self under the pressure of severe emotional impact or existential shocks is that they represent three manifestations through which trauma functions in the *Batman* universe. Batman exemplifies the sublimation of trauma, the Joker embodies its aggressive corruption, while Catwoman is the limbo where the aspiration for the ideal of the normality of happiness (or the happiness of normality) meets the entrapment in a history of iniquitous struggle to survive.

The main focus of this study will be the effects of personal tragedy on their psyche and the transformations it engendered in their lives and personalities as fictional characters and cultural constructs. The choice to pay direct attention to a representational universe comes from our opinion that the complexity of the characters that comprise it



allows us to analyse them from such a multitude of perspectives that they could be regarded as life lessons in personal development as well. In this respect, we have resorted to a source-based analysis and reconstituted these characters' profiles from comics, films, and animations in which they play central roles. By no means do we consider our investigation exhaustive, especially given the limited scope of the essay. A leading authority in the field of superhero psychology is Professor Travis Langley, author of *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight* (2012), which served as a critical reference for our interpretation, but from which our examination differs in its more applied and specific analysis of character trauma. A more comprehensive exegesis is further developed in our ongoing doctoral research, which addresses archetypal configurations in character construction in the Batman imaginary.

2. Traumatic family: "A home of stolen happiness..." (*Catwoman* #39, 1996, 20)

The overarching Batman mythos is fundamentally rooted in family trauma. In Gotham, both heroes and villains are shaped by formative, often devastating events that occurred within their families during childhood. Batman's parents were murdered in front of him when he was just a little boy (the origin story in *Detective Comics* #33), and his traumatic story appears the simplest and most undisputed. The Joker, on the other hand, is either an abused orphan (Dini et al. 2010–2011¹), a struggling comedian who loses his pregnant wife

¹ When it comes to comic books, which form the essence of this article's corpus, the rendering of the in-text references becomes more problematic than the usual book and article citations for several reasons. First of all, there is never a single person authoring the comic book. While it is true that there is a writer who crafts the story linguistically and narratively, an equal credit also goes to the artist who conveys the story visually, as well as to the inker, colorist, and letterer. That is why we have mentioned all the names of the people involved in authoring a comic book story in the bibliographical list at the end of the article, and we have kept only the writer – followed by the phrase *et al.* – when making the in-text references for the sake of space economy and avoidance of the accumulation of many names that would otherwise be difficult for the reader to follow. Secondly, a great many comic books do not number their pages, which made it impossible for us to indicate the page number where there was none. The absence of such an indication when quoting characters' lines was not an oversight on our part; the page numbers were not present in the comic book from the outset. And thirdly, words and phrases in comic books are often highlighted for stylistic reasons with bolded or italicised formats of lettering by the writers and artists of the story. If such situations



in an explosion (Moore et al. 1988/2019), or a destitute individual battling mental illness, with a harrowing history of neglectful and abusive foster parenting - a man whom poverty and ill health have condemned to a precarious existence on the margins of society and reason (Phillips 2019).

The Catwoman, although not a villain in the traditional sense, cannot be considered a heroine either. Her constant walk along the thin line between law and lawlessness - a waitress/escort (Reeves 2022), a prostitute (Newell et al. 1989), a madam (Miller et al. 1986), or a cat burglar (in the 1992-1995 *Batman: The Animated Series* and Christopher Nolan's 2012 film *The Dark Knight Rises*) - is deeply rooted in a childhood scarred by familial trauma and foster care abuse. Her parentage is uncertain. In some versions, Selina Kyle's mother is psychologically unstable and eventually dies by suicide (Lustbader et al. 1994); in others, she is a bar girl working for mafia boss Carmine Falcone, who arranges her murder when Selina is still a child (Reeves 2022). In this latter narrative, Falcone is also Selina's biological father - something that does not prevent him from trying to kill her too when his power is threatened. Selina's father is variously portrayed in multiple ways as well: as an abusive alcoholic who drinks himself to death, leaving a teenage Selina to discover both her parents' corpses (Carlton et al. 2000), as Carmine Falcone (Loeb et al. 1996-1997), or as another mob boss, Rex "The Lion" Calabrese (Snyder et al. 2014). Yet no matter the version, a background of familial abuse is always present, and she carries the burden of a traumatic past seemingly forever and inescapably. The most benign role Selina has been assigned is that of a quiet, insipid secretary working for a corrupt, ego-maniacal tycoon (Burton 1992). Yet even this incarnation transforms into the most violent and vengeful version of Catwoman, returning from death to get back at those who exploited her.

occurred when quoting from comic books, the author of this present article did not alter this style but kept it as such.



3. Traumatic Love: “Half the bat is *man*, just as half the cat is *woman*.” (*Catwoman* #4, 1989, 16)

The parents represent the child’s first contact with life and the world. These are made known to the child through the mediation of the parents, who are the infant’s first determinant influences and models. And, if one of them is missing, the child (future adult) looks for a substitute in the people met throughout life to compensate for the handicap of not having either the masculine or the feminine side of personality sufficiently developed. But what happens when the individual is deprived of both parents, especially as a consequence of a tragic act, as in Bruce Wayne’s case?

The warmth, nurture, and love of Bruce’s parents towards him, the intensity of the pain caused by their loss, trigger the need for the loved son left behind to reconnect with them and with that lost childhood paradise. For this reason, Bruce subconsciously searches for parental figures who would replace, rectify, make up for, or, at least, attenuate that loss. He, too, as it normally happens in such cases, finds surrogate parents in the persons of Leslie Thompkins and Alfred Pennyworth. They make up Bruce’s family circle of intimacy, and the relationship they have with him is that of a mother and father, respectively, to a son. Leslie and Alfred are the people to whom Bruce turns when his natural parents are taken from his life and who care for him and his personal and educational development. (O’Neil et al. March 1976, Grant et al. Oct. 94).

The individual, throughout his life, looks for close, or personal/intimate, relationships with people who resemble the model of his childhood parents. In some cases, it becomes pathological and, in such situations, we speak of the mother (or father, respectively) complex (Jung 1959/1969). In boys, the mother complex (the pathological aspect of the mother archetype) produces homosexuality, Don Juanism, and sometimes impotence. In girls, the mother complex has two opposite effects: either a hypertrophy of the feminine instinct, or an atrophy of it. The former instance is characterized by either an “overdevelopment of Eros” (Jung 1959/1969, 88) or an exaggeration of the maternal



element, as part of an “intensification of all female instincts” (Jung 1959/1969, 87). The overdevelopment of the feminine *eros* comes hand in hand with an unconscious incestuous projection of the relation with the father as the first male presence in a girl’s life and world, and, hence, with jealousy of the mother with whom she is in a life-long competition for the father. In Jung’s view, this type of woman is characterized by utter unconsciousness, as it favours exalting and passionate relationships for their intense romantic substance and nothing else. They lack the maternal instinct, a reminder of their mother, and they are especially fascinated with married men for the thrilling pleasure of breaking marriages (as they would do with their father’s relationship with their mother). When they reach this goal, their interest rapidly fades away once they have separated the father from the mother. They are particularly appealing to men with very limited sexual life who find in such women the projection of their own anima (the feminine part of their psyche) (Jung 1959/1969, 106-107).

In Batman’s world, this type of woman is represented by Catwoman. Rapturously beautiful and sensual, she is uncontrollably drawn to the inaccessible Batman and to stealing as a *modus vivendi*. She never has any intention of being a spiteful criminal but ends up on the wrong side of the law because of her total, and quite ingénue, oblivion of any ethical or moral prescriptions. This is what actually makes her intensely feminine and attractive to Batman and other men. Catwoman is instinctively good, but instinctually bad. She knows theft is a crime, yet she still does it even when her means are more than enough for a good life. Such life becomes uninteresting to her eventually, so she finds herself unable to resist the constant temptation of spicing it up. She can never reform; any such attempts fail all the time because her nature is always stronger than reason (represented by Batman and the law). One of her symbolic images is the cat, a highly independent feline who is characterized by mystery, agility, grace, versatility, curiosity, but also by selfishness and attention-seeking. Since the cat meets all the attributes of the unconscious, it is also considered a traveller between two worlds: the known and the unknown, the



conscious and the unconscious, life and death, which explains Catwoman's (literal) acrobatics between the two sides of the law with the desire of being part of both but actually belonging to neither. The cat is Selina's totem of strength. It is empowering just like the bat is for Bruce, not simply to scare others: "A long time ago, before I put on this mask, I was afraid of everything." (Grayson et al. July 1998)

To Batman/Bruce Wayne, Catwoman/Selina poses an inexplicable attraction since she operates in the world of the criminals against whom he has committed his lifetime to fight, and since she inspires him absolutely zero trust. In the Golden Age, Batman is totally smitten with her wild femininity (Finger et al. June 1940) and often lets her get away (Finger et al. March 1940) while Catwoman, too, has reveries of the mysterious, testosterone-filled Dark Knight who exerts upon her his saviour complex (Finger et al. September 1940, 13). In the subsequent eras, the two have frequent amorous encounters on the rooftops of Gotham and eventually mature and manage to get married and have a child. Their daughter, not in the least surprising at this point of our discourse, takes up her father's crime-fighting mission and is in irreconcilable conflict with her mother over the father: [Selina to her daughter:] "Soon I'll be dead. You'll have everything. But I'll have your father, so I'll be fine." (King et al. August 2022).

Catwoman's penchant for stealing, although becoming quite obsessive-compulsive at a certain point ("I could steal the world blind, from alleys to penthouses, and it still wouldn't be enough. I am a thief -- and stealing is what I do. Not so much for the prize or the possession or even the profit... but for the art of doing it..." - Moench et al. Oct. 1996, 2), is not an inborn impulse, but an instrumental modality of ensuring basic needs, about which people like Bruce Wayne, for instance, do not have to worry (Langley 2012, 264). It is the element which, more than crime, separates Batman and Catwoman's worlds incorrigibly and aggravates their perception of such respective spheres: "But we've been at odds from the start [...] Because my world is all just shades of grey, Batman. That's why you'll never really understand me. It's about good people being forced into bad situations.

That's my territory... In between right and wrong. Which is a place you can never go. And we both know it." (Brubaker et al. January 2002, 13-14).

We cannot help but notice in her evolution the repercussions of a troubled childhood: the preference for living the moment although that unconscious unbridled instinct most often leads her to trouble, or worse – in prison, after witnessing the fragility of life with the discovery of her parents' corpses; the impossibility to be part of a structured social system as a result of a long record of maltreatment in foster institutions; the inability to form bonds and relationships because of her aggressive self-sufficiency and chronic mistrust in people; and the repeated failure to remodel as a law-abiding citizen on account of her incapability to follow reason to the detriment of impulse despite conscious positioning on the side of good nearly all the time. Just like in Batman's case, the costume enables her to fight back at the cruel world and its merciless unfairness: "I can't take it. But she can. The Catwoman -- she can stand it all. Everything crummy that life can throw at her, she just throws it right back -- and it doesn't even faze her -- Nothing hurts her -- It's like she's dead -- Oh, Maggie -- it's so much easier being dead!" (Newell et al. 1989, 9)

Nevertheless, Batman falls in love with her, both for her neurotic sexuality (a reminder of his mother) and her good nature (consonant with his hope in people), and, after constant fruitless efforts to have her reformed, he accepts her for who she is. Surprisingly, that is the moment Catwoman starts operating exclusively within the law, or at least in its interest, which is an indicator of both her and Batman's maturation. To anthropologist Joseph Campbell, the acceptance of womanhood is the prerequisite for veritable manhood and heroism, and meeting with the feminine principle is finding love, life, and eternity (Campbell 2004, 106, 109).

4. Traumatic Joy: "Why be a disfigured outcast when I can be a notorious Crime God?" (*Batman* #663, April 2007)

Ever since his first appearance in *Batman* #1 (March 1940), the Joker has been redefined through multiple personas and biographical frameworks. Despite the myriad complex origin stories surrounding the Joker, a core theme emerges from them all: family trauma as the catalyst for the destiny of an individual with a fragile psyche, one who, moreover, does not grow up in a healthy social environment. According to the *DSM-5-TR*, pre-, peri-, and post-traumatic factors – including here a person’s moral and educational background, familial and community support, access to medical care, and the spiritual or cultural traditions they are accustomed to – are decisive in shaping the individuals’ response to tragedy. In the absence of these protective factors, a trauma victim may struggle to cope with PTSD symptoms, which are likely to persist for a very long time, potentially for life. This can result in severe depression (“All I have are negative thoughts,” Arthur tells his therapist in *Joker*, Todd Phillips’ film from 2019) bordering on suicidal ideation, with more than half of such cases ending in suicide², or may lead to the development of undesirable personality traits and inclinations, including violent behaviours such as serial killing (Simpson 2017).

Taking all of these factors into consideration, the course that the life of Bruce Wayne and of the persons who became villains – and who undertook similar traumas – have taken can be understood in a much clearer light. If Bruce Wayne transformed his grief – thanks to his family wealth, and to the warm encouraging support from Alfred and Dr. Leslie Thompkins – into a powerful and meaningful mission of fighting crime and protecting the innocent, the others, who did not benefit from appropriate medical or social support and, moreover, were economically forced to live a precarious marginal life, became Gotham’s most vicious criminals and Batman’s most ruthless villains.

The multitude of backstories and identities with regards to the Joker, and his own inconsistencies about his past (“If I’m going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!

² 54% of the people suffering from PTSD commit suicide because of the psychological condition and no other comorbidities (Gillette 2022). The statistics are for the USA in the absence of any other scientific data at a global level.



Ha Ha Ha!" – Moore et al. 1988/2019) do confuse us, but, at the same time, are indicative of his mental lability and his own take on reality. Ultimately, the matter of Joker telling the truth is not that important after all, simply because truth is so relative and subject to so many influences. Although many might label his perception of the world as insane, there is nothing in his arguments that we could exclude as crazy. It is just different from long-established mainstream dogma: "I'm not mad at all! I'm just differently sane!!" (Morrison et al. Aug. 2010). On the contrary, the Joker's popularity among real-life fans owes a great deal to the lucidity with which he expresses his philosophy of life as a new kind of enlightenment. Dr. Ruth Adams, a psychiatrist in Arkham Asylum, actually considers the Joker as the next (superior) link in the evolution of humanity, one which displays a developed form of sanity, which she calls "super-sanity": "It's quite possible we may actually be looking at some kind of super-sanity here. A brilliant new modification of human perception, more suited to urban life at the end of the twentieth century." (Morrison et al. 1989)

As fictional as Dr. Adams as a character in a graphic novel might be, and as unreliable her statement might therefore seem, psychopaths are not necessarily the heartless serial killers that people see in the mass media. They are also the modern individuals who, given the new dynamics and innovations, have developed certain adaptive mechanisms. These psychological and behavioural adjustments ensure them not only survival, but also success in the contemporary world by being less immune to empathy, emotion, risk, danger, fear, and doubt than other people (Dutton 2020).

Legally, the Joker is not a serial killer because, although he kills people, there is rarely an established pattern that would make up for a series of related obsessive-compulsive murders. If there is anything similar about the killings that the Joker performs is the fact that many die at the same time, either from explosions or his laughing gas. He would more arguably count as a mass murderer, responsible for terrorism, than a serial killer.



And medically, the notions of psychopath or a sociopath – which we might feel inclined to use in connection with the Joker – do not, as perplexing as that might appear, even exist in psychiatry! At least one will never find them in the *DSM*, psychiatry's official manual. Since psychopathy does not carry an entirely negative load (Dutton 2020), the *DSM-5-TR* advances the term “Antisocial Personality Disorder” (APD) which can get closer to the notion of criminally insane that Arkham Asylum is built for, but with the same reserve that even this condition – which would justify the Joker's confinement in the Asylum – rarely manifests itself in criminal behaviour or even insanity whatsoever.

Antisocial Personality Disorder is, according to the *DSM* diagnostic criteria, “a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others,” which manifests itself in: “failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors,” (proven by repeated actions that are susceptible for arrest), “deceitfulness” (attested by compulsive lying, use of different identities, and manipulating others for personal gains), “impulsivity or failure to plan ahead,” “irritability and aggressiveness,” “reckless disregard for safety of self or others,” “consistent irresponsibility” (indicated by constantly being in and out of work, or inability to uphold economic responsibilities), and “lack of remorse” (evidenced by indifference, superficiality in justifying reprievable acts, lack of empathy and regret) (*DSM-5-TR* 2022, 749).

Everything the Joker does (from theft to murder) is in disregard and violation of the rights of others (even if only for people's right to make a personal choice), he exists as “an agent of chaos” (Nolan 2008) and as a rule-breaker, and that is the crux of his philosophy: “the only sensible way to live in this world is without rules. And tonight you're going to break your one rule.” (Nolan 2008) The Joker is a mythomaniac, a compulsive liar; he assumes different identities and multiple – most, if not all of them, bogus – origin stories, either as a strategy of escape and survival, or as an elaborate plan of deceit. He is a master manipulator; he does not love anybody, not even Harley Quinn, treating her as a slave subjugated to his will, useful only inasmuch as she serves his interests, such as helping

him to escape from Arkham and carrying out his plans. Yet, right after he does not need her any longer, he either abuses her verbally and physically: “We’re not equals; I’m always your superior, and you do as you’re told!” (Dini and Cadigan, as cited in Kusko and Husmann 2025, 203), or even tries to kill her, such as *The Final Joke*, season 1 of *Harley Quinn* (2020).

He has mood swings that qualify him for bipolar disorder (*DSM-5-TR* 2022, 140-160) as well, his state often shifting from mania (hyper-excitability and ego-eccentricity) to major depressive episodes, like the one described in *Lovers and Madmen*, when he genuinely wants to die out of boredom and loss of interest for anything in life (Green et al. 2007-2008). He does display expressions of impulsivity, irritability, and aggression in the form of violence and abuse (physical, psychological, and verbal), but, in the Joker, they seem to be more of a deliberate manifestation, rather than a natural one.

In what job irresponsibility is concerned, it is true that the Joker does not have one, and he is repeatedly in and out of prison, which would make him unfit to hold a job, provide for a family, or honour financial obligations. Even as ‘Jack’, he changed workplaces and had not been doing well in any of them, losing interest as soon as drawbacks came into sight or monotony settled in. But, once he has become the Joker, he is past those responsibilities that do not bother him anymore, and has become extremely skilled at devising plots to destroy Gotham. The matter of financial accountability eludes him as he places no value on money. In *The Dark Knight* (2008), he robs the mob’s bank simply to burn the loot shortly afterward. To him, material gain is not important: “It’s not about the money. It’s about sending a message.” (Nolan 2008)

Empathy evades the Joker, as it probably did the people who caused the tragedies that created him. Similarly, the Joker is unfazed by any human feelings, except, probably, selfishness. But, in the case of psychopaths, the drive takes precedence over feelings for other people, even over the self, as a matter of fact (Dutton 2020). The Joker does not laugh only when he kills other people, he is laughing even when *he* is dying, such as illustrated



in the 1986 *The Dark Knight Returns* comic-book miniseries where, after Batman beats him to near death, the Joker finishes himself off by twisting his own spine laughingly simply for Batman to be accused of murder and publicly defamed. Given this understanding, the explanation for the Joker using toxic gas that makes people laugh themselves to death suddenly makes a lot more sense. Laughter is not happiness to the Joker; his broad grin is definitely not jolly. At best, it is oblivion, and, in its most frequent occurrence, it is death.

He feels no remorse for what he does to people, be they guilty or innocent. If faultless people have to die along with the ones he intends to kill just to prove a point, he has no problem with it. They are simply collateral damage, meaningless statistics sacrificed for an utterly senseless personal revenge. "They [psychopaths] do emotions by numbers," a senior forensic psychiatrist tells Dr. Kevin Dutton (Dutton 2020, 51). And they like playing games with people, just like the Joker loves to juggle with innocent lives to prove that civilization is actually a dark place where people "are only as good as the world allows them to be", whose morals are "dropped at the first sign of trouble," and who, "when the chips are down, [...] they'll eat each other." (Nolan 2008) To prove that "these civilized people" are no better than he is and that they can be "brought down to [his] level", the Joker orchestrates several criminal plots centred around illusory moral choices: between the life of one person or another (Rachel or Harvey), or between a ferry full of ordinary citizens and one carrying convicts. These gambits are, in fact, the kinds of games psychiatrist Kevin Dutton suggests are devised *by* psychopaths *for* psychopaths (Dutton 2020).

The Joker easily meets all the "symptoms". Out of all seven enumerated for the diagnosis of APD, the *DSM* states that three are enough... However, there is one sub-criterion that does not apply to the Joker, and that is the "impossibility or failure to plan ahead". Although it might seem, based on his mood swings and his making it all sound like a big joke ("Do I really look like a guy with a plan? You know what I am? I'm a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it." – Nolan 2008), that the



Joker does everything on the spur of the moment driven by whatever is going through his mind at the moment, a closer look at his actions show quite the contrary: everything is very carefully planned and sorted out, including the backup plans for potential contingencies. Think only of the many times he escapes when Batman and the police foil his murderous conspiracies using a back or trap door, a secret vehicle or small chopper close at hand, or a hidden underground passage.

In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker has a thorough plan of corrupting the essence of Harvey Dent, Gotham's fearless prosecutor, and he goes through with it even when he is captured. Moreover, when he tries to show Batman and Gotham that, given the occasion, all people abandon the civilization polish and turn to survival animal instincts, as he did with Harvey, but his ferry experiment to prove it fails, he has a detonator himself at hand to blow up both ferryboats: "You can't rely on anyone these days, you got to do everything yourself, don't we? But that's ok, I came prepared. It's a funny world we live in." (Nolan 2008)

Damian Wayne, Bruce's son and third Robin, being trained as an assassin in his grandfather's League of Shadows, therefore knowledgeable of all the tricks of the trade and perceptive of all the subtleties of human emotions, reads the Joker perfectly: "You say you're a force of chaos and you don't plan anything. It just happens. But I've read your files and everything's a plan." (Morrison et al. Aug. 2010) So, taking the *DSM's* criteria, applying them to the Joker, and then analysing the result, we can draw the conclusion that he is criminally antisocial, not that he is criminally insane. Internment at Arkham is therefore unjustifiable in his case.

5. Conclusions: "There are no innocents in the dark city." (*Detective Comics* #673, 1994, 11)

We have chosen these three characters in particular, Batman, Catwoman, and the Joker, for our analysis of the effects of trauma on the individual's psyche and life, because we



consider them representative of the transformative force of trauma. The conclusion, after briefly examining their biographies, psychological profiles, and behaviours, is that people evolve differently after one or more episodes of tragic challenges in their lives. Batman sublimates suffering and becomes a hero for fellow sufferers, the Joker is crushed by anguish and projects it onto the world, finding some sort of alleviation in inflicting the same pain on others, while the Catwoman walks on the very thin thread between good and evil that neither saves her from her past, nor allows her the peace of a lawful existence. Their life stories are case studies not only for popular fiction aficionados but also for psychologists, philosophers, and sociologists. It is certainly a theme for more in-depth research since popular fiction, such as comic books and films, has had multiple creators and re-creators over time. Each of their respective contributions illustrates the connection between trauma and biography from several perspectives and in various contexts. According to our personal research, to be further developed in a doctoral thesis, the evolution of these characters under the impact of trauma proves that tragedy is not enough to shake the individual to the core, but, combined with socio-economic factors and psychological history, it has the potential to transform destinies in unimaginable ways – crafting heroes, or birthing monsters.

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Marginalizations of Deaf¹ Characters on the Small Screen: A Multi-Layered Analysis of Theo Dimas' speech in *OMITB*

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Abstract

This paper offers a multilayered linguistic analysis of the intersemiotic translanguaging communication of Theo Dimas, a young Deaf character in the renowned television series *Only Murders in the Building* (Hulu, 2021–). By focusing on his final conversation with his overbearing hearing father, Teddy, the study examines how Theo is portrayed as a marginalized, second-generation Greek-American Deaf. He is a manualist and primarily communicates through American Sign Language (ASL); throughout his limited interactions with other characters, only once do we detect a spoken outburst to convey profound frustration – frustration that is further expressed through physical reactions, contributing to a heightened sense of physicality often, and sometimes problematically, associated with D/deaf characters on screen (see §2; see also Sileo 2024, 2025a, 2025b, 2026).

The core analysis (§3) draws on four theoretical perspectives: 1) discourse and conversation analyses; 2) pragmatic theory – including speech act theory (Austin 1962), conversational maxims (Grice 1975), and politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1978); 3) intersemiotic analysis of the interplay between verbal and visual codes – highlighting Teddy's use of Simultaneous Communication (SimComm) and Theo's abrupt, atypical shift into spoken language; and 4) a syntactic-semantic examination of word and sentence choices. This comprehensive framework, which could be extended to broader conversational contexts, sheds light on how linguistic and semiotic strategies shape Theo's characterization, his social and ethnic positioning, and the broader representation of D/deaf identity in the media.²

Keywords: D/deafness; marginalization; multi-layered analysis; media linguistics; disability studies.

¹ In this paper, I am going to use upper-case “D” for culturally Deaf people, identifying with sign languages and Deaf communities, and lower-case “d” for biologically and audiotologically deaf people.

² For a more in-depth study on Deaf people as an ethnic minority – possibly transnational – with their own socio-cultural and linguistic features, please refer to Lane et al. (2011).

1. Introduction

In recent years, the representation of D/deaf characters in cinema and mainstream television has garnered increasing scholarly attention, reflecting broader shifts in media portrayals of minority identities and disabilities, more specifically (Lerner 2010; Foss 2014; Gloeckner 2016; Bednarek 2019). This paper presents a multilayered linguistic analysis of Theo Dimas – a Deaf young man of Greek descent in the series *Only Murders in the Building* (Hulu, 2021-; henceforth, *OMITB*) – as he interacts with his father Teddy. Their interaction stands out for the complexity of Theo's characterization as a white, second-generation Greek-American and, more importantly, as a marginalized and (l)on(e)ly deaf child to an overbearing hearing father.

Theo's communicative acts are predominantly conveyed through American Sign Language (ASL) and his spoken voice is rarely heard – when it does occur, it is only in a moment of tremendous frustration. In order to analyze his speech, a multi-layered approach is going to be used, integrating different theoretical perspectives:

- Layer 1 resorts to discourse and conversation analyses, by focusing on situational and background context, lexical cohesion, and turn-taking;
- Layer 2 employs a pragmatic perspective, including speech acts theory (Austin 1962), politeness and face (Brown and Levinson 1978), cooperative principle and maxims (Grice 1975);
- Layer 3 offers an intersemiotic analysis, due to the presence of two different linguistic codes, a verbal and a visual one, as they overlap in some of Teddy's utterances, when he resorts to Simultaneous Communication, also known as SimComm. The choice of linguistic code is examined also based on its implications;
- Finally, Layer 4 focuses on sy-mantics (as in syntax-semantics) to enable a deeper understanding of how lexical and syntactic choices contribute to the representation of Theo's inner world and ethno-social positioning.

By situating Theo's characterization at the intersection of Deaf identity – i.e., ethnicity –, family history, and scripted content artificiality, this study aims to illuminate the multilayered processes through which mainstream television constructs and communicates marginalized identities. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates in media linguistics and disability studies.

1.1 Methodological Approach and Data Selection

Methodologically, this research is designed as a qualitative, micro-analytical case study situated at the intersection of media linguistics and multimodal discourse analysis. The data selection process was highly purposive. *OMITB* was chosen due to its mainstream success and its prominent inclusion of a culturally Deaf character portrayed by a Deaf actor. Within the series, the specific interaction between Theo and Teddy in Season 2, Episode 4 (S2E4) was selected as the primary dataset because it represents the climax of their communicative and relational tension. Unlike other scenes, this specific excerpt encapsulates a rare and dense convergence of multiple linguistic codes – ASL, spoken English, and SimComm – culminating in Theo's highly unusual spoken outburst. This unique concentration of intersemiotic translanguaging makes this scene the ideal case study to apply the proposed four-layered analytical model, as it effectively exposes the power imbalances, the face-threatening acts, and the marginalization dynamics that this study aims to investigate.

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- (RQ1) How does the overlapping of ASL and spoken language shape power dynamics between D/deaf and hearing characters?
- (RQ2) What pragmatic and semiotic strategies are employed to construct Theo's marginalized identity within the scripted dialogue?

2. Deaf Representation on the (Small) Screen

In recent years, the critical analysis of Deaf representation in mainstream media has gained significant momentum through the lens of Deaf Studies. Authentic Deaf narratives often have to negotiate with or resist hearing-centric frameworks, a dynamic widely observed in Deaf literature (e.g., Peters 2000). This critical approach is increasingly necessary for contemporary audiovisual products as well. For instance, recent scholarly work has highlighted how acclaimed films like *Sound of Metal* (2019), despite their inclusive intentions, can still reflect a 'hearing gaze' or commodify Deaf experience (Sileo 2024, 2025a, 2025b, 2026). Building directly upon this existing critical framework regarding cinematic representations, this paper seeks to extend the same analytical scrutiny to the serial television format. Using Theo Dimas as a case study, the present analysis investigates how linguistic and pragmatic mechanisms can still perpetuate marginalization.

A 2022 survey conducted on a sample of one thousand D/deaf individuals residing in Anglophone countries (the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and Australia) reveals increasing awareness within the audiovisual industry regarding D/deafness and its representation: since 2019, Hollywood appears to have initiated a process of greater inclusivity, as evidenced by the production of high-profile films centered on D/deaf characters or on the theme of D/deafness.³ Much of this progress is attributed by respondents to the film *CODA* (2021), identified as a turning point for the inclusion of numerous D/deaf creatives, both before and behind the camera.

Despite these positive developments, the Deaf community remains among the least represented groups in the media, surpassing only the blind community. Underrepresentation, coupled with misrepresentation, in fiction directly influences public perception and the treatment of D/deaf individuals in real life. This is particularly significant in the United States, where the majority of hearing individuals report sporadic

³ Available at <https://www.nrgmr.com/our-thinking/entertainment/the-state-of-deaf-representation-in-media-and-entertainment/>. Accessed 2 July 2025.

or nonexistent interactions with D/deaf people – often less than once a month, or never (based on the mentioned survey). In this context, media assumes a crucial role in shaping public opinion. This phenomenon can be understood by resorting to Cultivation Theory (Shrum 2017), which posits that prolonged exposure to media, particularly television, gradually shapes an individual's perception of reality. The ensuing “cultivation effect” (Shrum 2017) leads heavy viewers of television – to which one might add cinema – to adopt beliefs and attitudes that align with the repeated patterns, images, and values presented in the media⁴. Therefore, if D/deaf people are consistently underrepresented or stereotypically portrayed in audiovisual fictional content, it can ‘cultivate’ a distorted or limited understanding of the community among the mainstream hearing public, influencing their real-life behaviors towards D/deaf individuals.

Several scholars have conducted studies on the qualitative – or mis-representation – and quantitative – or under-representation – of D/deafness in the media. Using Clark's (1969) “four-stage evolutionary model” of minority representation in mass media, Gloeckner (2016) examines the portrayal of deafness in American primetime television. This model outlines a progressive trajectory:

1. non-recognition by the dominant culture;
2. ridicule, where minorities are depicted as caricatures;
3. regulation, in which minorities are present but constrained by majority norms;
4. respect, where minority characters are portrayed equitably as fully integrated individuals.

Although signs of progress toward greater dignity and authenticity in representation can be observed – while some minorities remain trapped in the stage of ridicule (Gloeckner 2016) – under- and misrepresentation of D/deafness in mainstream media remains

⁴ Short (2013) notes that Americans spend an average of five hours per day watching television, with most of this time devoted to primetime programming. Such intensive consumption of audiovisual content has a tangible effect on how the public perceives minorities off-screen.

problematic.⁵ A colonizing⁶ and pathologizing⁷ approach seems to persist, portraying D/deafness as a vulnerability often linked to dehumanizing imagery (Avon 2006; Foss 2014; Sileo 2024, 2025a) and limiting characters to stereotypical roles.⁸ More importantly, entertainment television rarely portrays the lived experience of hearing loss as a “gain” (Foss 2014, 18), failing to highlight the cultural, linguistic, and identity benefits associated with belonging to the Deaf community, whereas cinema rarely depicts the experience of hearing loss per se – with such exceptions as *Sound of Metal* (2019). Despite several historical milestones between 1987 and 2013 that impacted the community, deafness continues to be depicted primarily as a disability rather than as a cultural and ethnic difference comparable to racial or linguistic diversity (Fosse 2014, 18).

3. Marginalized Deafness in *OMITB*: Theo Dimas

Theo Dimas starts off as a secondary character and remains so until the end – Season 5 is being shot as this paper is in the making, so one cannot be sure about his return and what it may entail for his development. He gains the limelight only for one episode, when he is

⁵ From the 1930s to the 1960s, D/deaf characters were frequently shown as silent, fragile, and dependent, whereas the 1960s and 1970s saw renewed interest in D/deafness, fueled by the recognition of ASL as a legitimate language and the civil rights movements; a more significant shift occurred with Deaf actress Marlee Matlin’s Oscar win in 1987 for *Children of a Lesser God* (Foss 2014).

⁶ The metaphor of colonization, as discussed by Ladd (2003) and Batterbury, Ladd, and Gulliver (2007), alongside calls to decolonize D/deaf education (Anglin-Jaffe 2015), has been extensively examined by scholars and applied to this context. Deaf women, more specifically, have frequently been portrayed as objects of “male colonization” (Nelson 2011, 192), as exemplified in such films as *Johnny Belinda* (1949) and *The Piano* (1993).

⁷ Foss (2014) identifies two main models of media representation: the pathological model and the cultural model. In the former, D/deaf characters are passive and dependent, with D/deafness portrayed as an obstacle to overcome. Such characters often serve – and are exploited – as narrative devices for the development of hearing protagonists, as seen in films like *Four Weddings and a Funeral* or the TV series here analyzed. By contrast, the cultural model depicts D/deaf characters as autonomous, fully integrated into the narrative, and clearly identified as members of a distinct culture. These characters use their own native sign language fluently and represent D/deafness as an integral part of their identity.

⁸ “Demonstrated in feature films *Hear No Evil* (1993) and *Dead Silence* (1997), the power struggle of silence versus sound, and even deafness versus hearing, is evident. This is also seen in films made for television. Beginning with *Silent Victory* (1979), [...] *Love Is Never Silent* (1985), *Trapped in Silence* (1999), *Bridge to Silence* (1989), and *Locked in Silence* (1999). Using titles with words such as ‘trapped,’ ‘bridge,’ and ‘locked’ further reinforces the ideology that deafness is a condition to be escaped from or cured of” (Avon 2006, 190).

discovered to be the unwilling perpetrator of Chloe's murder – happened ten years before – which triggered a series of unpleasant events. Our first sight of him is in S1E2, during the – deaf-unfriendly – board meeting held in honor of late fellow resident Tim Kono. Theo reappears in the ensuing episode, where it becomes apparent that he is not very proficient at lip-reading – a skill often assumed to be mastered by all D/deaf individuals. S1E7 is entirely focused on him, but soon after this he temporarily exits the storyline while awaiting trial for involuntary manslaughter and grave robbing. In S2E4, he is spied on while he “destroys” his father “in silence”: this moment symbolizes Theo's severing of ties with his family of origin – or, more precisely, with the only remaining member of the family, since his mother abandoned them many years earlier due to both her husband's infidelities and her inability to cope with deafness.

Let us begin by providing some situational context for the most relevant interaction involving Theo: he and Teddy are in their living room, where the former expresses concern about the upcoming manslaughter and tomb robbing trial – here, the endophoric use of “this” in “we can fix this” refers directly to that issue. From S1E7, we know that Teddy bribed late Tim Kono to accuse one of Chloe's friends (i.e., “Everything [he] did [...] to protect” his son); the scapegoat has just been released after serving 10 years in prison. Unlike his father, Theo is consumed by self-blame and guilt over “what happened ten years ago,” an exophoric reference that relies on extensive interpersonal background knowledge shared both by the interlocutors and by dedicated viewers.

Theo's translanguaging intersemiotic conversation with his father⁹ (S2E4)

TEDDY: [<i>Off screen</i>] Theo, stop obsessing. Stop obsessing, please! We can fix this, alright? You just have to trust me! Theo? Theo! [<i>On screen; SimComming</i>] Everything I did was to protect you.

⁹ The transcript resorts to the following symbols: numbers enclosed within round brackets refer to the duration of pauses in speech and “--” signals interruption. Interestingly, this conversation totally lacks overlapping, which subtracts to the spontaneity and plausibility of it.



THEO: [*In ASL*¹⁰] I don't care if it was to protect me! Stay away from me!
TEDDY: What? Don't say that. (0.5) You're my boy!
THEO: [*In ASL*] My lawyer said I should have told earlier my side of the story of what happened ten years ago.
TEDDY: What? (1) You got your own lawyer now? [*Theo turns his back on him*] Theo!
[*Teddy faces Theo again and stops signing, just pointing his finger at this son*] Theo! I'm the only one who's been looking out for your interests! I --
THEO: [*Only verbalizing*] -- You're killing me! [*He forcefully pushes Teddy, causing him to fall back and sink into the armchair. Theo grunts while verbalizing*] (2) I have no life anymore! [*Theo falls back and sits on a small table opposite the armchair*]
TEDDY: [*Resumes SimComm*] Theo. (1) I'm sorry. (1) I love you (0.5) so much. You're (0.5) all (0.5) I care about in this world. (1) [*Places a hand on Theo's left shoulder*] Theo --
THEO: [*Rejects his father's touch. In ASL*] -- [Non intelligible]
[*Theo leaves. Teddy cries*]

Layer 1: Discourse and Conversation Analyses: Power imbalance in turn-taking

Teddy dominates the conversation by resorting to SimComm, i.e., speaking and signing simultaneously, thereby controlling both the flow and content of the interaction. This dynamic is heavily skewed in favor of verbalization, as SimComm is known to prioritize oral content at the expense of the signed message (Strong and Stone 1987). Theo, who is not an oralist, responds primarily in ASL with minimal verbalization, creating a marked asymmetry in communication modes. This imbalance marginalizes Theo's voice, as – to a hearing eye – his native language (ASL) is consistently overshadowed by Teddy's spoken words and persistent verbal commands – most notably in his repeated calling of his son's name, as if Theo could actually hear him, even when he is turned away.¹¹

¹⁰ Interpretation of ASL uttering's content is drawn from "Can someone please tell me what Theo is signing? (from "Only Murders in the Building" s02e04) : r/asl at https://www.reddit.com/r/asl/comments/vx49cd/can_someone_please_tell_me_what_theo_is_signing/?show=original. Accessed 6 July 2025.

¹¹ Theo's turning his back on Teddy and signing "Stay away from me!" are clear non-verbal acts of resistance, signaling emotional distancing and rejection of Teddy's control. His limited verbal outbursts ("You're killing me! I have no life anymore!") further express his frustration and sense of suffocation.

Such behavior can be interpreted as an interruption, likewise oral interruptions occurring when he begins to verbalize and, later on, when he pushes his father's hand away. In contrast, Teddy demonstrates an ability and willingness to recognize and respect transition-relevant places (TRPs) in his son's speech. This stands in stark contrast to Teddy's frequent repetitions and urgent tone of voice, which signal a need to control the conversation. His repetitions – while contributing to lexical cohesion – also function as attempts to assert authority and maintain dominance, simultaneously restricting the young man's capacity for full self-expression. This dynamic justifies Theo's interruptions as inevitable should he wish to genuinely convey his own views and emotions.

The absence of overlapping speech in this intense and heartfelt father-son exchange further highlights the contrasting features of Teddy's elocutionary style – but, at the same time, has to do with the artificiality of scripted content language. As previously noted, this absence undermines the interaction's plausibility and credibility. It is coupled with a near-complete lack of fillers, interjections, tag questions – except for “alright” – and other discourse markers such as “I mean” and “you know”, which are heavily present in non-scripted or natural conversation and oddly missing here. These “carriers of orality” (Pavesi 2008) are commonly used in spontaneous speech not only to sustain and verify that the communication channel remains open – the phatic function of language as defined by Jakobson (1960) – but also to fill pauses and maintain the floor for as long as possible. This is a strategy typically employed by long-winded speakers who aim to avoid reaching TRPs, thereby delaying handing over the turn to their interlocutor.

Layer 2: Pragmatics and impoliteness: Face-threatening speech acts and Theo's actions

Teddy's commands (e.g., “Stop obsessing, please!”) function as directive speech acts aimed at changing Theo's behavior. However, given the emotional context and Theo's rejection, these acts can be face-threatening, challenging Theo's autonomy and identity. Teddy's positive face claim (“We can fix this, alright?”) conflicts with Theo's negative face – he now

has his own lawyer and demands that his autonomy be acknowledged and respected, a request the co-speaker refuses to honor. Teddy alternates between directives and expressive speech acts, as when he apologizes and expresses his unconditional love for Theo (“I’m sorry. I love you – so much. You’re – all – I care about in this world”) in an attempt to repair relational damage and reaffirm his protective role. Yet, these caring expressions coexist with his controlling tone, creating a tension between the two. From a pragmatic standpoint, Teddy’s conversational dominance – achieved through repetitions and the refusal to yield TRPs – can be interpreted as a blatant violating of Grice’s maxim of quantity. By providing continuous, overwhelming verbal input, he deliberately violates cooperative principles not to advance the exchange, but to assert authority and restrict Theo’s communicative space.

Theo asserts his independence by emphasizing that he has a lawyer and wants to tell his version of events. These acts challenge Teddy’s narrative and authority, highlighting Theo’s newly gained agency, which promises liberation from patriarchal imposition but simultaneously increases his loneliness and marginalization as he awaits trial and a possible lengthy prison sentence. His physical withdrawal – signaled by turning away from his father, a gesture that in Deaf culture signifies the end of a conversation – underscores his emotional and communicative distancing.

Regarding compliance with Grice’s (1975) four cooperative maxims, consider the following exchange:

TEDDY: You’re my boy!

THEO: [*In ASL*] My lawyer said I should have told earlier my side of the story of what happened ten years ago

Theo’s reply is completely irrelevant to Teddy’s expressive speech act; it can be seen as an unpreferred response and, moreover, carries an implicature – the fact that Theo has hired his own lawyer, which is new information for Teddy. Similarly, Theo’s utterances, “You’re killing me! I have no life anymore!”, though emotionally charged, appear somewhat

tangential to the factual discussion about the lawyer and past events, thus violating the maxim of relation. Most importantly, these statements flout the maxim of quality through exaggeration and hyperbole.

Layer 3: Intersemiotic analysis

Theo responds by using a minority code that the mainstream majority cannot fully understand, which emphasizes his exclusion. The hearing viewer may feel closer to Teddy, and this is exactly what happens with one of the main characters, Oliver, who observes the interaction without understanding what Theo is signing – because he is not fluent in ASL. Theo's abrupt verbalization could be interpreted as a scripted narrative device to accommodate this on-screen viewer, a reaction filled with despair and pain that would not come naturally to a manualist Deaf signer like him. To an audience unfamiliar with Deaf culture, like Oliver and the public, this may not seem incongruous. Moreover, it can be argued that this choice – which somewhat distorts Theo's character – seems to cater to the expectations of the hearing audience, for whom the animalistic grunting of a non-oralist deaf person might be even more striking.

Layer 4: Sy-mantic analysis

"You're – all – I care about in this world" breaks the sentence into fragments, highlighting emotional intensity but also a controlling, almost possessive tone. Teddy's syntax favors short, imperative clauses ("Stop obsessing," "Theo! Theo!"), which create a rhythm of insistence and urgency. The repetition functions syntactically to dominate the conversational floor and pressure Theo. His limited verbal utterances are short and emotionally charged ("You're killing me!"), syntactically simple but pragmatically and semantically powerful though somewhat hyperbolic: the semantic choice and the tense selected underline how painful the situation has been for a while and how it seems never to end.

4. Wrapping up

This conversation exemplifies how Theo is marginalized both linguistically and relationally, despite Teddy's apparent attempts to communicate through SimComm – an intersemiotic translanguaging choice that arguably functions less to facilitate the flow of conversation and more to accommodate the hearing witness observing them, whether Oliver himself or the viewing and hearing audience. The dominance of spoken language, Teddy's repeated commands and tone of voice, and Theo's behavior reveal a power imbalance that restricts Theo's agency and expression and threatens his negative face, triggering his – implausible – physical and verbally hyperbolic outburst. The interaction highlights broader themes of D/deaf marginalization, parental control, and the struggle for comprehension and sympathy within families where D/deaf and hearing members negotiate different linguistic and cultural worlds – more importantly, where deafness entails loneliness, and loneliness pushes an emotionally needy son to get along with his overbearing father to the point of committing crimes with and for him.

Oliver's presence is crucial also for another reason: his subjective perception and impression of the encounter may contribute to fostering a partial perspective on this father-son encounter and on their relationship as a whole. In fact, he later recounts witnessing the event to his friends by using the words, "I saw a deaf son silently destroy his father". This statement reflects his interpretation of the events, shaped by the fact that Theo is deaf and primarily communicates through sign language rather than speech. Oliver's use of the word "silently" emphasizes the communication barrier and the absence of spoken words, which may lead him to perceive the interaction as a quiet yet destructive act. Over the previous episodes Theo has already been associated with destruction, when he violently pushed Chloe during altercation, causing her death.

The "deaf" son to whom Oliver refers is actually the first victim in the entire narrative, burdened by debt toward his father, not only for failing to leave him alone in this world as

his mother did (“I’m the only one who’s been looking out for your interests!”) but more importantly, for covering up the crime Theo committed. This indebtedness has served as Teddy’s leverage over his son, pushing Theo into further criminal acts such as grave robbing and kidnapping. This is Teddy’s notion of “protecting” his son. Conversely, Theo expresses that he was “killed” by his father – through emotional, psychological, or symbolic violence which has proved excruciating for his whole being. This highlights a profound trauma and a deeply conflicted father-son relationship. In this narrative as in many others, the idea of “killing” a parent is metaphorical, symbolizing a struggle to break free from that parent’s authority, control, or oppressive influence. This struggle can occur without uttering a single sound, demonstrating that not only words but also signs can “kill”. Moreover, since Theo has already unintentionally caused a person’s death, this may amplify perceptions of his animality and physical violence, aligning with ongoing onscreen depictions of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) individuals (Sileo 2024, 2025a, 2025b).

After severing ties with his only family, he is now completely alone and wishes to make up for his past evil deeds. In S2E7, he approaches Mabel to redeem himself and assists her in her private investigation to find Arconia’s murderer, putting himself at risk. Despite his efforts, by the end of the episode, he returns to his solitude, while Mabel re-joins the original trio’s embrace – a circle from which Theo remains excluded. In other words, the show failed to seize the chance to promote the cultural model mentioned above, although some attempts had been made with the Theo-centered episode, where verbal communication is entirely absent except for the final line – “We did it!” – uttered by Charles, who finally managed to find the password to access Tim Kono’s computer.¹² Theo resurfaces from his silence in S3E7, where we get acquainted with a smiling and smart version of him: we get to know that his friendship with Mabel is standing still and that she has been learning

¹² Through this episode, we learn much more about Theo’s backstory and about Teddy’s learning ASL, in contrast with many hearing parents of D/deaf children, thus implicitly criticizing the ostracizing attitudes often found in hearing families with D/deaf members but also showing off what a nice person and a good father he is.

ASL to better communicate with him while she gets his help in her private investigation into a new Arconia murder. In this episode, Theo's signing is subtitled for viewers who are not fluent in ASL. Unfortunately, this Deaf character is once again exploited for the sake of the plotline, side kicking for a hearing one while being left out of verbalized conversation when third parties come onto the scene.

5. Conclusions

This study aims to contribute to media linguistics and disability studies by shedding light on how media narratives can both reflect and shape societal attitudes toward D/deafness, influencing public perceptions and the lived experiences of the DHH. The character of Theo Dimas in *OMITB* provides a multifaceted and poignant representation of Deaf identity, one that intricately intertwines issues of ethnicity – in that he belongs to an ethnic group, the Deaf community, to which no other character belongs and of which the hearing mainstream majority has very limited knowledge and awareness –, family dynamics, and social marginalization within Arconia's microcosm. Through a multi-layered analysis of his pivotal interaction with his father Teddy, this study has highlighted the complex communicative tensions and power imbalances underpinning their relationship. Teddy's dominant use of SimComm and verbal language, contrasted with Theo's reliance on ASL and minimal spoken utterances, reveals a fundamental asymmetry in their modes of communication. This imbalance marginalizes Theo's voice, both literally and figuratively, reflecting a broader societal tendency to prioritize hearing norms and oralist approaches, a 'colonizing' approach that seems hard to defeat.

The discourse and conversation analyses demonstrated how Teddy's repeated commands and insistence on controlling the conversational floor serve to restrict Theo's agency and threaten his negative face. These behaviors not only reflect paternal authority but also symbolize the hegemonic pressures D/deaf individuals often face within hearing families and communities. Theo's rare verbalizations, marked by emotional hyperbole



("You're killing me! I have no life anymore!"), emerge as desperate attempts to assert his autonomy and emotional pain in a context where his primary language is systematically overshadowed to the advantage of oral speech. From a pragmatic perspective, Teddy's speech acts oscillate between directives and expressions of love, creating a tension between care and control that complicates their relational dynamics – standing in stark contrast to the profound psycho-physical and social harm inflicted on his own son. The intersemiotic analysis highlights how Theo's translanguaging from a minority linguistic code inaccessible to the majority – of characters and viewers alike – serves both as a powerful marker of identity and as a site of exclusion. Hearing audiences – Oliver, at the least – tend to align and sympathize with Teddy, as he witnesses "a deaf son destroying his father in silence". The dynamic becomes even more complex due to Theo's occasional spoken utterances, which come across as hearing frames and concessions to hearing norms, expressions of acute frustration. Such moments risk problematizing the authenticity of his linguistic portrayal – already jeopardized by the paucity of discourse markers¹³ and other "carriers of orality" (Pavesi 2008) – and may unintentionally reinforce the misconception among uninformed viewers that D/deaf people default to verbalization under distress, when losing control over their own communicative choices. Sy-mantic examination of the interaction highlights how it is dominated by Teddy's fragmented and imperative speech patterns in a controlling and urgent tone, while Theo's simpler, emotionally charged utterances underscore his vulnerability and isolation in a metaphorical and literal silence imbued with his indebtedness to his father. Theo's eventual physical and communicative withdrawal, marked by turning his back on Teddy and finally leaving the scene, signifies a rupture in their relationship and a rejection of the paternal authority that has both protected and constrained him.

¹³ Their absence, coupled with the absence of overlapping speech, in this exchange contributed to an interaction that, while emotionally intense, lacked the natural flow of spontaneous conversation, reflecting the strained and asymmetrical nature of their communication or, more plausibly, the artificiality of scripted content, which is supposed to replicate natural speech.

The multi-layered analysis conducted in this study provides substantial evidence to answer the research questions formulated in the introduction. Regarding the first research question (RQ1), the findings confirm that the systematic use of Simultaneous Communication (SimComm) by the hearing character acts as a tool of linguistic dominance. The analysis of turn-taking and speech acts reveals a profound power imbalance that restricts the Deaf character's agency, thereby confirming the hypothesis that oralist norms continue to marginalize Deaf voices even in inclusive settings. In relation to RQ2, the study highlights a tension between inclusive intentions and stereotypical execution. While the show incorporates ASL, Theo's sporadic and emotionally charged verbalizations suggest that the production still prioritizes the hearing audience's perspective. This confirms that the representation of Deaf identity in *OMITB* remains partly trapped in a 'colonizing' framework, as initially suspected.

While the show makes important strides in representing Deaf culture and language – particularly through the casting of a Deaf actor, the inclusion of ASL, and the filming of a “silent” episode (S1E7) in which audiences are allowed to walk in a deaf person's shoes for around 40 minutes –, it also reveals ongoing challenges in media portrayals of deafness. Theo's character, though complex, is often sidelined and instrumentalized within the plot, reflecting the broader issues of under- and misrepresentation in mainstream media. His sporadic verbal outbursts and the framing of his character through the lens of trauma and criminality risk reinforcing stereotypes of D/deaf individuals as physically violent or socially marginalized.

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When the Margin Reaches the Mainstream: A Case in Drag

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Abstract

American culture represents a good example of the contamination of mainstream literature, cinema and television with historically marginalized contents. This bigger presence of underground themes in products intended for mainstream consumption indicates progress, but also entails a shift in content. The paper focuses on this dynamic in the context of LGBTQ+ culture, which contaminates *and* is contaminated by the mainstream. I will observe the implications of marginality reaching the mainstream through the case of on-screen gender-non-conforming portrayals, discussing the progress and problematic results generated by contaminating the mainstream with the marginal through on-screen representations of drag and drag culture, exploring how the element of drag has appeared in mainstream and not-as-mainstream films and TV series.

Keywords: drag, subculture; queer studies; queer representation; assimilation.

Introduction

As a consequence of social and political change, in the past few decades American mainstream culture and canon have opened up to communities and contents historically relegated to the margins. This increased contact between mainstream culture and marginal or underground contents has the potential to develop in different directions, from influence to appropriation. While the presence of underground themes in products intended for mainstream consumption indicates progress, it can also entail a shift in content, including generalizations and assumptions. This relationship between the margin and the mainstream is nuanced, and its implications are not necessarily obvious.

In the pages that follow, I will analyze this dynamic in the context of queer culture, which has a specific and complex relationship of mutual contamination with the mainstream. I will observe this contamination in different on-screen representations of drag and drag culture, exploring how the element of drag has appeared in mainstream and nonmainstream films and TV series. I will focus on visual media as they are the most pervasive, and thus can exert the biggest influence on popular culture.

As the materials in this analysis embrace several decades of queer and mainstream culture, I should clarify here that I will employ the term drag broadly when referring to gender-non-conforming portrayals. In some cases, for instance, it can overlap with crossdressing or transsexuality, while there will be works featuring drag as a disguise that bears no relation with LGBTQ+ culture; in other instances it appears as a medium of queer expression, a practice with deep roots in the subculture that generated it. This is due not only to the ever-evolving terminology on gender identity and sexual orientation, but also to how certain representations were received at the time they were created¹. I will also discuss quotes from seminal queer

¹ In this sense, the most fitting definition for the purposes of this article is the one outlined by Monica Baroni in David Gerstner's *Encyclopedia of Queer Culture*: "although drag is often associated with cross-dressing, transvestitism, transsexualism and transgender, it is not synonymous with any of these terms. Drag is essentially action, not identity: it shakes up all rigid definitions for gender and sexuality, parodying the stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. In this connection we find expressions such as gender-fuck or gender bending being used. In a sense, drag cuts across the other categories, which may enact drag situations" (Baroni 2011, 191).

scholarship employing terms that are now outdated, when not considered derogatory (for instance, the words 'transvestite' and/or 'transvestitism'). Naturally, these should be understood as they were intended when they were written and not as they would be interpreted today.

The term drag is generally used to refer to the act of wearing clothes of the opposite sex². However, as Esther Newton observed in *Mother Camp*, her seminal book on drag culture, "homosexuality is symbolized in American culture by transvestism. The homosexual term for a transvestite is 'drag queen.' 'Queen' is a generic noun for any homosexual man. [...] Drag queens symbolize homosexuality despite the truthful assertions of many homosexuals that they never go to see professional drag queens" (Newton 1979, 3). This definition well encapsulates also how drag has traditionally appeared on film: as a signifier of homosexuality. The decision to employ 'drag' as an umbrella term in this essay is motivated by its flexibility, as it has been used in different times and contexts to broadly refer to the practice of wearing clothes of the opposite sex. As argued by Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, "drag does [...] 'trouble' gender and sexuality by making people question the naturalness of what it means to be a man or a woman and what it means to be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. Drag embodies ambiguity and ambivalence," and thus "can serve as a catalyst for changes in values, ideas, and identities in twenty-first century American society" (Rupp-Taylor 2003, 6). As works featuring different incarnations of this practice have tended to be conflated and interpreted in a similar way by mainstream audiences, it may be useful to analyze this relationship in more detail.

Throughout the essay I will discuss several on-screen works that have employed drag in as broad a manner as I described above. It is interesting to note that, with the obvious exception of the documentaries, almost all of the films discussed here are based on source material produced in Europe - either films, plays to novels - which may suggest more openness in the

² Cfr. Rodgers 1979, 67; and Newton 1979, 3.

old world when it comes to queer content.³ However, the American versions of these narratives all went on to achieve popular success and ‘classic’ status. The first category includes four popular films in which drag appears as a comedic device bearing no relation to the queer world. These films have been particularly influential in popular culture, both because of the inclusion of drag and the success of the pictures themselves. The second group discusses works created in the underground LGBTQ+ milieu, and hence feature drag in a way that is more coherent to its history as a queer practice. The third category deals with the different incarnations drag has had in more assimilated works, that is, works that mediate between the underground and the mainstream. The essay will explore the implications of this interaction between the dimensions of assimilation and appropriation, and reveal the powerful subversion that drag still represents at a time in which it is threatened by institutionalized oppression.

1. Drag and the Mainstream: Points of Contact

Due to its nature, the art of drag exists on the border of mainstream and underground culture. On the one hand, as we will see below, drag feeds on signifiers from mainstream culture and is employed to challenge and subvert the values of that culture. On the other hand, mainstream culture has a history of employing drag in ways that tend to trivialize the subversion that characterizes it, often for comedic purposes. This ambivalent presence of drag has the potential to convey different meanings.

Similarly to queer culture in general, the relationship of drag culture with the mainstream has been what David Halperin calls parasitic: “drag, camp, and various cultural appropriations

³ Among the films discussed below, *Some Like It Hot* is based on the 1935 French comedy *Fanfare of Love*, which will also be remade in West Germany in 1951 before being adapted by Billy Wilder in 1959; Edwards’ *Victor/Victoria* is based on the German 1933 musical *Victor and Victoria* (which had also been already adapted into a comedy in Britain in 1935); and *Mrs. Doubtfire* is based on the 1987 British novel *Madame Doubtfire*. Perhaps best known is the history of *The Birdcage*: first a French play, in 1978 it was turned into a film by the same name, *La Cage aux Folles*, a French-Italian production. This material will have two American incarnations: in 1983, Harvey Fierstein will turn it into a successful Broadway musical, and Mike Nichols will remake the movie in 1996.

and identifications are all, properly speaking, subcultural practices, insofar as they are in a dependent, secondary relation to the preexisting non-gay cultural forms to which they respond and to which they owe their very existence” (Halperin 2012, 422). Queer culture has historically appropriated and resignified themes and symbols from mainstream culture - that is, straight culture. In this sense, Halperin argues, “gay culture is parasitic on mainstream culture” (Halperin 2012, 422). Particularly in the case of drag, this parasitic relationship often develops through parody.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler notes that drag parodies “the notion of an original or primary gender identity” (Butler 1990, 137). This parody, Butler argues, “is of the very notion of an original; [...] so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect – that is, in its effect – postures as an imitation.” (Butler 1990, 138). This relationship of drag with traditional notions of gender identity makes it so that “at best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes” (Butler 1993, 125). While this is true, as the acceptance of a term of reference is crucial for a variation of said reference to exist, the implications of this ambivalence are vastly different depending on the author of the variation.

As we will see below, the parodic nature of drag has subversive roots. Newton argues that “drag is code for queer: professional drag queens are, therefore, professional homosexuals; they represent the stigma of the gay world” (Newton 1979, 3). Thus, even beyond professional entertainment drag has been employed regularly to symbolize or imply homosexuality, as it is the most evident and immediate form to express queerness, while challenging normative assumptions on gender and sexuality. However, parody can also be present when drag is employed in mainstream on-screen narratives, which tend to present a more diluted form of drag. In these cases, queerness itself is usually the bottom of the joke: as drag is interpreted as a signifier of homosexuality, the implication that a character could be gay or trans is intended

as cause for humor. The element of marginality is therefore always present in on-screen drag appearances, but with rather varied implications. The tensions between these two incarnations of drag will be explored in the following pages.

2. Drag in Mainstream Culture

Despite its history as an underground, even countercultural form, drag appears in mainstream works. These are, however, subdued incarnations of the form and have no relationship with its queer roots. In American popular culture drag is not related to LGBTQ+ culture, and is generally portrayed as the source of comic relief. I will explore below how drag appears in four popular American films: *Some Like It Hot* (1959) by Billy Wilder, *Victor/Victoria* (1982) by Blake Edwards, *Tootsie* (1982) by Sidney Pollack and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) by Chris Columbus. These are all examples of movies produced for the consumption of a broad audience, in some cases children, that have received both critical and popular acclaim – and hence had an impact on mainstream culture. In these films, drag appears merely as a comedic plotline to unsettle the premises of the story, but has nothing to do with identity or gender subversion.

In *Some Like It Hot*, two jazz musicians dress as women to escape gangsters in 1920s-Chicago. In Wilder's movie drag provides endless comedic possibilities: one of the musicians, played by Tony Curtis, goes back and forth between genders – he becomes Marilyn Monroe's confidant when he's in drag while pursuing her in male clothes. The other, played by Jack Lemmon, represents the main source of comedy due to his more constant 'female' presence in the film: we see him succumb more and more to concerns traditionally associated with women, such as vanity and jealousy (he tells Curtis, "I saw you, [...] borrowing each other's lipstick!") as well as marriage (after getting engaged, he wonders if the fiancé is too old for 'her' and identifies his mother as their main problem as a couple). As a woman, however, Lemmon's character also clues the audience in on the struggles of the female condition, from the difficulty of walking in heels to sexual harassment (Lemmon's character gets patted on the butt and subsequently groped in an elevator, to which Curtis comments "Now you know how the other



half lives"). However, Wilder's comedic intent always prevails, and none of these moments leads to in-depth exploration. Eventually, Lemmon's character becomes tempted by the idea of becoming a millionaire's 'wife,' leading to more source for comedy ("Why would a guy wanna marry a guy?", asks Curtis, "Security", replies Lemmon). The reveal in the last scene of the film, in which Lemmon's fiancé pronounces the immortal line "Nobody's perfect" upon finding out he fell in love with a man, is all played on the implication that a man marrying another man is funny.

A similar dynamic is identifiable in *Tootsie*, where Dustin Hoffman plays an actor unable to get work because of his bad temperament. After attempting an audition dressed as a woman, he gets a job on a soap opera where he immediately achieves great success. Similarly to *Some Like It Hot*, he is both pursuer and confidant of the woman he is interested in, played by Jessica Lange. Hoffman also gets informed by other characters about the sexual harassment happening on set (one of the stars has earned the nickname 'the tongue' from the actresses). In fact, resistance to sexual harassment is what will make a star of Hoffman's female alter ego, who is able to be more assertive than the female characters: as a man, he hasn't been brought up to just take it. As the story unfolds, other forms of sexism are shown: male characters in positions of power answering questions addressed to women (Lange is asked if she's hungry, the director says that "she's fine"), talking over or ignoring them, and always, always touching female subordinates. In fact, the very title of the film comes from a scene in which Hoffman's character insists on being called by 'her' name. Pollack's film also highlights the physical and financial strain endured by women in order to be considered presentable: after going shopping, Hoffman remarks, "I don't know how a woman can keep herself attractive and not starve these days" – later he will also have to diet, once again concerning himself with his appearance. In both these films, the main character ends up becoming a better man after his experience in drag, having achieved a new perspective on what it's like to be a woman. Then again, this growth is rewarded, first and foremost, with romantic involvement with the woman they pursued while in drag – hardly a subversive message. Queer issues are never included.



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

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di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

There is, however, a subcategory of mainstream films featuring drag that are more inclusive to gay characters. For instance, in *Victor/Victoria* drag is used by a singer, played by Julie Andrews, pretending that she's a female impersonator in order to get work. These 'two levels' of drag allow a more nuanced representation of sexual orientation and gender identity. The film also includes gay characters not in drag: one of them, played by Robert Preston, has a prominent role as Andrews's partner. Edwards' film thus includes a humorous but progressive portrayal of homosexuality: for instance, Preston's character has a conversation with a woman who thinks he could be "reformed" by the right woman, to which he replies "I think the right woman could reform you, too." Moreover, the intersection between feminism and queerness is touched on when, after being discovered, Andrews discusses her future with her now lover, played by James Garner: she remarks on the "things available to me as a man that I could never have as a woman," and on feeling "emancipated." Andrews talks about the injustice of being expected, as a woman, to give up a successful career, while Garner clearly states that he is worried about being considered a homosexual if they stay together and Victoria continues to perform as Victor. The romantic happy ending, however, is inevitable here, too.

Finally, in *Mrs. Doubtfire* Robin Williams is a man in the middle of a divorce who dresses as an elderly woman to get a job as his children's nanny. Similar to the examples above, he also tries to win back his ex wife by becoming her confidant as Mrs. Doubtfire. Coincidentally, queerness is not completely foreign to him: in his enterprise he is helped by his makeup-artist gay brother (played by gay playwright Harvey Fierstein) and his partner, whom his kids call 'uncle Frank and aunt Jack.' Here drag also provides an opportunity for comedy on traditional gender roles: Williams learns how to become a great homemaker, and scenes such as the one in which he vacuums to Aerosmith's *Dude Looks Like a Lady* are familiar even to those who have never watched the film. Although there is not as explicit a discussion on the female condition as in the previous example, it is worth noticing that in *Mrs. Doubtfire* it is the mother, played by Sally Field, who has a big career and is the family's primary breadwinner. We also see how

she struggles between family and career without her husband's help. Therefore, in this film the portrayal of femininity has moved in a more progressive direction.

These pictures are representative examples of a tendency: drag never appears as an act of self expression, but as a way for – mostly – men to obtain something they want that is precluded to them in their own identity⁴. There are also a few tropes recurring in each film in which a man does drag: for instance, the character gets discovered and has to clarify to someone that they are doing drag for practical reasons, not because they enjoy the 'lifestyle.' Another recurring gag is the involuntary seduction of a person of their own sex (usually an older man) with humorous consequences for the audience. This trope also has a variation in which the man in drag is physically attacked or assaulted, generally in the street, and saves himself by using his real voice to scare off the aggressor. Albeit with a humorous tone, the characters who get in drag end up empathizing with the opposite sex, as the act of – literally – walking in someone else's shoes provides a new perspective. However, even when traditional assumptions on gender roles are questioned the traditional happy ending restores normativity: Tony Curtis gets Marilyn, Hoffman ends up with Lange, Andrews is with Garner. The only exceptions are Williams, who stays divorced, and Lemmon, whose bewildered look upon hearing "Nobody's perfect" at the end of the film has been leaving audiences in suspense about his destiny for decades.

These examples do not indicate appropriation per se as much as the employment of drag for humorous purposes. In each of these films, drag expresses a form of deceit, usually towards women, and the inevitable discovery of the truth is associated with feelings of betrayal toward the women. Moreover, there is often an underlying implication that a genuine involvement with the gender-non-conforming world would be dangerous and unacceptable: Butler argues that in these films "the anxiety over a possible homosexual consequence is both produced and deflected" (Butler 1993, 126). In fact, these works are structured around a strictly binary

⁴ It is interesting to notice that all the aforementioned characters already belong to the world of show business, either as actors or musicians.

interpretation of gender⁵. They are, ultimately, forms of drag that straight culture produces for itself – and therefore have little to do with the underground milieu that generated drag as a form of expression.

The forms of drag produced for the mainstream are clearly easier to find in works from a time in which LGBTQ+ rights and culture were not prominent in the national conversation. However, it is possible to find examples of authentic, subversive expressions of drag in works produced roughly around the same time as the ones discussed above. While these films did not reach the public in the same way, their presence had a significant impact on the culture, either directly or through cultural appropriation, as we will see in the next section.

3. Queer Drag

The queer world has historically been relegated to the underground, especially in the time preceding the Stonewall Riots. In this sense, drag may very well represent the underworld of the underworld. One of the most significant documents from this era is represented by *The Queen* by Frank Simon (1968), a documentary about the backstage of the Miss All-America Camp Beauty contest in New York in the 1960s. The film would influence many on-screen works featuring drag, particularly because of the final scene in which a furious Crystal LaBeija reads⁶ the queen who has won the pageant.

⁵ In Eve Sedgwick's book *Tendencies*, scholar Michael Moon argues that "in the film and theater of the past two decades, as well as in the body of critical gender theory and performance theory that has arisen during the same period, transvestism has often been trivialized and domesticated into mere 'crossdressing,' as if its practice had principally to do with something that can be put on and off as easily as a costume. [...] As such, it is sometimes treated as sinister-when men are seen as being empowered by a pretense of femininity they can doff at will, leaving their underlying gender identity and privilege untouched or indeed enhanced. Alternatively, a very similar understanding of transvestism can take on a utopian tinge: as a denaturalizing and defamiliarizing exposure of the constructed character of all gender; as a translation of what are often compulsory gender behaviors to a caricatural, exciting, chosen plane of arbitrariness and free play" (Sedgwick 1994, 219).

⁶ Rodgers defines reading as "to tell somebody to f— off - but good" (Rodgers 1979, 169). Originating in ballroom culture, reading can be described as the art of caustic insult as performance. In *Paris Is Burning*, Dorian Corey describes it as "the real art form of insult. [...] You get in a smart crack, and everyone laughs and kee-kees because you found a flaw and exaggerated it. Then you've got a good read going."



When it comes to fictional content, the films by John Waters are probably the best example of underground productions featuring drag. Waters' muse, Divine, is a drag queen whose identity is unacknowledged in the plot of the films. Butler argues that her "impersonation of women implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates" (Butler 1990, XXVIII). Waters' espousal of an aesthetic of the excess and the abject⁷ signals an embrace of this underground condition. As Halperin notes, "a subculture is not the same thing as a culture. [...] A subculture is in an oppositional (if not adversarial) relationship to an already existing set of authoritative cultural values, and it refers, explicitly or implicitly, to a world that is not its own independent creation. It is an expression of resistance to a dominant culture and a defiance of a social order" (Halperin 2012, 423). Waters is a perfect example of this description.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) by Jim Sharman probably represents an unprecedented case, as an underground work which gradually conquered cult status⁸. The film is explicit in its celebration of queerness: the song *Sweet Transvestite*, according to Vito Russo "the essence of what every parent in America fears will happen if our sexual standards are relaxed" (Russo 1987, 53), is the best example. Dr. Frank-N-Furter, a modern Dr. Frankenstein in drag⁹, makes fun of the fears and assumptions on gender of the super-heteronormative couple played by Susan Sarandon and Barry Bostwick. Newton notes that "if the symbolism of the film is familiar, the fact that it was made, and that apparently thousands of American adolescents flocked to see it at midnight showings is not" (Newton 1979, XII). In

⁷ Cfr. Kristeva 1982.

⁸ Vito Russo remarks that "Twentieth Century-Fox has never given [the film] a proper release in the United States" (Russo 1987, 52).

⁹ Newton remarks that "though Dr. Frank N. Furter's drag is drawn more from pornography (black garter belt, tight corset) than from gay drag, and though he is represented as an androgynous bisexual, his creation of a witless muscle man as an ideal lover puts us back on familiar ground. The muscle man and the drag queen are true Gemini: the make-believe man and the make-believe woman" (Newton 1979, XII).

Sharman's film drag is used, to use Butler's words, "for the purposes of resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy" (Butler 1993, 21). In this film, part of the legitimacy comes from the connection of the theme of drag with gayness and sex, a dimension that was absent in the previous examples.

In queer culture, the original intent of drag is a subversive one: the "appropriation and resignification of heterosexual forms and artifacts" (Halperin 2012, 424) as an expression of resistance to and subversion of heteronormativity. Butler argues that "drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (Butler 1993, 125). The practice of female impersonation, in particular, represents a challenge to social behavior.

As Butler observes, "although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself." (Butler 1990, 176). In *Mother Camp*, Newton had noted that "masculinity also depends crucially on differentiation from, and dominance over women" (Newton 1979, 4), and while it is true that to parody a certain social model can mean to accept it – or at least to acknowledge it - in the case of drag "parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities" (Butler 1990, 138). In a heteronormative culture in which "to be penetrated is to abdicate power" (Bersani 2010, 19), the idea of not only being a gay male, but of incarnating femininity in the way a drag queen does implies a complete subversion of the patriarchal system.

The first documentary to look at the world of drag after *The Queen* is *Paris Is Burning* (1990). Jennie Livingston's film started as an independent movie, but ended up as an influential cult object. *Paris Is Burning* focuses on the house ballroom community in New York, a community composed of gender-non-conforming people of color. In the world immortalized

by Livingston, drag and transsexuality intersect and often overlap, thus offering a more complex view of gender: “members of the ballroom community function under more expanded notions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Unlike in dominant U.S. society, ballroom communities view and adopt categories of identity as malleable and mutable” (Bailey 2011, 369). Race and class are also central in the film, as the subjects of the documentary are marginalized on both levels – on top of the oppression endured for being trans and/or queer. Ballroom culture carved a space for these identities that were not allowed to exist anywhere else. Therefore, here drag is a way to express the aspiration to be a member of high society, to pass (i.e., realness¹⁰), and the ironic critique which is intrinsic to this portrayal of heteronormativity. One of the boys interviewed in the film says that it’s “as close [...] as we’re gonna get” to the reality of inclusion and professional self-affirmation that is more easily available to cis, straight, white people.

This form of aspiration poses the real concern, highlighted by Judith Butler and Venus, one of the queens in the film, of “whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms” (Butler 1993, 125). I would argue, however, that the film more accurately reflects Halperin’s definition of drag as a “response to social conditions and cultural codes that they cannot alter, but can only resist” (Halperin 2012, 217). George Chauncey points to the very employment of the ball as an event as “appropriating rituals of the dominant culture – debutante and masquerade balls – and investing them with new meaning” (Chauncey 1994, 25). It is interesting to notice, however, that the film most frequently described as an authentic portrayal of the gender-non-conforming world points to heteronormativity as much as it does – even if this aspirational tension is mostly associated to an acknowledgment of the disparity of access to wealth and social mobility. The legacy of the

¹⁰ Marlon Bailey describes realness as “a set of performance criteria [...] used to create the illusion of gender and sexual conformity in the outside world. [...] to be ‘real’ is to minimize or eliminate any sign of deviation from gender and sexual norms that are dominant in a heteronormative society” (Bailey 2011, 377-78).

film itself is complex for other reasons as well: on the one hand Livingston, who is white and cisgender, records the experience of a community often overlooked, when not oppressed. On the other, the film's release also raised the question of whether it is appropriate to observe the experience of a community to which we don't belong like a curious phenomenon. bell hooks, in particular, wrote a scathing review of the documentary (cfr. hooks 2015), arguing that Livingston's work provided entertainment for straight white audiences¹¹. Regardless, the film's influence has been enormous, both in queer culture and on American pop culture at large.

The most immediate impact of *Paris Is Burning* on mainstream culture is represented by Madonna's *Vogue* era, a time in which, according to Carsten Balzer, "the rich diversity of gender identities and performativities in this urban subculture was reduced to stereotypes and the drag queens' homosexuality" (Balzer 2005, 112). Madonna represents a good example of appropriation of minority and underground culture in general¹². Balzer argues that the release of Madonna's *Vogue* video on MTV in the early 1990s (along with RuPaul's success shortly after) is what started "the beginning of the international drag queen hype of the 1990s" (Balzer 2005, 117). Rosemary Hennessy highlights the contradictions within this phenomenon:

the appropriation of gay cultural codes in the cosmopolitan revamping of gender displays the arbitrariness of bourgeois patriarchy's gender system and helps to reconfigure it in a more postmodern mode [...]. In itself, of course, this limited assimilation of gays into mainstream middle-class culture does not disrupt postmodern patriarchy and its intersection with capitalism; indeed, it is in some ways quite integral to it (Hennessy 1994, 63).

The bigger presence in mainstream culture of queer subjects (in this case, of drag) on the one hand represents an obvious positive improvement, as representation tends to reduce marginalization and oppression. On the other hand, this presence tends to be filtered through

¹¹ hooks herself, however, consistently misgenders the protagonists of the film in her review, and repeatedly characterizes the community in the film just as Black (a point on which she builds much of her argument against Livingston), thus ignoring the many Hispanic people that appear in the film.

¹² The *Sex Book*, for instance, looks like a tamed remake of Robert Mapplethorpe's S&M portraits.

a heteronormative gaze. The “entertaining transvestite” (Hennessy 1994, 117), Hennessy remarks, is a stereotypical caricature meant for the entertainment of a heterosexual audience, and in mainstream culture “as in most marketing strategies, money, not liberation, is the bottom line” (Hennessy 1994, 32). This description fits more the films described in the first section of this article than the ones discussed above.

4. Forms of Assimilation

As American culture at large gradually becomes more comfortable with the marginal, it is easier to recognize authentic queer elements in mainstream cultural products. There is always, however, a negotiation that aims at making marginal content more palatable, a dynamic Halperin described as an “accommodation to the mainstream” (Halperin 2012, 441). Content produced with an awareness of its larger audience has complex implications. On the one hand, in a context of marginalization, a bigger presence of underground themes in works intended for mainstream consumption indicates a cultural and social progress that should be welcomed. On the other, when contamination turns into assimilation there is also an inevitable shift in content. Danielle Fosler-Luisser describes a similar dynamic with race, highlighting a lingering power disparity, “people within a minority or less powerful group changing their behavior to be more like a dominant group. We might think of assimilation as a companion concept to appropriation: it emerges from contact between groups who have unequal authority” (Fosler-Luisser 2020, 86). This tendency to conformity has the inevitable consequence of smoothing the edges which represent a crucial part of queer and drag culture.

A fascinating way in which queer culture permeates mainstream culture is the phenomenon of queer coding. If we pay attention, we’ll notice that queer content has always been present in mainstream works, albeit in a sneaky way. In his groundbreaking book *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo identifies and catalogues queer content in film since the dawn of cinema. When it could not be mentioned, particularly at the time of the Hays Code, queerness would be suggested or hinted at in what Russo identifies as “coded references” (Russo 1987,

59) and “gay overtones” (Russo 1987, 74-75) in film¹³. These references usually had to do with sexual orientation, as drag is more difficult to allude to in a subtle way. Despite this, John Musker and Ron Clements managed to sneak drag into *The Little Mermaid* (1989): the look of Ursula was inspired by Divine¹⁴. As a general tendency, drag representation was also about to become more explicit in the 1990s.

In *The Birdcage* (1996), for instance, queer content is more prominent. The film by Mike Nichols is, again, an adaptation of European material; a French play subsequently adapted into a film. Among these, *The Birdcage* is certainly the work more directly aimed at a mainstream audience. Nevertheless, the film is filled with gay characters and revolves around a queer family, in which Albert, played by Nathan Lane, routinely refers to himself as his son’s mother. Here we don’t have a straight man who goes in drag for practical purposes (not until the end, anyway), but a professional drag queen who uses her skills to achieve Barbara Bush realness, so to speak, in order to impress the conservative future in-laws, who are unaware their daughter is marrying the son of a gay couple. When Albert dresses as a credible upper-middle-class housewife, drag is employed for comic relief in a way that is different from the previous examples. Here most characters are in on the plot, and the comedy comes from the attempts of the couple at looking normative: redecorating the house switching the art with a crucifix, mimicking John Wayne’s walk to seem manly, loudly disapproving of gays in the military (albeit because of the haircuts and uniforms).

Writing about the French original¹⁵, Russo remarks that “a gay reading ... that escapes most audiences [...] shows that in fact the film is about passing for straight and the accommodations gays make, large and small, each day of their lives in order to meet the expectations of the straight world” (Russo 1987, 263). The audience never laughs at the gay characters, but rather with them at the incongruities posed by so-called ‘respectability.’ Most

¹³ Eve Sedgwick also makes reference to “coding” (Sedgwick 1994, 83) in *Tendencies*.

¹⁴ It must be clarified that the practice of queer coding has been a tendency particularly concerning the portrayal of villains (including Disney villains), which raises problematic implications (cfr. Brown 2021).

¹⁵ Having died in 1990, Russo did not live to see the American version.

importantly, in this film the inevitable happy ending does not include a return to normativity: Albert and his partner Armand, played by Robin Williams, sign a palimony agreement halfway through the film, thus giving legal status to the gay family. Moreover, now it is the father-in-law, a Republican senator, who is eventually forced into drag to escape journalists, thus subverting the trope discussed in the first category.

When it comes to drag, however, the best example of the margin reaching the mainstream is represented by RuPaul, arguably the first drag superstar in history. Starting out in the underground queer world in the 1980s, she later appeared on MTV and hosted a TV talk show in the 1990s, walking on the line between mainstream and underground. In mainstream culture, she represented the outsider and, as such, was welcomed – and employed – as a symbol of change¹⁶. RuPaul also highlighted the commonalities between drag and regular people:

when I go to work, it's no different than a businessman wearing his three-piece suit on Wall Street. I'm like a nurse, a fireman, or a cop on the beat – they all wear their uniforms to work, and I'm no different. And, like all professionals, I love my uniform. After all, whether we are at work or at play we are all wearing masks and playing roles all the time. Like I've always said, 'You're born naked and the rest is drag' (RuPaul 1995, *forw.*).

However, following the success of *RuPaul's Drag Race* on TV, RuPaul has now evolved into a polished entertainment machine.

The show is a good example of the concept of assimilation, as opposed to appropriation. Started on Logo, a gay network, *Drag Race* moved on to VH1 and now MTV, thus addressing decidedly mainstream audiences. Using the reality TV format, according to Eir-Anne Edgar, is “a way to present new elements (such as drag queens) in a framing device that viewers feel comfortable with.” (Edgar 2011, 138). Scholars have found many ways in which the show caters to the mainstream. Ben Robbins, for instance, argues that *Drag Race* “frequently flattens individual expressions of protest into a standardized package through its normative

¹⁶ For instance, the brand Mac Cosmetics employed her in a 1994 campaign.

production values” (Robbins 2024, 404). Furthermore, the show has a checkered history when it comes to trans representation, as for most of its run it excluded trans contestants¹⁷.

Drag Race is filled with queer references, particularly to works like *Paris Is Burning* which inform the lexicon with words like ‘reading’ and ‘realness.’ Edgar argues that

this connection not only legitimates the queerness of the show in the queer historical continuum; it is also an attempt to equate the two in terms of social value. [...] Through these references to knowing viewers, RuPaul situates her show in the context of a long and complex queer historical record. However, viewers and critics must ask themselves whether or not *Drag Race* belongs in this queer canon or if an act of encroachment has taken place (Edgar 2011, 136).

The success of *Drag Race* also has the consequence of making queer phrases popular and of common use¹⁸, with an inevitable trivialization and commodification of what originally was underground content of a minority culture. This commodification is behind what José Esteban Munoz calls “commercial drag,” which he describes as a “sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption. [...] The sanitized queen is meant to be enjoyed as an entertainer who will hopefully lead to social understanding and tolerance” (Munoz 1999, 99). However, while Munoz lamented that this visibility on mainstream media did not have a positive effect on LGBTQ+ civil rights, we can now say that it did¹⁹.

Drag Race is not the only contemporary work to be influenced by *Paris Is Burning*: a further evolution of this content is represented by shows like Ryan Murphy’s *Pose*, which portrays the world of ballroom. A series produced by a big network, FX, the show has achieved large commercial success by telling parts of queer and drag history rarely dealt with in mainstream media, all the while employing a gender-non-conforming cast. *Pose* certainly presents features that compromise with commercial success - for instance, queer themes are dealt with in a way

¹⁷ Cfr., Robbins 2024, 409.

¹⁸ Cfr. Campana et al. 2022, 1963.

¹⁹ Both marriage equality and the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell happened after the publication of Munoz’s book, arguably as a consequence of gay rights being more broadly accepted in the United States - and thus as a consequence of the positive impact of increased gay representation in mainstream media.

can feel didactic to the audience. At the same time, *Pose* also shows a deep knowledge of its roots, with several references that wink at those who know the culture: for instance, the character of Elektra is clearly inspired by Crystal LaBeija, Candy's death references the murder of Venus Xtravaganza, and there is a storyline that clearly references the discovery of a mummified body in the closet of Dorian Corey (both Xtravaganza and Corey are queens featured in *Paris Is Burning*).

Pose is perhaps the best example when it comes to a balance between marginality and commodification. Despite being a big production distributed by an important network, the knowledge of queer subculture on the part of the show runners is evident – and the involvement of figures such as Janet Mock, who is trans and black, in the production team helped stave off accusations of cultural appropriation. The largely trans cast (including Dominique Jackson, who in her youth participated in the ballroom scene) also contributes to giving the show credibility. *Pose* includes storylines dealing with the marginalization and oppression endured by trans people of color. The strength of the community is also featured prominently. However, there are moments expressing a sentimentalism clearly meant to cater to a mainstream audience. The best example is in season 2, when the character of Candy is murdered. Her spirit attends her own funeral, tearfully saying goodbye to her friends before reconciling with her estranged parents. Needless to say, this is not a plotline that is often found in underground narratives. This sentimentalism is a product of commercial domestication. However, instances such as this do not diminish the invaluable contribution *Pose* gave to trans representation.

Even beyond the arts, one of the consequences of a more prominent queer presence in the mainstream concerns profit. When queer culture seems to be a popular subject, for example, not only does it appear in films or TV series, but corporations (even those having nothing to do with cultural production) participate as well: for instance, the World Pride march held in New York City in 2019 had such a big corporate sponsorship that a second march was held in

protest²⁰. Profit, however, does not well align with subversion. While provisionally positive, this kind of involvement is superficial. While substantial initiatives originating from the contact with the mainstream exist – for instance the Drag Queen Story Hour program, in which public libraries host book readings for children made by drag queens, thus making a tangible effort toward education and inclusivity – most steps forward can have problematic implications. Charvel et al., for example, reported on the positive impact of *Drag Race* on cis, straight viewers as a consequence of exposure to representation²¹. At the same time, there is a process of corporate capitalization on the stigma endured by the queer community²² that remains problematic.

In a more assimilated culture, Halperin has warned, these steps forward could also lead to a belief that queer subculture should be regarded as no longer necessary, “a vestige from an earlier time” (Halperin 2012, 442). As subculture develops in contrast to mainstream culture, once assimilation and the ‘accommodation to the mainstream’ have taken place, the resistance of gay subculture could be regarded as “the sign of failure (or refusal) to assimilate” (Halperin 2012, 442). Once a minority reaches a certain kind of assimilation, especially if it comes with forms of legal recognition²³, it is generally assumed that certain subcultural expressions of that culture have become obsolete. If assimilation is regarded as a sign of acceptance, a lingering attitude toward subversion in the face of so-called respectability politics runs the risk of being interpreted as a refusal of integration. On the other hand, Halperin argues, queer subculture is essential as it continues to “provide an important, if implicit, vehicle of social critique and political resistance” (Halperin 2012, 430). I would argue that the latter is a crucial point, particularly in light of the political developments that took place in recent years.

²⁰ Cfr. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/millions-celebrate-lgbtq-pride-in-new-york-amid-global-fight-for-equality-organ-idUSKCN1TV0SP/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/30/new-york-pride-parade-lgbtq-rights>.

²¹ Cfr. Charvel et al. 2024.

²² Cfr. Campana et al. 2022.

²³ For instance, marriage equality or the ability of serving in the military.



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As it is dependent upon profit, mainstream representation is not a stable condition: the popularity of a subject has not as much to do with content as it does with the market. A recent example of this phenomenon is the reverse course on inclusivity initiatives many corporations took in 2025 following Donald Trump's reelection, most notably their participation in Pride Month initiatives²⁴. Similarly, in the past few years drag shows have been banned by Republican governors in several American states²⁵. These events demonstrate that the subversion and social critique inherent to queer subculture are still necessary, and need to be simmering below the mainstream surface. While there are civil rights advancements that have been reached in the last few years, such as marriage equality and the ability for LGBTQ+ people to serve in the military, recent developments prove that minorities have to remain vigilant (for instance, in a concurring opinion on the Dobbs ruling, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas signaled that marriage equality may not be settled precedent²⁶). And while mainstream representation can help, its dependence on profit does not make it a reliable ally.

Conclusions

The fact that the marginal has reached the mainstream does not entail that the marginal has to become palatable to the mainstream: on the contrary, its role as a vehicle of critique and resistance can be particularly valuable during a time of assimilation, as a point of reference and contrast toward appropriation or exploitation.

²⁴ Cfr. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/22/revealed-how-big-businesses-are-rolling-back-public-support-for-pride>; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebekahbastian/2025/06/18/pride-month-2025-exposes-the-limits-of-corporate-allyship/>; <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/06/02/business/brands-pride-month-trump-lgbtq>.

²⁵ Cfr. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/commentisfree/2023/mar/10/drag-show-bans-tennessee-lgbtq-rights>; <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/02/politics/tennessee-ban-drag-show-performances-governor>; <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/tennessee-takes-lead-republican-effort-restrict-drag-shows-2023-02-23/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/21/anti-drag-show-laws-bans-republican-states>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/27/us/texas-law-drag-shows-restriction.html>.

²⁶ Cfr. <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/24/thomas-constitutional-rights-00042256>.



It is also important that subculture not be considered a fixed, settled entity, but something that changes and evolves along with the kinds of oppression and challenges that society poses while maintaining an awareness of its subversive roots. In this sense, the best role for assimilated queer products may be that of cultural gateway. Seductive as it may be, the idea that the general public could directly come in contact with subcultural content is not realistic. There is a need for a map, a yellow brick road to follow in order to get to the underground. In this sense, assimilation can prove to be helpful: products that are more accessible, the ones easier to get in contact with, maybe not the most provocative or the most profound, can lead people deeper down into the subcultural rabbit hole. Provided that these assimilated texts do not embrace oppressive practices toward that marginalized community, they can play an important role in culture not only by softening the ground for civil rights (it is not by chance that LGBTQ+ rights were more embraced after the increase of gay content in mainstream works that started in the 1990s), but also by representing the first step into a minority culture (something that is particularly important with queer culture, which is not passed down by blood). Thus, *Pose* can lead to *Paris Is Burning*, which can lead to John Waters, and who knows what else. Like breadcrumbs, there are older but still quite sparkling sequins to follow.

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Transgressive Narratives at the Margins: Exploring Romanian Transgender Identities in the Online Sphere

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Abstract

This study explores how Romanian transgender users construct their identities in the digital space. It analyses the transgressive self-narratives, the reactions from digital audiences, and the intersection of these two dimensions. The study looks at a collection of multimodal online discourses from the perspective of Internet linguistics and identity studies. It identifies patterns in users' attitudes and positions towards transgender identity. The findings reveal that these online discourses frequently exhibit polarisation, with consensus on transgender identities being difficult to achieve. The study contributes to understanding online (self-)presentation and sheds light on stance-taking regarding (trans)gender identities.

Keywords: digital autobiography; transgressive narratives; transgender identity; digital audiences.

Introduction

In recent years, the digital sphere has become a crucial site for identity construction, particularly for marginalised communities whose voices are often underrepresented in mainstream discourse. This study investigates how Romanian transgender individuals articulate and negotiate their identities online, focusing on the interplay between self-narration and audience reception. By examining a corpus of multimodal online discourses, the research adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines Internet linguistics with identity and ethnographic studies.

The analysis centres on the transgressive narratives of a transgender man, Taylor Winters, who challenges normative gender expectations. While exploring how these narratives are shaped, contested, and received within online niche communities, special attention is given to the linguistic strategies employed in his digital autobiography, the affective and ideological stances taken by both the content creator and his audiences, and the broader sociocultural implications of these interactions. Building on previous work (Cotoc and Radu 2024; Cotoc and Radu 2025), this analysis starts with a parallel between Taylor Winters and a trans woman, Daria Jane, to explore three main aspects:

1. Gender trajectory (female-to-male vs. male-to-female) and how it influences narrative framing and audience perception;
2. Cultural context (Romania vs. the UK) and its impact on visibility, acceptance, and discursive strategies;
3. Linguistic environment (Romanian vs. English) and how language choice shapes identity construction and community engagement.

Through this lens and the parallel between these two digital autobiographies, the study identifies recurring patterns in how transgender identities are positioned and perceived, revealing a landscape marked by polarisation and contested legitimacy. While some comments foster solidarity and visibility, others provoke resistance or reinforce binary norms. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of online (self-)presentation and

the dynamics of stance-taking in relation to (trans)gender identities in a post-socialist, digitally mediated context.

This paper begins by outlining a contrastive overview between the two transgender identities and the theoretical framework, followed by a presentation of the methodology and the central hypothesis. It then moves into a detailed analysis of selected examples from the corpus of comments, illustrating how the data supports or challenges the initial assumptions. Through this structure, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive and critical exploration of the discursive dynamics at play.

Contrastive Overview of Daria and Taylor

Despite being a member of the European Union, Romania continues to lag behind in LGBTQ+ rights, ranking among the lowest in the EU according to ILGA-Europe's 2025 report (<https://www.ilga-europe.org/report/annual-review-2025/>). In addition, based on the Rainbow Map, Romania scores 18.63% on a scale from 1 to 100% in terms of legal and policy practices concerning LGBTQ+ people (<https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/>). While legal gender change is permitted in Romania, there is no recognition of same-sex partnerships, and public discourse remains largely conservative. However, recent events such as the record-breaking Bucharest Pride 2025, which drew over 30,000 participants, signal a growing push for visibility and equality (<https://bucharestdailynews.com/bucharest-pride-2025-30k-march/>). Within this contested social landscape, Romanian transgender influencers like Daria Jane (27,6 Tsd Followers) and Taylor Winters (69,4 Tsd Followers) have emerged as powerful digital voices.

Daria Jane, known for her bold, activist-oriented content, often confronts societal norms head-on, using her platform to challenge transphobia and advocate for systemic change, and has become a microcelebrity, as she gained popularity for being the first Romanian transgender woman who documents her life and transitioning process. She has

become “iconic for the community of transwomen”, while stressing out that “transwomen should not be regarded as abnormal” and presenting the lives of transwomen and relevant aspects concerning the transitioning from a male body to a female body (Cotoc and Radu 2024, 353).

Since the “digital media has a global reach, but at the same time also a provincialising effect” (Cotoc and Radu 2024, 356), Taylor Winters adopts an aesthetic and lifestyle-focused approach, weaving trans identity into narratives of beauty, fashion, and personal growth. This highlights the diverse strategies of self-representation and audience engagement among Romanian trans creators, reflecting broader tensions between visibility, acceptance, and resistance in the digital sphere.

Comparing the digital narratives of Daria Jane and Taylor Winters offers a rich lens into how Romanian transgender individuals construct identity online. This comparison reveals how Instagram, gender identity, and cultural context shape the way transgender individuals construct their digital narratives. Daria’s narrative is more visually transgressive and confrontational within a local context, as her content is glamorised and at times eroticised, while Taylor’s is emotionally transgressive, as his content is more self-reflective, expressive of vulnerability, depicting couple life, and challenging norms around masculinity and family in a globalised space. The difference between the two lies in five main dimensions: gender identity and transition narrative, cultural and geographic context, platform use and digital persona, themes and transgressive narratives, identity construction and audience engagement (see Table 1).

1. Gender Identity and Transition Narrative

Aspect	Daria Jane	Taylor Winters
Identity	Trans woman	Trans man



Transition	Born in 1998 in Romania, transitioned at 18 in Thailand, publicly visible from early stages	Born in 1984 in Romania, transitioned at 34 in Germany/USA, after moving abroad
Narrative Focus	Emphasises femininity, beauty, and visibility in Romanian society	Emphasises authenticity, body autonomy, and family-building

2. Cultural and Geographic Context

Aspect	Daria Jane	Taylor Winters
Location	Lives in Bucharest	Lives in London
Cultural Framing	Navigates Romanian conservatism and media scrutiny	Offers a transnational perspective, contrasting Romanian and Western experiences
Audience	Primarily Romanian- speaking	International, English-speaking audience (with Romanian roots)

3. Platform Use and Digital Persona

Aspect	Daria Jane	Taylor Winters
Main Platforms	YouTube, Instagram	TikTok, Instagram
Content Style	Glamorous, influencer-style, beauty-focused	Educational, personal, couple- focused, family-oriented
Tone	Bold, confrontational at times	Warm, reflective, often humorous

4. Themes and Transgressive Narratives

Aspect	Daria Jane	Taylor Winters
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Transgression	Challenges gender norms in a conservative society; highly visible and politicised	Challenges assumptions about masculinity, fatherhood, and trans family-making
Stigma Navigation	Faces direct backlash and media sensationalism	Navigates stigma through storytelling and emotional connection
Activism	Implicit through visibility and media presence	Explicit through educational content and advocacy for trans parenthood

5. Identity Construction and Audience Engagement

Aspect	Daria Jane	Taylor Winters
Self-Presentation	Emphasises transformation and beauty as empowerment	Emphasises authenticity, vulnerability, and relational identity
Audience Interaction	Often polarising; receives both support and hate	Builds a supportive community; less polarising due to international framing
Narrative Strategy	Uses visual transformation and glamor as tools of empowerment	Uses storytelling, humour, and emotional openness to build empathy

Table 1. *Contrastive Overview of Daria and Taylor*

Transgressive Narratives and Performance

The marginalised identity of Taylor Winters is articulated, negotiated, and received in a digital context, with particular attention to the dynamic interplay between personal storytelling/self-narration, social norms, and the performative dimensions of identity. The critical examination of the intricate processes involved in the construction and expression of his transgressive narrative within niche communities in the online sphere requires the nexus between self-narration, performance, performativity, and performativity, as well as transgression and audience reception.

In examining the role of self-narration, we draw on the assertion that “for marginalized groups such as queer individuals whose voices are often excluded from mainstream discourse, social media offers a relatively accessible and dynamic space for self-expression” (Talv and Käänte 2025, 37-38). Within this digital landscape, transgender users engage in the construction of multimodal discourses that articulate self-narratives characterised by transience and progression towards their desired selves. These narratives are not static representations but rather dynamic processes, where identity is continuously shaped and reshaped. As Klepper argues, narrative becomes “contingent to the definition of identity” (Klepper 2013, 4). This process of identity construction is further complicated by the duality inherent in personal identity. Klepper (Idem, 5) notes that:

personal identity is the mediation between two extremes: a person may have the strongest sense of self, of being a presence, of momentarily experiencing her/his actions as a fully conscious agent, but simultaneously disown her/his past selves and future accountability; or, a person may have an overwhelming sense of continuity and similarity, but hardly feel like an agent: an acting character who ‘owns’ her/his connectedness to the moment.

We contend that the narratives constructed by transgender users on social media function not only as expressions of identity but also as active sites of identity negotiation, revealing exactly the mediation of the two extremes of personal identity. These narratives mediate between presence and continuity, and agency and fragmentation, allowing users to articulate a self that is both in flux and deeply rooted in personal experience. In this way,



social media becomes a performative space where identity is not merely represented but continuously shaped and redefined in relation with audiences. As Cotoc and Radu (2024, 355) observe, “digital spaces, through their very glocal nature, are powerful tools in displaying transformations and behaviours which are subsequently endorsed by the audience in a reciprocal way”. This reciprocal dynamic is an “interaction between multiple co-authors and co-creators of a life narrative – through such acts as tagging, reposting, and liking” and it “participates equally in the production of the text as its author of the text” (Schultermandl, 2020, 148-149). Moreover, this interaction underscores the performative and iterative nature of identity in digital contexts, where self-expression is both personal and socially mediated. This performance is a digital autobiography that is made public for an imagined audience, “a cultural practice that seeks a public, an audience of imagined and unknown strangers who will interact with how a specific life has coemerged with specific media forms” (Poletti 2020, 12).

In the process of self-narration, digital spaces function as heterotopias, as conceptualised by Hetherington, drawing on Foucault’s original notion, as spaces of alternate ordering: “Heterotopias open up a space for the experience of otherness in relation to neighboring social spaces in a society. [...] heterotopias are real spaces of otherness, where ambivalence and insecurities can be retained for the search of authenticity beyond the binary” (Hetherington apud. Kraus 2013, 77). Within these heterotopic digital environments, authenticity and reliability emerge as central features in the autobiographical practices of transgender users, conveying a truth that is both manifested and credible. We also witness a “mundane proliferation of surveillance and self-life-inscription” (Poletti 2020, 74), which is continuously negotiated by audiences, transforming digital autobiographies into performance acts, as well as performative and periperformative acts.

These acts are autobiographical acts which critically engage with the ways in which the content produced by transgender users is interpreted, while also recognising their inherent subjectivity of self-representation. This represents the periperformative nature of

their discourses that “both narrate an individual life and critically interrogate the textual conditions under which lives are narrated. [...] a key element of periperformative life narrative is a critique of the importance of using a unique voice that speaks from and about the lived experience of the subject” (Poletti 2016, 366). Their discourse on social media shows a life narrative which is “a performative utterance that brings into being both a life and a self, and a performative reiteration of dominant discourses and ideologies that constitute both personhood and the intelligibility of what meaning may be found in “life” itself” (Poletti 2016, 367).

In the context of Taylor Winters’ life narrative on Instagram, transgression and body narrative emerge as central themes that challenge normative understandings of gender and embodiment. As Zimman (2014, 18) notes, “trans bodies have often been held up as exemplifying the way sex can be constructed and reconstructed”, and Taylor’s curated digital presence exemplifies this process. Through visual storytelling, captions, and personal reflections, Taylor’s narrative becomes a site of both resistance and redefinition where the body is not a fixed biological given but a canvas for self-determined identity. Taylor’s autobiographical posts, much like Daria Jane’s, participate in what Zimman (2014, 32) describes as a “destabilization of the boundaries between male and female embodiment, by decoupling gender from the physical body while making both a matter of self-determination”. These narratives subvert binary frameworks and invite audiences into a more fluid, inclusive understanding of identity. The body, in this context, is not merely represented but actively narrated, transformed into a space of agency, visibility, and transgressive potential. Yet this process of identity narration does not occur in isolation; it unfolds within the interactive dynamics of networked publics, where the audience does not merely consume content passively but actively participates in shaping its meaning through stance-taking and emotional engagement. As Poletti (2020, 74) suggests, the audience itself emerges from the narrative flow gradually positioning themselves within the unfolding assemblage of clues, interpretations, and affective responses. This dynamic is intensified in

the realm of “networked publics”, which, as boyd (2010, 39) defines, consist of both “the space constructed through networked technologies” and “the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice.” Within the networked publics, individuals operate through “networked individualism” (Wellman 2003; Darvin 2016, 526) forming fluid, personalised connections rather than fixed group identities. The result is sometimes a polarised discursive space where users take visible stances on trans identities, often guided more by personal convictions and emotions than by factual reasoning. This polarisation is especially evident in the comment sections, where expressions of solidarity, resistance, or ambivalence reflect the broader cultural tensions surrounding gender, embodiment, and legitimacy in digital life narratives.

Methodology and Hypothesis

To examine how Taylor co-constructs his trans identity through digital discourse within networked publics and practices of networked individualism, this study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic methodology. The approach is informed by the contrastive framework employed by Cotoc and Radu (2025) in their analysis of perceived identity formation across different digital inputs, and it is adapted here to a single-platform, audience-focused corpus. Despite the study concentrating on a single Instagram post, it allows for comparative insights without claiming statistical generalisability.

The dataset consists of 2,160 user-generated comments posted in response to a single Instagram Reel published by Taylor between 22 November 2024 and 12 June 2025. Comments were collected manually and anonymised in accordance with ethical guidelines for digital discourse research. Non-verbal elements (emojis, hashtags, orthographic emphasis) were retained, as they contribute to stance-taking and affective positioning. Comments were filtered and thematically coded for relevance to gender identity, transition, embodiment, or social positioning. The relevant comments were subjected to qualitative stance analysis, focusing on positive stancetaking and negative stancetaking, and were

interpreted in order to examine how individual users' positioning contribute to the collective construction of trans identity in comment threads.

This study hypothesises that audience perceptions and evaluations of trans identities in digital spaces are shaped by three interrelated variables: the direction of gender transition, the cultural context, and the language of narration. More specifically, it anticipates that female-to-male and male-to-female transition narratives elicit different discursive framings and affective responses; that Romanian and UK-based sociocultural contexts influence normative expectations and tolerance thresholds; and that Romanian-versus English-language environments condition the visibility and intensity of both supportive and transphobic discourse. These factors are expected to affect not only the presence of evaluative commentary, but also the forms of stance-taking and identity positioning enacted by users within networked publics.

Corpus Analysis and Discussion of Findings

This section investigates how trans identity is discursively constructed through periperformative life narratives in digital environments, with a focus on Taylor Winter's Instagram reel "Nothing's gonna stop us  " (see figure 1 below)¹. Building on Cotoc and Radu's observation that "more than in a face-to-face context, identities emerge from the narrativization of the self" (2024, 356), the analysis explores how Taylor's autobiographical content becomes a site of identity negotiation shaped not only by self-representation but also by audience engagement.

The concept of the periperformative life narrative shaped through the interplay between self-performance and public reception is particularly relevant in this context. Taylor's Instagram reel, captioned "Nothing's gonna stop us  " and set to *Starship – Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now*, serves as a focal point for this analysis. The post forms a rich corpus for examining how networked publics respond to trans embodiment and visibility.

The comments under scrutiny reflect a wide range of stances, from affirmation and solidarity to skepticism and resistance. The following analysis explores these dynamics, highlighting how trans identity is co-constructed through digital discourse and networked publics. Within this discursive space, the fact that Taylor chooses English to present his life-narrative plays a crucial role. English often functions as a connector to the global queer community and serves as a visual shorthand for content aligned with broader, often Western, cultural narratives. This association with globalness is further reinforced by patterns observed in Romanian queer social media, where commercial or outward-facing accounts tend to use significantly more English, often in full, presumably due to its prestige as an international and business language (Hasanova 2010). Thus, the presence and tone of audience responses are not only shaped by identity narratives themselves but also by the linguistic and cultural framing through which these narratives are mediated.

¹ The corpus falls outside copyright restrictions, and it can be accessed at <https://www.instagram.com/p/DCsL62yCX2x/>.



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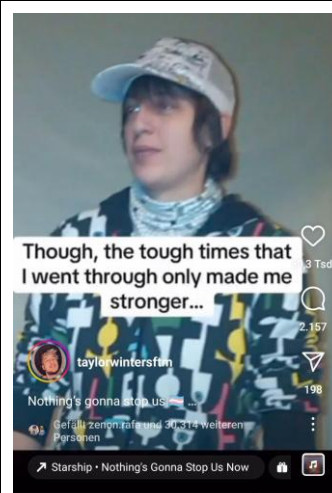
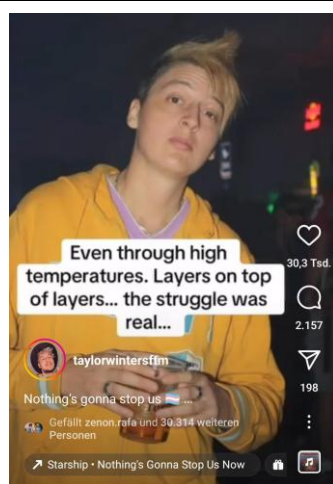
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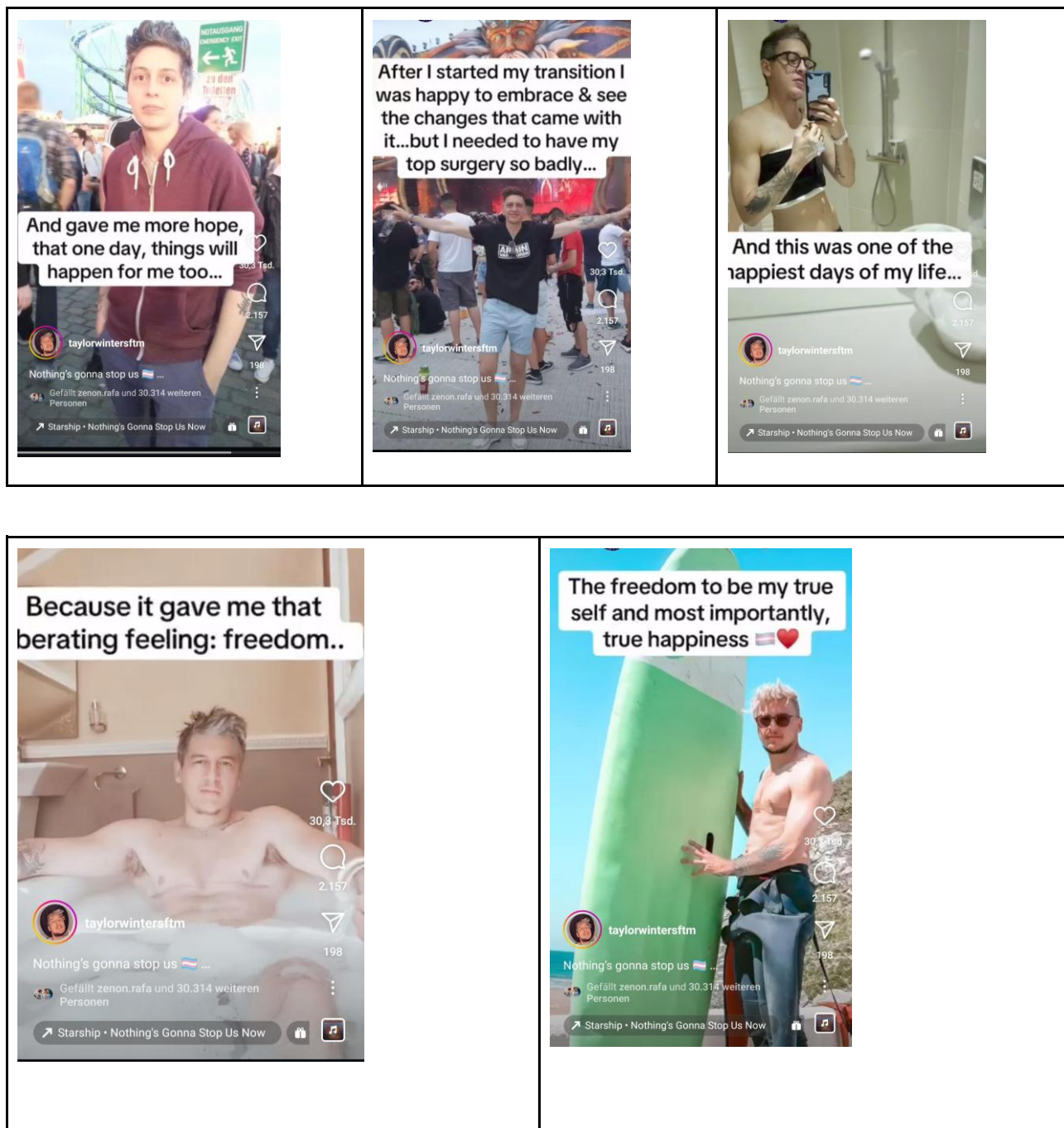


Figure 1. Instagram Reel "Nothing's gonna stop us 🏳️💖"

Taylor Winters' life narrative on Instagram exemplifies how transgression and body narratives intersect in the digital age. His posts challenge binary gender norms and present the body as a site of agency and transformation. Alongside other trans creators like Daria

Jane, Taylor's story destabilises traditional ideas of gendered embodiment. However, these narratives unfold within networked publics that hold conflicting views on trans identities. Audience reactions range from admiration to hate speech, reflecting broader cultural tensions. As Cotoc and Radu (2022, 56) note, "users appeal to their emotions and convictions rather than to facts". This emotional engagement shapes how trans identities are negotiated online, turning digital platforms into contested spaces of both empowerment and resistance.

As illustrated in Table 2 below, the comments on Taylor's story reflect a deeply polarised discourse shaped by tensions surrounding gender identity, national belonging, and cultural values. We have presented these comments verbatim and included translations of those originally written in Romanian in the Annex. The mirrored structure of the selected comments reveals patterns that closely align with the categories previously identified in our analysis of Daria Jane's case, as discussed in our earlier article (Cotoc and Radu 2025, 97-103; Cotoc and Radu, 2025, *Romanian networked publics and transgender identity Coggle Map*).

Positive Stancetaking	Negative Stancetaking
Validation/Admiration 1. ❤️❤️❤️ thank you for sharing your truth! Inspiring and beautiful! Be happy and healthy, always! ❤️ 2. Trebuie să fii ceea ce sufletul îți sugerează, bravo pentru curaj. 3. There was something masculine in your gaze even when you were little. I wish you all the best 🌸 4. Medically, he's perfectly normal. Wow...you are very handsome! I'm glad to see you be able to be yourself. It's not an easy thing in this world and so many people don't get it. But damn, you are one heroic heck of a man ❤️	Hate/Dislike 1. Absolutely repulsive. Why are you even allowed in public? 2. Tutorial cum sa-ti distrugi viata ireversibil 🔥💧 3. Disgraceful u will never be a man ever you will always be a woman. 4. Cam 36/40 de ani irositi ca și femeie...hopa vreau sa fiu(xx)însă în ADN tau tot femeie ești ...știi satana a găsit cu Cale sa suceasca minte multora ...in ciuda faptului ca ti-ai bătut joc de creație lui Dumnezeu...Dumnezeu te iubește asa cum



5. God made him want to be a man. So he became what he was meant to be. If God didn't want that, He wouldn't make him desire this. 6. So glad you didn't give up and living your authentic life ❤️	ești dar nu tolerează idioțenia și păcatul...trist ptr tine. 5. God never makes mistakes!!! He made you a female for a reason!! 6.You can feel like a truck but you will never be. Its ok to pretend you are a woman Still and always will be female
Romanian proud/Balkan proud 7. As a Romanian, I am so freaking proud of you! May you always feel comfortable in your skin! 8. oh we 100% claim HIM 🏳️‍🌈 RO 9. We do claim him ❤️ 🇷🇴 We do not claim our corrupt government that does nothing for us, that keeps people stupid and ignorant like in these comments, our criminals and thieves. And you sir, hot as 🔥🔥🔥🍷 10. Ca si româncă îmi cer scuze public pt toate mesajele negative de aici. Ma doare sufletul sa vad popurul nostru "creștin" câta rautate si ura poate sa arate. 11. Nu asculta comentariile acestea! Țara noastră te iubește și tot te acceptă! Dacă cetățenii din ei nu o fac, e strict problema lor! Sunt mândră de tine! [...] Different doesn't mean wrong! 💕 12. balcan trans people are the strongest ❤️	Romanian exclusion 7. esti o dezamagire pentru populatia romaniei o dezamagire tuturor 8. Please never return to Romania again. Unless you're planning to seek healing at a monastery 9. we don't claim you - marș 10. Ce mutantu naibii ești tu. Bine ca te ai mutat în UK. Nici sa mai pomenesti de România, sa nu mai vreodată ca ești româncă. Nu te recunoaștem, nu ne trebuie oameni ca voi. Sunteți o scârbă, mergeți oriunde vreți. Dar de România și de noi nu pomeniți, tu ești engelzoiacă acum. [...] 11. as a Romanian, I don't claim you, neither as a woman. You should be ashamed of yourself 12. Ne bucuram ca ai plecat in UK, STAY THERE 😂😂😂😂😂



13. I was born and raised in Romania and lived through the revolution too. I am so happy to see that you had support from your parents and found your way to being yourself ❤️ 14. Surviving Balkan as a Queer kid in any shape or form... We deserve gold medals 🏆🏆🏆🏆🏆🏆🏆 15. If you survived romania under these circumstances you can survive anything! 💙	
Psychological explanation 16. [...] știința și psihologia au dovedit că persoanele transgender sunt normale, corpul se dezvoltă înainte de creier în pântec așa că există oameni pentru care cele două nu se aliniază. 17. da search pe google academic si cauta articole stiintifice despre persoanele trans, un psiholog bun il indruma spre tranziție, asta e singura solutie pentru disforia de gen [...].	Psychological problem 13. e boala grea asta, un psiholog bun trebuia si te reseta bine 14. Please, tell us more about your mental illness 15. So you're mentally ill for a while, stay in the west that's where those like you belong 16. Mental patient craving attention again.
Censorship in a state/Trans rights Ceașescu Dictatorship 18. Sunt cu 4 ani mai mare ca el, crede-ma ca nu era nimic in Ro pe vremea aia care sa te "influențeze" sa fii gay, si mai ales trans. [...] nici macar in media internationala care a ajuns la noi dupa anii '90, gen televiziunea prin cablu, nu erau programe sau filme cu gay si trans.	Censorship in a state/Trans rights Trump administration 17. again- u claim genitals don't affirm gender but removing them does 😂. Nah. Doctors are following the agenda now. It will be debunked eventually like any crazy bs in history. Trump is on the right trajectory. 🍑 I'll minority will@never be a norm



19. Imi amintesc ca am vazut cuvantul "homosexual" intr-un film Cand eram adolescenta folosit ca jignire si nimeni din jurul meu nu stia ce inseamna si nici din DEX nu prea am inteles. 20. Mi se rupe sufletul cand ma gandesc la toti adolescentii care pe vremea aia stiau ca- s altfel dar nu gaseau nicio informatie care sa valideze ce simt, cat de singuri trebuie sa se fi simtit. Nu e nimic mai groaznic pe lumea decat sa nu stii cine esti, si Cand aflii, sa nu poti sa fii tu.	18. Uita te la Americani cu tot cu știința lor ce de cct au ajuns. Bine că a venit Trump la putere. [...] 19. Hope you will end up in america 20. sa vina trump pentru o saptamana doua
Reference to the necessity of the right wing party 21. tu ești comunistul care luptă împotriva inumanității... [...] de aia nu mai ninge, nu mai vine crăciunul că există transgenderi și alte bălării. fă-ți griji de sistemul medical, de sărăcia din România și de rata analfabetismului de la noi din țară pentru că astea sunt problemele cele mai mari pe care le avem acum în momentul de față. [...]	Reference to the necessity of the right wing party 21. Dezgustătoare, păcat că sunteți lăsați liberi pe străzi încă, deaia îl vor toți pe Georgescu președinte 22. Iese Georgescu președinte si va calmează. Această boală trebuie tratată.
Mutilation 22. Nobody is mutilating themselves. These are normal surgeries that everyone gets. You don't view it as mutilation when a cis woman or cis man gets breast reduction	Mutilation 23. Everyone is struggling with something. You are not special, nobody is. Don't get me wrong, it's very good that you found your inner peace, but mutilation is not the key for



surgery to affirm their gender and make themselves feel more comfortable in their body. This is no different. Also, you can't identify as an amputee. What you're poorly describing here is called BID. It is actually a neurological disorder in the DSM5. It's not comparable to being trans because "amputee" is not an aspect of one's identity. It's a disability. Also being trans still isn't considered a mental illness by any actual doctors. You just wanna cling to false beliefs. Which IS actually a mental illness . It's called a delusion. 23. You can give birth with whatever the chromosomes you have cause guess what. There are women with uterus that have XY. Also, what does giving birth have to do here? Do you really think the only thing that makes you a woman is giving birth? Infertile women are men now? Women that have lost their internal genitals due to cancer are men? 24. e corpul tau? Te 'mutileaza' pe tine? Te deranjeaza cu ceva? Era ma.ta sau ce. Acum pe bune.	mental struggles. The mind is always changing, depending on the hormonal balance of your body. Good luck 24. You are still a woman. You just mutilated your healthy body. 25. so I have limited brain activity cuz I don't support body mutilation, thank God he made me slow then. Make it make sense. 26. if you really have to ask that question, it's sad. basically you don't see anything wrong in a person mutilating themselves and also drugging because of an ideology? i feel bad for parents who lost their child to the "taking skin off the forearm to form the genital" disease
Religion 25. "Legile lui Dumnezeu"=)))))) There's no bigger hate than a christian's love, ma jur. 26. it is not a sin to be trans it is a just part of god's journey for specific people so they can align their body to their soul 27. si care va fi plata pentru că trăiește o viață fericită și nu rănește pe nimeni? va arde el în iad etern pentru ce mai exact?	Religion 27. Satan is the one who causes confusion! 28. God is love but He is also just and He loves the sinner but He hates sin. Remember what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah. 29. transgenderism = satanism 🔥 - copii ăștia au nevoie de Dumnezeu și psihiatrici. 99.9% did transgenders sunt nenorociți pe



	viață și recunosc asta însă este prea târziu. .1% sunt cei care refuză să accepte ca au făcut o greșală. Mi-e milă de oameni ăștia...[...] 30. Daca te intorci la Isus iti va ierta pana si pacatul asta. Pocaieste te cat mai e timp pe pamant.
Logical and scientific arguments 28. "Sex - the characteristics and traits of biological sex. Sex refers especially to physical and biological traits, whereas gender refers especially to social or cultural traits, although the distinction between the two terms is not regularly observed." - American Psychological Association ... "Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time." 29. So you're a woman just because you have a vagina? If tomorrow you woke up with nothing down there you'd no longer be a woman? It's so gross to boil down people to their parts, I am not a woman just because of what I have down there, I am a woman because of my experiences, because of my brain, the way I was socialized and the way I feel about myself, if suddenly I had nothing down there that would not change.	Mocking overtone: Identifying as ... 31. she has chromosome XX, she can make child's so she s a women! Doesn' t matter if she thinks she's a man, cow, pig, airplane, dinozaur...etc she was born a woman, she has chromosome XX so she will be a woman 4ever! 32. Surprisingly, yes... I was born a man, I will never be able to give birth to a child, no matter how much I would like to... I would never be able to be a cat or a cow no matter how much I would like to be... wake up from delusion moron! 33. bottom line is no one cares what u identify as- man, fox, napoleon. We see the truth and we will call u for what u are. A woman in this case.



Influencing kids 30. I had loving parents I didn't even know about being trans until middle school. So no, this is just science. "Most children between ages 18 and 24 months can recognize and label gender groups. They may identify others as girls, women or feminine. Or they may label others as boys, men or masculine. Most also label their own gender by the time they reach age 3. However, society tends to have a narrow view of gender. As a result, some children learn to behave in ways that may not reflect their gender identity. At age 5 or 6, most children are rigid about gender and preferences. These feelings tend to become more flexible with age.	Influencing kids 34. E alegerea ei ce dorește să facă cu viața ei. Problema e când spun copiilor la grădinițe că e normal. 35. I have a kid on the way, but thanks anyways. i'll teach him/her to hate twink's like you and it's gonna be easy because hating abnormal creatures like you is in our blood ;D 36. nu îmi stârnesc interesul articole "științifice" scrise de persoane transvertite sau transsexuale că există știință bună și știința rea. Și nici nu mă interesează psihologii sau care îi încurajează spre tranziție, fiindcă cel mai probabil au fost și ei spălați pe creier de asemenea "studii". [...] Dacă un om adult dorește să se îmbrace ca o femeie și să se considere una, asta e problema sa, dar să stea departe de copii că altfel cred că și părinții lor se vor identifica cu un urs grizzly. 😊
Medical explanations 31. No, that's a lie. Science actually says that chromosomes don't determine gender. Hell sometimes they don't even determine sex. Some females have XY and some males can have XX if the SRY gene is or isn't activated and anyways it doesn't matter because gender develops in early childhood. You aren't born with it. THAT'S the science. Again, it's not considered a mental illness to be trans. You just can't accept real science.	Medical explanations 37. That's crazy! When the doctors performed a lumpectomy to extract a cancer tumor I felt like a part of me was missing and when I had to get a mastectomy to remove the cancer that came back a month after I finished treatment I felt that a part of me died and I have never been the same. But if that makes her happy, kudos to her.



Legitimising the necessity to tell the story 32. I was happy to learn about your journey. Thank you for sharing it and being the light ❤️ 33. ai creat un adevărat război aici... Probabil te așteptai să fie mulți care nu înțeleg situația ta. De aia ai și plecat...Nu numai sistemul a fost cauza plecării tale din Romania, ci și oamenii din jurul tău, probabil... Oamenii nu sunt informați, ei știu doar un cuvânt generic pentru toți cei diferiți de ei și îl arunca de câte ori au ocazia. Succes Taylor! Acolo unde ești, poți fi tu însuți! 🙌	Legitimising the necessity to tell the story 38. Why do you feel the need to share something intimate with everyone in a public space? No matter who they are. Like .. why?!

Table 2. *Positive versus Negative Stances*

The comment corpus reveals a multi-layered epistemological struggle in which trans identity is negotiated through psychological, political, religious, and moral frameworks, each mobilised to either legitimise or delegitimise Taylor's existence. Supportive discourse draws on contemporary psychological and medical explanations, referencing academic research, the non-pathologisation of transgender identities, and developmental accounts that emphasise a misalignment between sex and gender. These positions often make reference to censorship in communist Romania and the absence of information about

LGBTQ+ identities before and after 1989, reframing transition not as a modern influence but as an identity previously silenced by structural repression. In contrast, hostile stancetaking pathologises trans identity, deploying labels of mental illness, reductive biological determinism, and analogies to animals or objects. Medical transition is reframed as mutilation or ideological self-harm, while psychology and psychiatry are dismissed. This delegitimation is embedded within a broader conservative political imaginary, where figures associated with right-wing authority are invoked as necessary correctives to perceived moral decay, linking trans embodiment to wider anxieties about social order, liberalism, and national decline. Religion operates ambivalently across the corpus: positive comments reinterpret faith as compatible with transition and personal authenticity, while negative discourse mobilises punitive theological narratives that frame transgender identities as sinful, satanic, or socially contaminating, particularly in relation to children. The theme of influencing children thus emerges as a central node of moral panic.

An approximate distribution of stancetaking across the 2,160 comments indicates that hostile or delegitimising discourse constitutes the majority of reactions, accounting for roughly over half of the corpus, while supportive comments represent approximately one quarter to one third. A smaller proportion consists of neutral, ambiguous, or interactional comments. Although these figures are indicative rather than statistical, the imbalance between negative and positive stancetaking is consistent across the dataset. Taken together, these discursive patterns demonstrate that the conflict exceeds disagreement over individual identity, instead exposing an ongoing struggle over who has the authority to define normality, scientific truth, moral order, and social belonging within networked publics.

Final Remarks

Romanian transgender individuals use digital platforms to craft *periperformative narratives*, stories that not only constitute transgressive narratives but actively shape and affirm online identity through ongoing interaction with audiences. Taylor Winters' Instagram presence

exemplifies this dynamic, where the body becomes a site of transformation and resistance, and transgender identity is continuously negotiated in response to public visibility. These narratives challenge binary norms and invite both solidarity and backlash within networked publics.

Networked public reactions reveal a highly polarised discursive space. While some users express empathy and support, others respond with hostility, exclusion, or mockery, often invoking conflicting interpretations of science, morality, and national identity. These patterns closely mirror those observed in the previous study on Daria Jane, where Romanian networked publics similarly displayed emotional and ideological stancetaking rather than consensus-driven dialogue. As reflected in the Romanian networked publics and transgenderism Coggle Map, both cases illustrate how transgender visibility in digital spaces provokes intense reactions that are shaped by cultural anxieties, religious beliefs, and contested notions of national belonging. These narratives underscore the recurring dynamics of trans identity negotiation in Romanian online spheres, where personal storytelling is reshaped in real time and becomes a site of both empowerment and public contestation.

This study contributes to shaping a perspective on networked publics in relation to transgenderism as it builds on our second article examining the topic. Across the two articles, we explored a transition from male to female and from female to male, each situated within distinct cultural contexts and accompanied by particular linguistic dimensions. While the intention was not to produce a quantitative analysis, several aspects nevertheless emerged from our findings. Taylor's female-to-male transition appears to elicit patterns of stancetaking that differ in tone and framing from those documented in male-to-female narratives, with masculinity often naturalised by supporters and denied by opponents through biological reductionism. The Romanian cultural context further amplifies these dynamics, as trans embodiment is entangled with post-communist anxieties about moral order, Western influence, and national continuity. Language choice plays a crucial role in



this process: English comments tend to mobilise globalised psychological and medical discourses that frame gender as complex and experientially grounded, whereas Romanian comments more often draw on religious absolutism, nationalist gatekeeping, and moral panic, particularly around children and social decay. At the same time, code-switching and Romglish function as metapragmatic tools for irony, mockery, or distancing. These patterns show that trans identity in digital spaces is not only negotiated through visibility and interaction, but is refracted through culturally specific discourses and linguistic resources, which shape how transition is understood, legitimised, or rejected within Romanian networked publics.

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Corpus

"Nothing's gonna stop us . Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/DCsL62yCX2x/>

Annex

Table 2. Positive versus Negative Stances

Positive Stancetaking	Negative Stancetaking
Validation/Admiration 2. [Be who your soul tells you to be – well done for your courage.]	Hate/Dislike 2. [Tutorial how to destroy you life irrversibly 🔥👊] 4. [About 36/40 years wasted as a woman...whoops I want to be (xx) but in your DNA you are still a woman ...you know satan found the way to twist the minds of many ...despite the fact that you mocked God's creation...God loves you as you are but he does not tolerate idiocy and sin...sad for you.]
Romanian proud/Balkan proud 10. [As a Romanian woman, I publicly apologise for all the negative messages here. It breaks my heart to see how much malice and hatred our “Christian” people can show. 11. [Don’t listen to these comments! Our country loves you and still accepts you! If some of its citizens don’t, that’s entirely their problem! I’m proud of you!] Different doesn’t mean wrong! ❤️	Romanian exclusion 7. [you are a disappointment for the population of Romania a disappointment for everyone] 9. we don’t claim you - [get lost] 10. [You're such a goddamn monster. Good thing you moved to the UK. Don't even mention Romania, don't ever say you're Romanian. We don't recognize you, we don't need people like you. You're disgusting, go wherever you want. But don't mention Romania or us, you're English now.] 12. [We're glad you went to the UK], STAY THERE 😂😂😂😂😂



Psychological explanation 16. [[...] science and psychology have proven that transgender people are normal. The body develops before the brain in the womb, so there are people for whom the two don't align.] 17. [Do a search on Google Scholar and look for scientific articles about trans people. A good psychologist guides them toward transition – that's the only solution for gender dysphoria [...].]	Psychological problem 13. [it's a hard illness, you need a good psychologist who could reset you well]
Censorship in a state/Trans rights Ceașescu Dictatorship 18. [I'm four years older than him – believe me, there was nothing in Romania back then that could 'influence' you to be gay, let alone trans. [...] Not even in international media, which only reached us after the '90s through cable TV, were there shows or films with gay or trans people.] 19. [I remember seeing the word 'homosexual' in a movie when I was a teenager. It was used as an insult, and no one around me knew what it meant – not even the dictionary helped me understand it clearly.] 20. [My heart breaks when I think about all the teenagers back then who knew they were different but couldn't find any information to validate what they were feeling – how alone they must have felt.]	Censorship in a state/Trans rights Trump administration 18. Look at the Americans with all their knowledge, what a sh*t they have become. Good thing Trump came to power.[...] 20. [Trump should come for a week or two.]



There's nothing more terrible in this world than not knowing who you are, and when you finally find out, not being able to be yourself.]	
Reference to the necessity of the right wing party 21. [You're the communist fighting against inhumanity... [...] That's why it doesn't snow anymore, why Christmas doesn't come – because transgender people and other nonsense exist. Worry about the healthcare system, the poverty in Romania, and the illiteracy rate in our country, because those are the biggest problems we're facing right now.]	Reference to the necessity of the right wing party 21. [Disgusting, it's a pity that you're still let loose on the streets, that's why they all want Georgescu as president] 22. [Georgescu gets elected as president and calms you down. This illness must be treated.]
Mutilation 24. [Is it your body? Are they 'mutilating' you? Does it bother you in any way? Was it your mother or what? Seriously now.]	Mutilation
Religion 25. [God's laws'] =)))))) There's no greater hate than a Christian's love, [I swear]. 27. [And what will be the punishment for living a happy life and not hurting anyone? Will he burn in hell for eternity – for what exactly?]	Religion 29. [transgenderism = satanism 🔥 - these kids need god and psychiatrists. 99.9% of transgenders are broken for life and recognize it but it's too late. 1% are the ones who refuse to accept they made a mistake. I pity these people....] 30. [If you turn to Jesus he will forgive even this sin. Repent while there is still time on earth.]
Influencing kids	Influencing kids



	34. [It's her choice what she wants to do with her life. The problem is when they tell kindergartners it's normal.] 36. I'm not interested in "scientific" articles written by transverts or transsexuals because there is good science and bad science. Nor am I interested in psychologists or those who encourage them to transition, because they have most likely been brainwashed by such "studies" too. [...] If a grown man wants to dress like a woman and consider himself one, that's his business, but stay away from children or else I think their parents will identify with a grizzly bear too. 🤪
Legitimising the necessity to tell the story 33. [You've started a real war here... You probably expected that many wouldn't understand your situation. That's why you left... It wasn't just the system that made you leave Romania, but probably also the people around you. People aren't informed – they only know one generic word for everyone who's different from them, and they throw it around whenever they get the chance. Good luck, Taylor! Where you are now, you can be yourself!] 🙌	Legitimising the necessity to tell the story



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Staging the Virtual/Virtualising the Stage: From Theory to Practice

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Abstract

This paper examines the interrelated practices of virtual theatre and video art. The first part establishes the contextual and methodological framework by considering how the so-called 'virtual turn' has shaped modes of authorship in contemporary theatre and video art. In doing so, it identifies and explores two central concepts within these fields: embodiment and spatiality. The second part presents two case studies. First, *MDLSX* and *Chroma Keys*, by the theatre company Motus, demonstrate how live performance within a virtual environment can unsettle the cultural legibility of the body and expose the performer as both material presence and mediated image. Second, *Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi*, by the cultural association AltroSguardo, opens up a discussion on genre categorisation, as it appears to introduce theatrical elements into the two-dimensional realm of video art, thereby encouraging a reshaping and shifting of categories and definitions.

Keywords: AltroSguardo; embodiment; Motus; spatiality; virtual theatre.

1. Virtual Theatre and Video Art in a Digitally-Mediated Twenty-First Century

1.1 Virtual Theatre

Theatre has long been a privileged case study for the Digital Humanities. Besides its inclusion in Roberto Busa's definition of the newly born field of study (cfr. Busa 2004, xvi), Lawrence McNamee and Edward Mullaly investigated how computers could aid theatre research in organising textual and historical data: "Edward Mullaly, for example, describes his use of an Apple IIe and the database software DB Master to reconstruct the career of a minor nineteenth-century American actor/manager from newspaper accounts" (Saltz 2004, 122). From a digital-oriented perspective, this approach is primarily functionalist: it archives dramatic texts and gathers information about the performance text and/or its author. As Antonio Pizzo notes, technology is here treated as a technical requirement rather than as an integral component of theatrical creation (cfr. Pizzo 2013, 20).

Emmanuel Alloa offers a different starting point. He observes that, "although [...] theatre seems to have served as a catalyst for thinking about the virtual" (Alloa 2014, 156), it has not always encouraged a precise account of theatrical illusion, or of what Suzanne Langer calls its status as an "intangible image" (Langer 1953, 72). This point should not be reduced to a simple opposition between theatre and reality. Rather, Alloa's formulation recalls an older debate about realism: Brecht's anti-illusionist theatre sought to estrange spectators from passive identification, whereas Lukács defended realism as a means of grasping social totality. In this context, the virtual does not simply mean 'unreal'. It names a potential or mediated relation to the real, one that may reveal the constructedness of theatrical presence instead of merely replacing the material stage with an imaginary world.

Brenda Laurel's *Computer as Theatre* (1993) shifted the discussion again by drawing attention to "the theatrical quality of human-computer interaction" (Giannachi 2004, 8). Her argument helps move the idea of theatre beyond a heterotopic space that is at once real and



unreal. The virtual turn in theatre and drama studies therefore refers not only to the spectator's suspension of disbelief, but also to the incorporation of new media into performance: film and video on stage, digital scenographies, interactive systems, and web-based dramaturgies. These are not all new phenomena in themselves; what is new is the extent to which they have become ordinary means of organising theatrical experience.

Two recurrent forms are especially relevant here: live performance within a virtual or mixed-reality environment, and the cyborg theatre. As for the former, Richard Schechner proposes, as a case study, the Builders Association's *Elements of Oz* (2016) – a multimedia production including the use of augmented reality¹ (AR) and a shared-with-the-audience app (cfr. Schechner 2020, 69). The Builders Association wanted to stage a live performance within a semi-virtual environment, thus creating a dialogue between the analogue and the virtual: indeed, whilst keeping the traditional liveness of the performance, attendees had to use their smartphones in order to truly 'activate' the show. As for the latter, Gabriella Giannachi uses the expression 'cyborg theatre' to point to "an art form that uses cybernetics as part of its method and practice" (Giannachi 2004, 43). The main difference between the two forms lies in how technology is applied: in the first case, technology is mainly applied to the theatrical stage (by means of screens, apps, and cameras); in the second case, technology is applied to the actor's body, which becomes the main locus where the performance takes place.

Web-based drama (e.g. attended via personal computers) further complicates presence and audience agency. A virtual performance may be understood as a process in becoming, because the audience's interventions, platform behaviours, and technical conditions can

¹ As Oliver Bimber and Ramesh Raskar clarify, there is a difference between Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR): "Rather than immersing a person into a completely synthetic world, AR attempts to embed synthetic supplements into the real environment (or into a live video of the real environment)" (Bimber and Raskar 2005, 2).



shape the event in ways that are difficult to predict. As an example, in July 2020, the research unit *Cambridge Digital Humanities* (University of Cambridge, UK) organised a 15-minute virtual performance entitled *Dr Tulp and the Theatre of Zoom*. Via the use of a cloud-based platform (i.e. *Zoom*), three actors performed an autopsy on a corpse (diagnosed with COVID-19), whilst four participants at a time were allowed to partially take part: the users' activity was limited to wearing and/or removing the facemask at the actors' direction. The performance was followed by a workshop that reflected on what might be called, adapting Ortega y Gasset's phrase, the misery and splendour of web-based dramas:²

- the actors' agency is 'reduced to a rectangle', since the body cannot move through space as it would on a physical stage. Consequently, theatre acquires features associated with film and video production: as Claudio Vicentini points out, film actors must adjust their gestures to camera and frame (cfr. Vicentini 2013, 236; see also Eckert 2021, 85). As Paul Budra argues of *Zoom Shakespeare*, the fixed grid isolates performers in individual boxes and reduces visual theatrical meaning while giving renewed prominence to voice (cfr. Budra 2023, 359-360);
- by using *Zoom's* 'speaker view' and turning off the microphone, the performer-spectator bond grows dim, as the former cannot rely on the ordinary 'light signals' of audience response, such as sighs, shaking, or laughter (cfr. Ubersfeld 2018, 237). Yet other signals – chat, reaction buttons, camera choices, or deliberate muting and unmuting – may create a different, platform-specific feedback loop;
- technology poses many challenges. For instance, the connection's speed affects the quality of the signal, and hence the communication between performers and spectators: "During its passage along the channel, the signal is liable to disturbance by *noise*, interference which hampers its proper reception" (Elam 2002, 31).

² The details reported here were collected whilst personally attending both the performance and the workshop (16 July 2020). For more information, see: <http://cdh.cam.ac.uk/events/dr-tulp-and-theatre-zoom-workshop>.



On the whole, virtuality has changed “the ideal of unmediated artistic experience and expression (live, intimate, immediate, embodied)” (Blake 2019, 3-4). For this reason, the present study does not attempt a comprehensive survey of virtual theatre. It focuses instead on the main theoretical and practical issues that virtual and digital performance make newly visible,³ especially the body, the stage, and the audience’s mode of participation.

1.2 Staging the Screen: Video Art

As far as virtual theatre is concerned, the use of video installations is common in contemporary performances. And yet, the term ‘video installation’ can be misleading if it suggests that video is merely a decorative addition to theatre: hence, Alfonso Amendola treats video installations as part of the broader field of ‘video art’ (cfr. Amendola 2012, 76). Although the history of video art conventionally begins in the mid-1960s, Lucio Fontana’s *Manifesto del movimento spaziale per la televisione* (1952) had already anticipated the relation between art, medium, and space: “Noi spaziali trasmettiamo, per la prima volta nel mondo, attraverso la televisione, le nostre nuove forme d’arte, basate sui concetti dello spazio”⁴ (Fontana in Bordini 2000, 43). Interestingly, Fontana’s attention to television is important because it frames the medium not simply as a vehicle for transmitting images, but as a space in which the artwork can be reconfigured.

Barbara London’s account of early video formats confirms this spatial dimension. Single-channel video, presented on a television screen, offered a two-dimensional projection on one surface, whereas three-dimensional media installations used several monitors and turned the surrounding environment into part of the work (cfr. London 2020, 27). A similar

³ Recent pandemic scholarship makes this focus more urgent. COVID-19 did not invent digital theatre, but it forced artists and audiences to test what could still count as theatre when physical assembly was suspended. Cfr. Allred 2022, 84; Fuchs 2022, 5-8; Sullivan 2022, 36-37.

⁴ “We, the space-men, broadcast, for the first time worldwide, via television, our new art forms, grounded on the concepts of space” (My translation).



distinction remains useful for virtual theatre. Some productions use one virtual wall or screen; others transform the entire stage environment through projections, cameras, and interactive devices. In Keir Elam's terms, screens may reinforce sociofugal arrangements, where performers and spectators occupy well-marked areas, or help produce sociopetal spaces, which draw partakers into the performance (cfr. Elam 2002, 58).

Besides the location and the number of screens involved, videos are usually classified as pre-recorded and live: pre-recorded videos can be edited before the event and then integrated into the *mise-en-scene*; live videos are captured by cameras during the performance and relayed onto screens, creating a metatheatrical effect as spectators watch both the performer filming and the image produced by that act. The distinction is useful, but it is not absolute: contemporary performance often combines pre-recorded material and real-time capture.

In Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi's analysis of virtual theatre, the introduction of audiovisual material into the performance requires attention to several time scales: story time, plot time, schedule time, interaction time, and perceived time (cfr. Benford and Giannachi 2011, 96). If story and plot time are widely known in literary criticism (cfr. Tomaševskij 2015, 315), and schedule time has always mattered to theatre and cinema (e.g. plays and films are scheduled to be shown at set times), the last two categories are specifically virtual-oriented. Interaction time refers to "the times at which participants engage with the story once it has been made available" (Benford and Giannachi 2011, 97): for instance, contemporary video walls allow – via interactive kiosks – the participant to make choices once they enter the virtual environment. Perceived time, instead, describes how the virtual environment as a whole can affect the participant's awareness of clock time.⁵

⁵ Of note here is the exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci: 500 Years of Genius*, employing SENSORY4™, which is a system developed by Grande Exhibitions: during the projection of Leonardo da Vinci's masterpieces on giant screens, through multiple projectors, and with the aid of a musical score, the visitor is able to transcend the



The use of video in theatre can therefore intensify theatrical virtuality. It does so by staging a tension between bodily co-presence and mediated image, and by making spectators aware of the time-space relations through which the performance is produced. The result is not a simple substitution of the virtual for the real: “In other words, it is in its *relationship* with the real, rather than in its attempts to substitute itself for the real, that the most original use of virtual reality is found” (Giannachi 2004, 125).

2. Virtuality and/in Performance: Bodily and Spatial Paradigms

2.1 Moulding Bodies, Making Cyborgs: Rethinking the Notion of Embodiment

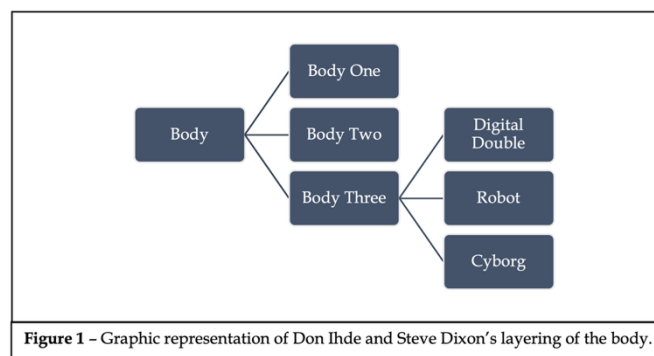
The corporeal turn in the Humanities and Social Sciences has challenged the Cartesian opposition between mind and body. It has also affected theories of the virtual body, since Donna Haraway’s cyborg is not a disembodied fantasy but an active site where power, identity, and technology are negotiated (cfr. Haraway 1991, 180). In performance studies, the body remains central because theatrical action is always carried, constrained, and made legible through bodies: indeed, as Richard Schechner points out, in Performance Studies “questions of embodiment, action, behavior, and agency are dealt with interculturally” (Schechner 2020, 26).

Technological development has fostered debate about what may be called ‘virtual corporeality’ and, more specifically, about the relation between the physically present body and the mediatised body. This relation should not be framed as a simple opposition. Philip Auslander has influentially argued that liveness and mediation exist in a historical and contingent partnership rather than as absolute alternatives (cfr. Auslander 2008, 60-61; Sullivan 2022, 33-34). Antonio Pizzo identifies two positions in the debate (cfr. Pizzo 2018,

surrounding world. For more information, see: <http://grandeexhibitions.com/leonardo-da-vinci-500-years-of-genius>.

113): on the one hand, the body as a fully interactive digital image, produced through video walls and computers (for example, an avatar); on the other, the body partially prostheticised through technological elements. Conversely, Antonio Caronia distinguishes three kinds of body: ‘replicated body’ (i.e. clone), ‘invaded body’ (i.e. the biotechnological body), and ‘scattered body’ (i.e. the dematerialized body, as a result of computational operations) (cfr. Amendola, Del Gaudio, and Tirino 2017, 4).

Don Ihde’s model is more useful for the present discussion because it avoids treating these forms as mutually exclusive. Ihde distinguishes ‘body one’, the body of flesh and bone; ‘body two’, the culturally constructed body; and ‘body three’, the technologically modified body (cfr. Ihde 2002). Ihde’s standpoint overcomes any attempt to categorise the body: indeed, it is described as a unique surface made of several – coexisting – strata. In *Digital Performance* (2007), Steve Dixon expands the idea of ‘body three’ to include the digital double (e.g. the body’s projection onto a video wall), the robot (i.e. machines and mechanical devices controlled by a computer), and the cyborg (i.e. a machine–organism hybrid) (cfr. Dixon 2007, 209-332). For a graphic representation, see Figure 1 below:



Regardless of the framework we adopt – Pizzo’s bipartition, Caronia’s tripartition, or Ihde and Dixon’s layered model – the digitalisation of the body depends on a process of mediamorphosis, which Roger Fidler describes as the reworking of an existing surface (cfr. Fidler 1997, 22-23). Similarly, Anna Munster uses the term ‘digital embodiment’ to describe



a condition “in which the digital is not pure code nor the body pure physical extension” (Klich and Scheer 2012, 100). In this light, the performing body becomes a living palimpsest, a corporeal form made of layers of text, intertext, and metatext. Virtuality does not make the body immaterial; it changes how the material body is read, doubled, and circulated. Moreover, as Marco De Marinis points out, virtual embodiment involves spectators as well as performers (cfr. De Marinis 2013, 63): the spectator’s agency has increased as technological devices have enabled the fourth wall to give way to a broader idea of ‘empty space’.⁶

2.2 Virtual Environments

In 2016, Judith Butler published “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance”, where she links embodiment to the infrastructures that support or fail to support bodies: “We cannot talk about a body without knowing what supports that body and what its relation to that support – or lack of support – might be” (Butler 2016, 19). The exposure of one’s body through performance is therefore always place-based. Butler’s insight is relevant to mediamorphosis because the virtual body – be it either entirely or partially digitalised – is interconnected with its environment (cfr. Giannachi 2004, 47). Jennifer Parker-Starbuck similarly argues that the cyborg body is central to the application of technology to theatre space (cfr. Parker-Starbuck 2011, 7).

And yet, Susan Sontag’s distinction between theatre and cinema offers a useful counterpoint. In “Film and Theatre” (1966), she argues that theatre “is confined to a logical

⁶ According to Keir Elam, the expression ‘empty space’ refers to the theatrical stage “distinguished from its surroundings by visible markers (a raised platform, a curtain, or simply a conventional distance signalling the boundary between acting area and auditorium)” (Elam 2002, 50). By breaking the fourth wall, these conventions are subverted, as in Brecht’s theatre: “There was no fourth wall between actors and audience – the actor’s unique aim was to create a precise response in an audience for whom he had total respect” (Brook 1996, 87).



or *continuous* use of space”, whereas cinema, through editing, “has access to an alogical or *discontinuous* use of space” (Sontag 1966, 29). However, the virtual turn in theatre, drama, and performance studies complicated this opposition. First, video and film on stage introduce discontinuous spaces into theatrical continuity. Second, when Sontag writes that “in the theatre, people are either in the stage space or ‘off’” (Sontag 1966, 29), she underestimates the extent to which digital media can place the same body in several spatial relations at once: on stage, on screen, in the camera’s frame and in the spectator’s mediated field of vision.

Along similar lines, Ubaldo Fadini warns that virtual environments may produce ‘technological alienation’, moving people away from the “possibility of the real” (Fadini in Mancini 2020, 21), and dissociating the body from the space it inhabits. Such a warning is valuable, especially in relation to forms of Technological or Internet Addiction Disorder. Yet Bruna Mancini also recognises that technology, when integrated critically into human life, can foster the spatial relocation of subjects (cfr. Mancini 2020, 21). For performance, the issue is therefore not whether virtual space is alienating in itself, but how particular works organise the relation between physical support, digital environment, and spectator agency.

Following Mancini, we may say that the virtualisation of theatre has created embodied hybrid spaces: performers’ and spectators’ bodies inhabit sites suspended between architectural space and virtual environment. Vincenzo Del Gaudio makes this point clearly: “Put another way, digital media did not only redefine stage boundaries, but also exposed bodies to relations with their image and their digital doubles” (Del Gaudio 2016, 98). Space thus becomes an active component of the performance. It may be included in Schechner’s performance quadrilogue as the condition that allows sourcers, producers, performers, and partakers to meet.⁷ Since virtual space can be computerized and interactively managed, it

⁷ According to Richard Schechner, performance scholars study the dynamic relationship amongst four categories of players: sourcers, producers, performers, and partakers (cfr. Schechner 2020, 60).

functions as a medium among other media. This process may be described as ‘space remediation’.

Space remediation implies the switch from the passive audience model to a dynamic relational model: indeed, interactivity requires theatre-goers to literally ‘navigate’ the hybrid space. According to Steve Dixon, there are four ascending levels of interactivity: from navigation – which is the basic level of engagement, as the attendees freely move in/around the scenic space – to collaboration – which entails a response-based interaction (cfr. Dixon 2007, 563). Consequently, the participant triggers reactions in the performers – in the same space they jointly inhabit – and becomes co-creator of the media content. In this sense, virtual reality can become, in Giannachi’s words, “a space where the real can be seen inside out” (Giannachi 2004, 159).

3. From Theory to Practice

3.1 The Body in Question: *MDLSX* and *Chroma Keys* by Motus

3.1.1 *MDLSX* (2015)

In 2015, theatre company Motus produced *MDLSX*, a solo performance starring Italian actress Silvia Calderoni. The title refers to Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Middlesex* (2002), a novel that narrates the life of an intersex person⁸ named Cal/llie and questions the construction of sex as a fixed category. Drawing on Eugenides’s *Middlesex*, Calderoni frames her own androgynous life: “Ero nata apollinea e un elemento dionisiaco si inserisce a 13 anni nella

⁸ According to Judith Butler, the intersexed infants are “those born with mixed genital attributes” (Butler 2004, 63).



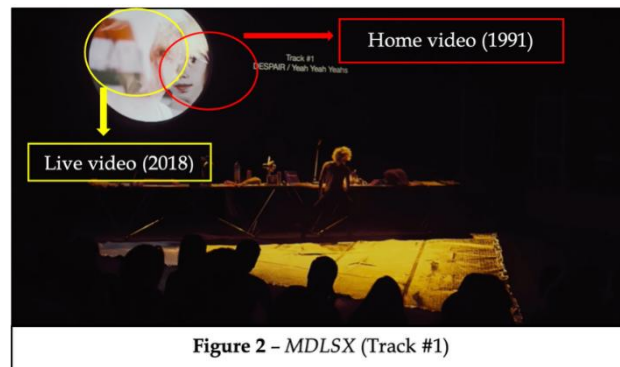
mia vita”.⁹ Calderoni recalls Nietzsche’s dichotomy in order to show how a body can be made culturally unintelligible when it exceeds the binary expectations through which sex and gender are usually read. Thus, despite the sex assignment she was given at birth, she was perceived as belonging to what Foucault would define as ‘the domain of abnormality’: specifically, Calderoni exemplifies what he terms ‘human monster’, since her “existence and form is not only a violation of the laws of society but also a violation of the laws of nature” (Foucault 2003, 55-56).

The live performance takes place in a mixed-reality environment: the traditional stage is combined with technological devices, specifically two screens (one round and one rectangular), a computer, a mixing console, and a video camera (an iPod touch 6g). Once the performance begins, Calderoni appears on stage holding the video camera, which broadcasts live on the round screen whatever she chooses to zoom in on. At the same time, she performs a DJ set via an Apple MacBook and a mixing console. Each song title appears on the rectangular screen, accompanied by an immersive graphic produced via the software *Resolume* (cfr. Gemini 2017, 162).

At the beginning, Calderoni plays Gianni Morandi’s *C’era un ragazzo che come me amava i Beatles e i Rolling Stones* [There was a boy who, just like me, loved the Beatles and the Rolling Stones] on the rectangular screen, while the round screen juxtaposes live images with a home video of herself singing the same song in 1991 (Figure 2). The audience sees the production of the live image and, at the same time, is invited to connect the fictional structure of the performance with the documentary force of Calderoni’s personal archive. In Greg Giesekam’s words, this kind of performance “employs film’s apparent capacity to show

⁹ “I was born Apollonian and a Dionysian element started to be part of my life from the age of thirteen” (My translation). Unless otherwise specified, quotations and images relating to the performance were collected whilst personally attending it at Teatro Morelli in Cosenza, Italy (24 February 2018).

‘reality’ to introduce aspects of the outside world into the ‘artificial’ world of the stage” (Gieseckam 2007, 24).



It would be excessive to say that Calderoni’s ‘actual’ body becomes a cyborg body simply because she holds and operates a camera. More precisely, the performance constructs her body as a body-medium: a physical presence that produces, selects, and transmits its own mediated image. Giannachi’s claim that “the body itself becomes both the laboratory and the theatre of the piece” (Giannachi 2004, 43) is useful here, but it must be applied carefully. Calderoni’s body is not replaced by technology; it is reframed by it. The live body, the camera, the round screen, and the projected image form an assemblage in which the performer is simultaneously operator, image, and object of spectatorship. In Pizzo’s terms, *MDLSX* connects the body as an interactive digital image with the prostheticised figure on stage; Calderoni’s body is therefore a body-medium (cfr. Gemini 2017, 161).



Calderoni also rephrases – or, one might say, translates¹⁰ – literary and philosophical excerpts, such as the incipit of *Middlesex*:¹¹ “Sono nato due volte: prima una cosa e poi l’altra. Alla nascita è stato stabilito che io ero F”.¹² The performance makes the audience read Calderoni’s body through the texts, songs, and images that pass across and around it. Her body functions as a living palimpsest. In Ihde’s terms, ‘body one’ is the material body on stage; ‘body two’ is the culturally constructed body shaped by quotation, music, and gendered perception; ‘body three’ is the technological body produced by the live camera feed, the digital double, and the surrounding screens.

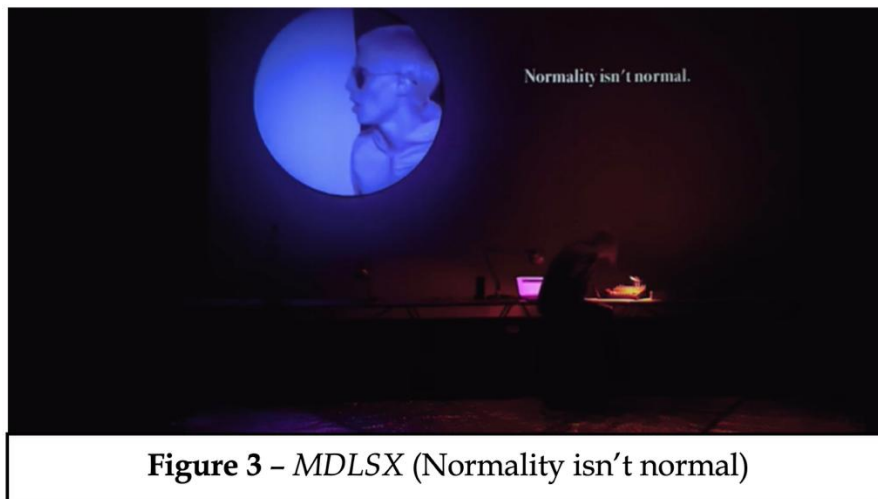
To take this further, *MDLSX* may be understood as a performance based on cut-up composition. Calderoni ties together selected quotations, songs, and videos, thereby disrupting linear temporality: the audience encounters a body that moves between childhood archive, present performance, and literary fiction. Calderoni herself describes the work as a collage rather than an autobiography: “Il lavoro non è la mia biografia, ma è un collage, una riscrittura fatta di diversi testi che vengono drammaturgicamente intrecciati l’uno all’altro e che, in qualche modo, coincidono con una mia biografia ‘emozionale’” (Calderoni 2018).¹³ The conclusion to draw is therefore that the blurring between the actual and the virtual questions the cultural procedures by which bodies are narrated, gendered, and normalised (Figure 3).

¹⁰ On the broader issue of translation for the theatre, see Soncini 2007; Bigliazzi, Kofler, and Ambrosi 2013; Guarracino 2017; Morini 2022.

¹¹ Jeffrey Eugenides’s original words are as follows: “I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974” (Eugenides 2002, 1).

¹² “I was born twice: first, one thing, and then the other. At birth it was established that I was F” (My translation).

¹³ “*MDLSX* is not my biography, but rather it is a collage, a rewriting made up of several texts which come to be dramaturgically interwoven and that, somehow, coincide with my ‘emotional’ biography” (My translation). Silvia Calderoni has always been reluctant to accept the label of ‘auto/biography’. See also Calderoni 2023.



3.1.2 *Chroma Keys* (2018)

In 2018, Silvia Calderoni was cast by Motus in another solo performance – *Chroma Keys* – which returned to Sontag's question of "whether there is an unbridgeable division, even opposition between the two arts" (Sontag 1966, 24), film and theatre. The title refers to the post-production technique used to combine two visual elements: a green screen separates a person's image from its background so that the body can be inserted into another setting. *Chroma Keys* by Motus is moulded on the use of this technique in a live performance, which may take place either inside or outside theatres.¹⁴

Wherever it is staged, the scenic space is almost laid bare. Besides the chromakey green screen, it consists of only three video monitors. The performance begins with Calderoni sitting on a cushion outside the chromakey space while the screens project clips from several films; after a while, she stands up and walks towards the green screen. The audience witnesses the duplication of Calderoni's body as her actual body becomes a

¹⁴ For example, in March 2020 *Chroma Keys* was to be staged – before being cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic – in Verona, at *Laboratorio Gestito Paratodos*, which is a cultural centre.



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composite image and enters the filmic scene.¹⁵ During this sequence, spectators are invited to attend both the making of the composite image and to the finished image on the monitors. The performance therefore includes both a localised site and a virtual screen-space: following Manuel Castells, the former can be described as a 'space of places', while the latter resembles a 'space of flows' (Castells 2010, 453-459).

According to Motus' founders Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Francesconi Nicolò, Calderoni's body 'sabotages' the filmic frame by entering its virtual space.¹⁶ She behaves as if she belonged to the scene, so that the boundary between stage action and recorded image becomes unstable. For instance, when she appears in a deserted landscape, she screams in response to what is happening in the virtual environment. At another point, she addresses an onscreen actor and creates a dialogue that was not part of the original film. Pizzo's observation that actors must learn new acting techniques for acting in virtual spaces, such as the chromakey green screen, is especially relevant (cfr. Pizzo 2011, 95).

MDLSX and *Chroma Keys* are both mixed-reality performances that build on an already well-established tradition,¹⁷ but they organise the relation between body and virtual space differently. In *MDLSX*, Calderoni performs in a materially dense environment: the stage includes the performer, screens, a computer, a camera, and a mixing console, all employed during the performance. *Chroma Keys*, by contrast, reduced the stage almost to a chromakey apparatus and three monitors. Its innovation lies in testing the border between theatre and cinema by placing a live body within a pre-existing filmic frame, thereby rendering Calderoni's body visible in two distinct yet simultaneous forms.

3.2 Pandemic Video/Theatre: *Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi* (2020) by AltroSguardo

¹⁵ The complete performance is available at: <http://www.e-performance.tv/2019/09/motus.html>.

¹⁶ See: <https://www.motusonline.com/chroma-keys/>.

¹⁷ From the Wooster Group's screen-based dramaturgies to Ivo van Hove's *Roman Tragedies*.



In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of cultural events across the world because mass gatherings risked fuelling the spread of the virus. Yet the need for collective experience did not disappear. As Judith Butler remarks, “these forms of embodied and plural performativity are important components of any understanding of ‘the people’” (Butler 2015, 8). When physical gathering became impossible or dangerous, performers and spectators moved towards virtual platforms and social media such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *YouTube*, *Zoom*. As Barbara Fuchs argues, the lockdown produced a large-scale remediation of theatre online and made questions of liveness and co-presence newly urgent (cfr. Fuchs 2022, 5-8). A familiar example is Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* at the Globe Theatre, made available for free on YouTube in May 2020.¹⁸

In Italy, the city of Naples (Department of Culture) issued a call for proposals in April 2020 to support cultural events inspired by Giordano Bruno. Amongst the applicants, the cultural association AltroSguardo – led by Antonello Cossia, Raffaele Di Florio, and Riccardo Venio – submitted a project that stood between virtual theatre and video art. It was selected and funded, and in May 2020 it was released on *Facebook* and *Vimeo*¹⁹ as *Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi*²⁰ [*Trilogy of the Infinite Worlds*]. Taking its cue from Bruno’s *De l’infinito universo et mundi* [*On the Infinite Universe and Worlds*], the work reflects on the relation between the world and God during the COVID-19 pandemic, when fear, anxiety, and illness

¹⁸ For more information, see: https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/learn/secondary-schools/playing-shakespeare-with-deutsche-bank/macbeth-2020-playingshakespeare/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=paid_social&utm_campaign=%7B%7Bcampaign.name%7D%7D&utm_content=%7B%7Bbad.name%7D%7D&fbclid=IwAR0wxYeM9UvLFvptmV0mv6gcS7oV_FFPjndi7G1JAQ3g22u6uWZJXzhPbW8.

¹⁹ *Facebook* and *Vimeo* are different types of social media platforms: following José Van Dijck’s categorisation, the former is a ‘social network site’ (SNS), which promotes “interpersonal contact, whether between individuals or groups”; the latter is a site for ‘user-generated content’ (UGC), which supports “creativity, foreground cultural activity, and promote the exchange of amateur or professional content” (van Dijck 2013, 8).

²⁰ *Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi* is still available – for free – on *Facebook*: <https://www.facebook.com/assessoratoallaculturaealturismodelcomunedinapoli/videos/1091388051240619/>.

altered people's being-in-the-world. From the authors' perspective, the idea of God as an undefined entity who stands above us and hears our prayers offered one way of responding to the crisis. At the same time, the project also considered those who reject religious consolation and place their hope in science, even while recognising the risk that scientific progress may be tied to the exploitation of worldly resources.

Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi is a video production: AltroSguardo edited a sequence of images, quotations, and background sounds, including classical music and actors' voices²¹ as voiceovers. Its opening offers a useful example (Figure 4). The graphic repetition of the phrase "Com'è possibile che l'universo sia in/finito?"²² is rhetorically effective because the shift from 'infinite' to 'finite' introduces decay as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic; the same repetition is also sonically rendered through voiceover. The work relocates theatricality from corporeal stage presence to dramaturgical composition, where voice, rhythm, and textual arrangement become the primary performative elements.

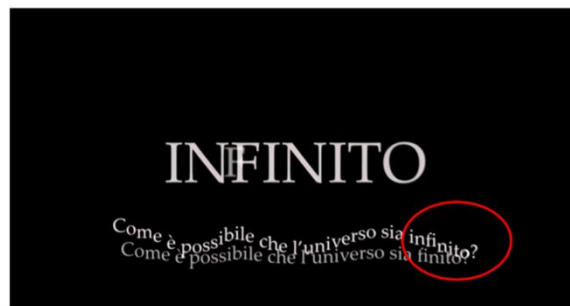


Figure 4 – *Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi* (I Movimento)

The piece also needs to be read in relation to the pandemic rethinking of community. Fuchs notes that the digital became, during lockdown, the only feasible means of theatrical production and delivery for many artists (Fuchs 2022, 6-7). *Trilogia* emerges from this condition: its release through *Facebook* and *Vimeo* replaces the theatre venue with a

²¹ Antonello Cossia, Paolo Cresta, Raffaele Di Florio, and Riccardo Venio.

²² "How is it possible for the universe to be in/finite?" (My translation).

platformed public sphere, while its use of voiceover preserves a trace of embodied address. In this respect, it differs from *MDLSX* and *Chroma Keys*, where the technological apparatus remains visible on stage; here, the apparatus is the platform itself.

Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi raises a question of genre categorisation: does it belong to video art, or should it be considered virtual theatre, in the form of web-based drama? In September 2020, I interviewed one of the project's creators, Raffaele Di Florio, who described the work as video art because, if performance is defined "as a live event – with or without props and media" (London 2020, 19), an edited video follows codes that differ from those of theatrical performance (cfr. Capalbo 2024). Nevertheless, the work also demonstrates what Seda Ilter calls mediatized dramaturgy: media do not appear as content, they shape the form, temporality, and mode of address of the work itself (cfr. Ilter 2021, 3-4). In this sense, *Trilogia* is theatre-adjacent because it organises voice, text, image, and audience reception through a dramaturgy of mediation.

This point also requires a more careful use – and an expansion – of the idea of liveness as a competitive opposition between the live and the mediatised (cfr. Auslander 2008, 11). Allred argues that lockdown performance can create a 'contract of liveness' through temporal proximity and the agreement to be together, even without physical proximity (cfr. Allred 2022, 84). Sullivan similarly describes social media as a 'third place' in which spectators may gather as a communal audience and experience liveness as meaningful connection or 'aliveness' (cfr. Sullivan 2022, 36-37). *Trilogia* does not offer the same immediacy as a *Zoom* performance, because it is edited and asynchronous. Yet its release on *Facebook* and *Vimeo* allows responses, comments, shares, and re-circulation to become part of its social life. In this light, the audience's interactivity is responsive (e.g. the act of commenting and/or sharing the media content) rather than creative (i.e. the act of being directly involved in the performance).



For this reason, *Trilogia* is best understood as pandemic video/theatre: a video artwork that borrows theatrical procedures and circulates through the digital infrastructures that sustained cultural community during lockdown. It does not dissolve the difference between video art and theatre. Instead, it makes that difference analytically productive. Compared with *Motus*, *AltroSguardo* shifts attention from the live body on a mixed-reality stage to the absent or displaced body of the viewer, who encounters the work through a platform and participates only by commenting, sharing, or watching at a chosen time. The questions it raises – about fake identities and trolls, copyright, and platform ownership, and the cultural work of art during a public health crisis – are therefore not peripheral. They show how digital performance is shaped by the political economy of platforms (cfr. Taylor 2014, 39) and by the fragile forms of community that can emerge when physical assembly is suspended.²³

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²³ As Jeffrey Alexander points out: "Cultural performance is the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation" (Alexander 2006, 32).



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**Shiuhhuah Serena Chou, Soyoung Kim, Rob Sean Wilson (eds),
*Geo-Spatiality in Asian and Oceanic Literature and Culture:
Worlding Asia in the Anthropocene*
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)**

Recensione di Silvia Igneo

(Università degli Studi di Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale, IT)

Sotto la spinta della crisi climatica, il panorama della ricerca critica contemporanea manifesta un'urgenza sempre maggiore nel rimettere in discussione le categorie concettuali di realtà ambientale e dinamiche territoriali. L'Antropocene si è configurato come un paradigma di indagine determinante, in grado di contestare il dominio delle visioni eurocentriche e di incoraggiare nuovi paradigmi di lettura della realtà globale. È entro questa cornice critica che si inserisce il volume curato da Shiuhhuah Serena Chou, Soyoung Kim e Rob Sean Wilson, *Geo-Spatiality in Asian and Oceanic Literature and Culture: Worlding Asia in the Anthropocene* (2022), il cui contributo fondamentale consiste nel riposizionare il dibattito ambientale globale, scardinando la sua matrice prettamente eurocentrica e valorizzando le narrazioni del quadrante asiatico e oceanico. Mediante l'adozione del paradigma del *worlding*, il testo non si limita a una mappatura della crisi ecologica, bensì esplora come la produzione letteraria asiatica operi una rinegoziazione delle identità territoriali che sfida i confini della modernità occidentale. Il carattere innovativo dell'opera consiste nella riconfigurazione della geo-spazialità: essa non rappresenta una semplice cornice topografica statica, ma emerge come uno strumento di decodifica in grado di sondare le tensioni tra le specificità territoriali e le pressioni climatiche transnazionali. La struttura corale, che spazia tra diverse spazialità e tipologie testuali, ricalca la complessità

stessa dell'Antropocene: un dilemma globale che richiede una pluralità prospettica e un'indagine radicata nelle coordinate spaziali e culturali dell'area asiatico-oceanica.

Diversi saggi contenuti nel volume approfondiscono il concetto di geo-spazialità dal punto di vista teorico, esplorandone in un secondo momento la validità mediante l'analisi delle dinamiche culturali dell'Asia contemporanea. Nel capitolo introduttivo, Rob Sean Wilson articola progressivamente il concetto di *worlding* come un processo dinamico e in continua tensione tra logiche di distruzione (*deworlding*) e volontà di ricostruzione (*reworlding*). Esso si manifesta inizialmente in sperimentazioni urbane situate nell'Asia-Pacifico in cui l'impulso al cambiamento convive con spinte all'integrazione nel paradigma neoliberale, estendendosi successivamente all'orizzonte ecologico su scala planetaria dove l'idea di Oceania declina il *worlding* in termini di appartenenza e impegno collettivo. Lo scopo della raccolta si rivela dunque quello di scardinare i confini disciplinari e le geografie convenzionali, articolando un progetto di interconnessione globale che rivendica la necessità di concepire il mondo come un luogo condiviso, fragile e in perenne divenire. All'interno del quarto capitolo, incentrato sul *subaltern cosmopolitanism* in Asia centrale e Corea, l'idea di *worlding* viene declinata secondo una prospettiva che privilegia la percezione soggettiva e narrativa, intrecciando esperienza migratoria e scenari internazionali. Inteso come manifestazione viva dell'esistenza ancorata alla dimensione temporale e alla condizione di *being-in-the-world*, il *worlding* trova la propria morfologia concreta nella storia dei Koryo Saram e nella figura di Kim Alex. Mettendo in discussione i presupposti del cosmopolitismo occidentale, Hye Young Kim rivendica la centralità di un cosmopolitismo subalterno, fondato sulla solidarietà transrazziale e transculturale tra soggetti privi di potere e capitale. La pratica narrativa si rivela un dispositivo essenziale del *worlding* in grado di legittimare le voci marginalizzate e declinare lo scenario globale come uno spazio di coesistenza tra differenti alterità. John Parham, nel dodicesimo capitolo, interpreta la geo-spazialità come un prodotto dei flussi internazionali, modellato dalle traiettorie dei media globali e dai conflitti che emergono dalla loro circolazione. Egli

introduce il concetto di *friction* mediante l'analisi degli anime televisivi giapponesi e del loro contributo al *worlding* ecologico globale, sottolineando come la diffusione della cultura globale non avvenga in maniera uniforme, ma secondo continue rinegoziazioni e attriti che producono significati spesso discontinui e frammentati. Tali flussi vengono messi in relazione con l'*eco-cosmopolitism*, inteso come la possibilità di sviluppare una consapevolezza ecologica su scala planetaria, mediante l'utilizzo di media, che resti però sempre soggetta a incomprensioni e frammentazioni locali. Si delinea così la centralità della *productive friction*: le frizioni non si limitano a ostacolare la circolazione, ma moltiplicano le possibilità interpretative di uno spazio globale la cui produttività risiede proprio nella sua natura instabile e asimmetrica.

La riflessione teorica è supportata da una serie di case studies volti a illustrare l'applicazione dei concetti di geo-spazialità e *worlding* a prodotti letterari, cinematografici e culturali dell'Asia e dell'Oceania. Nel terzo capitolo Pin-chia Feng si dedica all'analisi del memoir *Fresh Off the Boat* di Eddie Huang, introducendo un'idea di *worlding* interraziale e transpacifico. Emerge in questo caso un'identità diasporica e fluida, alimentata dall'interazione tra la memoria e la dimensione materiale del quotidiano. Di particolare rilevanza è il cibo, il *dan dan mian*, che diviene metafora stessa dell'esperienza della migrazione: esso supera il concetto di autenticità originaria, evolvendosi e rispecchiando le identità in movimento. Attraverso l'esperienza del ristorante Baohaus, inteso come pratica di *world-making*, la dimensione urbana e l'attivismo sociale si fondono per dare vita a una comunità e rappresentare l'identità Asian American. La sezione evidenzia la natura corporea e culturale del *worlding*, mostrando come la geo-spazialità non resti confinata alla teoria, ma prenda forma attraverso il cibo, lo spazio del quartiere e i circuiti della cultura pop. Lucifer Hung, nel sesto capitolo incentrato sul racconto *My Beast, My Brother, and My Alpha Creation*, delinea un universo radicale in grado di scardinare le categorie di genere e identità, ed esplorare territori del desiderio ancora inesplorati. Il legame fraterno, intriso di erotismo estremo e suggestioni mitiche, delinea una nuova soggettività che trascende i limiti

biologici e i vincoli sociali. Mentre il fratello-alfa si fa interprete di una mascolinità distorta e artificiale, il narratore è al contempo creatura e *world-maker*, artefice e prigioniero della sua stessa creazione. La narrazione estremizza le convenzioni del genere e della costruzione del sé, illustrando la capacità del soggetto frammentato dalla diaspora di trasfigurarsi radicalmente sfidando ogni norma prestabilita. Nell'ottavo capitolo, Chih-ming Wang si serve del romanzo *How I Became a North Korean* di Krys Lee per mettere in discussione l'immagine stereotipata del profugo nordcoreano, dimostrando che la libertà raggiunta alla fine di un viaggio rappresenta un concetto complesso e spesso contraddittorio. L'autore inquadra la penisola coreana come un *division system*, ovvero un dispositivo geopolitico in grado di modellare attivamente soggettività marginali e stratificare nuovi criteri gerarchici di inclusione. All'interno di questa cornice, le categorie convenzionali di *refugee* e *migrant* non si rivelano adeguate a descrivere esperienze umane caratterizzate da incertezza giuridica e continui spostamenti che superano i confini transnazionali. Le vicende dei protagonisti rivelano le disparità strutturali della mobilità e delle tutele giuridiche, ponendo l'accento sul ruolo determinante della cittadinanza e delle reti di appartenenza diasporiche. Il concetto di *copresence* rappresenta il fulcro per interrogare le implicazioni etiche della coesistenza in un sistema comune che implica l'occupazione dei soggetti di posizioni strutturalmente divergenti. L'analisi si conclude poi con una critica all'umanitarismo, mostrando come le narrazioni dei diritti umani possano talvolta riprodurre le stesse logiche di potere che dichiarano di voler contrastare e il modo in cui la letteratura si riveli un dispositivo critico in grado di negoziare i nessi tra flussi migratori, equilibri geopolitici e costruzione dell'immagine del rifugiato.

Infine, diversi contributi adottano una prospettiva diasporica e transoceanica, esplorando modalità di identificazione che superano le tradizionali delimitazioni dello Stato-nazione. La diaspora non viene raffigurata come una mera frammentazione geografica, bensì come un processo relazionale caratterizzato da un intreccio di memorie collettive e flussi storici che si intrecciano con le tensioni delle disuguaglianze globali.



Adottare una prospettiva transpacificca significa restituire una visione delle traiettorie umane individuali e collettive come parte di una rete di scambi in cui i fenomeni migratori e diasporici si configurano come processi instabili, stratificati e spesso conflittuali. Isaac Blacksin esamina, nel settimo capitolo, il giornalismo di guerra come una forma di *world-making* transnazionale in grado di mettere in comunicazione contesti geografici distanti attraverso narrazioni che superano le barriere spaziali e mediatiche. Il corrispondente estero assume il ruolo centrale di figura liminale che, muovendosi tra contesti di conflitto e platee globali, costruisce connessioni transnazionali basate sulla capacità di tradurre e mediare realtà distanti. L'autore assimila il giornalismo di guerra a una rete di legami diasporici, capace di proiettare eventi locali in uno spazio transoceanico: uno spazio dove i confini geografici sfumano in una cornice narrativa che supera la scala locale. Tale mobilità, lungi dall'essere priva di implicazioni, presuppone una semplificazione dei teatri di guerra attraverso lenti culturali che restituiscono una mappatura del conflitto parziale e soggettiva. Il capitolo evidenzia dunque, nonostante la circolazione delle immagini della violenza, l'impossibilità del giornalismo di raccontare fino in fondo l'orrore e la complessità del conflitto: il significato della guerra resta sempre incompleto e in attesa di essere tradotto. Nel decimo capitolo, Fritzie A. de Mata offre un'analisi della diaspora filippina che, attraverso il rituale delle *balikbayan boxes*, supera le interpretazioni convenzionali basate sui concetti di identità e reti transnazionali. Allontanandosi dalle letture che vedono nelle scatole semplici oggetti logistici o simboli identitari, l'autrice le interpreta come emblemi di coesione transnazionale in grado di stabilizzare le reti sociali disperse dalla migrazione e sincronizzare luoghi distanti e temporalità eterogenee. De Mata dimostra come il *worlding* non avvenga solo per mezzo di mappe e confini, ma si articoli attraverso micro-infrastrutture quotidiane che riconfigurano trame transnazionali invisibili al di fuori dei confini istituzionali. Le *balikbayan boxes* agiscono come mini-container transnazionali in cui si interfacciano i bisogni domestici, i flussi del capitalismo globale e le strutture dello Stato, rendendo tangibile la dimensione materiale della globalizzazione asiatica non egemonica.

Di particolare rilievo è l'impiego della categoria di zeugma come lente analitica che permette di interpretare le scatole come elementi di connessione simultanea in cui convergono città, affetti, lavoro e temporalità. Lo spazio globale non costituisce un piano astratto, bensì una costruzione interpersonale tenuta insieme da corpi in movimento, oggetti transnazionali e performance quotidiane. La diaspora appare così non come un'esperienza di nostalgia e sradicamento, ma come una rete dinamica di relazioni transoceaniche, costantemente alimentata dalla circolazione materiale. Le analisi letterarie rafforzano questa visione, evidenziando come le pratiche di scambio e condivisione operino oltre i confini del nazionalismo per rispondere a bisogni concreti e legami profondi. Il capitolo mette così in luce come le scatole fungano da siti di *world-making* diasporico, capaci di istituire geografie di resistenza e nuove forme comunitarie che abitano le strutture del capitalismo globale, sfidandone al contempo le logiche dominanti. Un ulteriore esempio significativo è offerto dal quattordicesimo capitolo di Ranjan Ghosh, il quale estende la prospettiva transoceanica verso una dimensione ecologica che va oltre l'antropocentrismo. Superata la visione dell'oceano come oggetto di osservazione e di consumo, esso emerge come un ecosistema vivo in cui convergono materia, politica e corpi in un'unica trama che ridefinisce l'immaginazione. L'autore impiega il concetto di *plastic sea* per rivelare come il ciclo globale dei rifiuti plastici produca una rete in grado di superare i confini nazionali e legare indissolubilmente l'umano, il biologico e il culturale. La figura dell'albatro diventa l'emblema dell'interdipendenza transoceanica nell'era di crisi: la contaminazione plastica dell'animale non rappresenta solo un danno ambientale, ma diventa lo specchio del destino umano, rivelando l'appartenenza di entrambi al medesimo orizzonte di ecologia tossica. Il capitolo contribuisce a superare i confini dello Stato-nazione, integrando la prospettiva della diaspora con una visione planetaria. La materialità degli oceani emerge come un agente di *worlding* in grado di ridefinire i legami tra Asia e Oceania nell'attuale crisi ecologica.

Geo-Spatiality in Asian and Oceanic Literature and Culture si distingue per un approccio corale che lo rende un contributo eterogeneo di rilievo per comprendere le dinamiche

dell'Asia-Pacifico nel contesto dell'Antropocene. Coniugando la riflessione teorica con l'analisi delle strutture materiali, l'opera eleva il concetto di *worlding* da semplice categoria interpretativa a vero e proprio esercizio critico volto a sovvertire le gerarchie esistenti e delineare nuove geografie relazionali. Particolarmente efficace risulta l'equilibrio con cui il volume sovrappone le trame diasporiche ed ecologiche alla prospettiva globale e transoceanica. Tale approccio evidenzia come le narrazioni culturali non siano semplici riflessi della realtà, ma operino come dispositivi di riconfigurazione spaziale e identitaria. Nonostante la varietà dei diversi approcci, questa stessa molteplicità costituisce il valore aggiunto del testo, in grado di restituire l'intrinseca complessità dei processi di *reworlding* in atto. L'indagine condotta ridefinisce i concetti di identità e territorio al di là del paradigma nazionale, favorendo una visione più fluida e interconnessa delle dinamiche che attraversano l'Asia e l'Oceania contemporanee. Il lavoro si configura, quindi, come un riferimento necessario per il dibattito accademico intorno all'interconnessione tra immaginario letterario, spazialità e sfide ecologiche nel contesto contemporaneo della globalizzazione.

Nota bio-bibliografica

Silvia Igneo ha conseguito, nell'aprile 2026, il titolo di Dottoressa di Ricerca presso l'Università di Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale, discutendo una tesi dal titolo "Tra dominio e resistenza: la lingua come strumento di controllo e cambiamento in Africa. Il caso Abdulrazak Gurnah e la Tanzania postcoloniale". Durante il suo percorso dottorale ha svolto un periodo di ricerca all'estero presso la University of Surrey. Membro dell'AIA (Associazione Italiana di Anglistica), i suoi interessi di ricerca si concentrano sulla letteratura postcoloniale africana, con particolare attenzione alle dinamiche linguistiche e alla rinegoziazione dei confini culturali nei contesti diasporici.

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**Thomas M. Wilson, *Borders, Boundaries, Frontiers:
Anthropological Insights*
(University of Toronto Press, 2023)**

Recensione di Alessia Perillo
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Pochi temi attraversano con forza pervasiva la contemporaneità quanto quello dei *borders*. Dalla crisi migratoria europea all'invasione russa dell'Ucraina, dalla Brexit al dibattito sul muro tra Stati Uniti e Messico; il *border* inteso come istituzione, simbolo e pratica quotidiana, si è ricollocato al centro della scena politica, mediatica e accademica. "The border is there", scrive Madeleine Reeves, "[...] visible and material, in the border guards, the customs officers, the legislation making some crossings legal and others illegal, in the technological apparatus of control or punishment" (Reeves in Wilson 2023, 13). Proprio questa materialità ostinata, resistente tanto alle retoriche della globalizzazione quanto alle decostruzioni post-moderne, costituisce il baricentro analitico di *Borders, Boundaries, Frontiers: Anthropological Insights* di Thomas M. Wilson. I *borders*, insiste l'autore, sono *inescapable facts*: non possono essere dissolti per decreto teorico, perché le nazioni, gli Stati ed essi sono inestricabilmente legati tra loro e con la vita quotidiana di milioni di persone. Tuttavia, proprio perché sono fatti, meritano di essere studiati con rigore, con metodo, e con quella pazienza lunga propria dell'etnografia. In questo contesto, il lavoro rappresenta un contributo di notevole rilevanza: un manuale introduttivo che offre, con notevole ampiezza di sguardo, una mappa dell'antropologia dei *borders* dalle sue origini disciplinari fino alle più recenti evoluzioni teoriche e tematiche.

Wilson è figura di riferimento consolidata nel campo dei *border studies*: i suoi lavori precedenti hanno contribuito a definire i paradigmi stessi della disciplina. In questo studio,

articolato in sette capitoli, l'autore non tarda a definire i propri obiettivi: esplorare le fondamenta storiche e gli sviluppi attuali dell'antropologia dei *borders*, mostrando come l'approccio etnografico possa illuminare ciò che altri metodi rischiano di trascurare, ossia la dimensione vissuta, quotidiana e culturale del *border*. In un compito insieme ambizioso e didattico, Wilson presenta i suoi protagonisti, i *borders*, come "primary, productive forces in the everyday lives of nation and state, and as the context for what happens every day in the lives of border peoples" (Wilson 2023, 18). La chiarezza con cui l'autore enuncia questi obiettivi è essa stessa un segnale metodologico: il testo non intende lasciare il lettore senza bussola, ma accompagnarlo in un percorso di formazione dello sguardo. In quest'ottica, le *Study Questions* poste a fine volume, sono il riflesso della postura intellettuale di un libro che non ambisce a dare risposte definitive, bensì a formare la capacità di porre le domande giuste.

Tale postura trova la sua traduzione pratica nel trattamento consapevole della triade terminologica che ne compone il titolo. Wilson rileva come la lingua inglese disponga di una costellazione di termini, *border*, *boundary*, *frontier*, *borderland*, *borderline*, spesso utilizzati come sinonimi, ma che in realtà sono portatori di "[...] different and wider meanings that may vary by region, social class, political persuasion, and education" (Wilson 2023, 5). Tale imprecisione non è neutra: l'autore osserva con acutezza che i *borders* sono stati talmente oggetto di una proliferazione definitoria nei circoli accademici da aver portato le definizioni a rappresentare "a sort of border between and among scholarly disciplines" (Wilson 2023, 5). In questa prospettiva, le definizioni stesse reiterano il problema di demarcazione che pretendono di risolvere. Ogni termine schiude un diverso orizzonte tematico, come emerge dalle distinzioni dei geografi fino agli anni Novanta, tra la *boundary* come linea, il *border* come frangia, e il *borderland* come zona di transizione. La *frontier*, in particolare, porta con sé "much emotional baggage because many geopolitical borders that are perceived as frontiers are seen to be relatively unsecured and unmanageable" (Wilson 2023, 55): un peso emozionale che rende necessario trattarla separatamente dal più neutro *border*. Non

diversamente, il termine *Culture*, cardine dell'antropologia, si rivela "a vexing issue" (Wilson 2023, 8), un terreno scivoloso su cui anche i più esperti rischiano di perdere il passo. In definitiva, questa attenzione lessicale è lo strumento che consente all'autore di mostrare come i *borders* operino simultaneamente su piani territoriali, istituzionali e immaginari, e come la loro comprensione richieda necessariamente un approccio plurale e interdisciplinare. Wilson fa emergere come l'antropologia, con il suo sguardo etnografico e la sua vocazione olistica, sia la disciplina più adatta a documentare e interpretare questa complessità, sfuggendo dalla unidimensionalità.

Proprio questa vocazione metodologica rappresenta il filo conduttore che attraversa l'intera opera. Wilson rivendica con convinzione il valore dell'etnografia, ricerca immersiva di lungo periodo, come strumento privilegiato per comprendere ciò che le statistiche e i rapporti politici non riescono a catturare: la vita quotidiana dei *borderlanders*, le loro pratiche, le loro identità ibride, il modo in cui negoziano, subiscono, resistono e trasformano le strutture di potere che il *border* incarna. Lo studio dei *borders* deve essere, insiste l'autore, al tempo stesso studio di strutture e di processi. Un'etnografia che si limiti alla descrizione degli assetti istituzionali formali rischia di perdere di vista il *real border*, quello che si produce e si riproduce ogni giorno nelle pratiche di chi lo attraversa, lo gestisce, lo abita o lo subisce. È in questo scarto tra norma e prassi che l'antropologia trova il suo spazio più fertile. Riprendendo i *pragmatic rules* di F.G. Bailey, Wilson evidenzia come le istituzioni possiedano una struttura ideale che spesso diverge profondamente dal loro funzionamento pratico, governato da regole informali che solo l'osservazione partecipante può svelare. A partire dall'insegnamento classico di Fredrik Barth sull'etnia come processo relazionale, alle riflessioni di Anthony Cohen sulla dimensione simbolica delle frontiere comunitarie, fino agli studi di Josiah Heyman sulla frontiera statunitense, Wilson costruisce una genealogia intellettuale dell'antropologia del *border* che risulta al tempo stesso rigorosa e leggibile. In questa costante tensione dialogante tra riflessione teorica e applicazione empirica, Wilson non si limita a sintetizzare i contributi altrui, bensì integra la propria esperienza di ricerca

sul campo, conferendo alla narrazione un tono autorevole ma anche personale. La celebre citazione di Gloria Anzaldúa, secondo cui il confine USA-Messico “es una herida abierta”, una ferita aperta, viene evocata come simbolo della tensione irriducibile tra conflitto e creatività che caratterizza ogni zona di frontiera. Questa scelta, tutt’altro che retorica, restituisce un’antropologia del *border* attenta alle voci, alle emozioni e alle esperienze di chi il *border* lo vive.

Wilson descrive i *borders* attraverso una moltiplicazione deliberata di metafore e registri concettuali: iceberg, camaleonti, corpi, fenomeni al tempo stesso invisibili e materiali, strutture di acciaio e di dibattito. Questa strategia riflette la convinzione che nessuna singola definizione sia sufficiente e che la complessità del fenomeno richieda uno sguardo mobile. Nella misura in cui segnala l’insufficienza di ogni approccio monodisciplinare, questa scelta è efficace e metodologicamente onesta. A tal proposito, l’autore evidenzia la contestazione antropologica delle visioni binarie sicurezza/pericolo, apertura/chiusura, ordine/disordine, che spesso appiattiscono la ricerca. Riprendendo Chris Rumford, Wilson invita a “thinking borders” e “seeing like a border” (Rumford 2014, 41-2), uno spostamento epistemologico che permette di cogliere come queste strutture possano connettere e separare simultaneamente, allontanandosi così da ogni visione dualistica.

Uno degli aspetti intellettualmente più stimolanti del contributo è la disposizione dell’autore a tenere aperte queste contraddizioni come strumenti analitici, invece di risolverle artificialmente. I *borders* forniscono ordine ad alcuni e disordine ad altri: “simply put, borders provide order to some, disorder to others” (Wilson 2023, 33). Il *border wall*, oggetto di un’analisi puntuale nel terzo capitolo, esemplifica questa ambivalenza: Wilson chiede se i muri funzionino e per chi, mostrando come le stesse strutture che uno Stato presenta come difesa possano essere vissute come violenza da chi ne è il bersaglio.

La capacità di abitare il paradosso si manifesta con forza nel trattamento della globalizzazione. La retorica del *borderless world* viene smontata dall’autore, che segnala

come l'accelerazione degli scambi, la mobilità delle persone e dei capitali e l'integrazione dei mercati, abbia in realtà alimentato la proliferazione di nuovi *borders*. Essi non sono divenuti obsoleti, ma si sono incorporati nei corpi e dispersi negli aeroporti e nei database biometrici. Come ricorda Étienne Balibar, i confini sono ormai ovunque. Il concetto di *bordering* è presentato come uno degli strumenti più fecondi del testo: un processo "double-edged" (Wilson 2023, 35) che crea strutture di potere ma apre anche spazi di resistenza. In questa prospettiva, la liminalità dei *borderlands* non è il sinonimo di marginalità: al contrario, queste zone di transizione sono "productive zones of social, political, and economic change" (Wilson 2023, 85), luoghi dove la xenofobia convive, imprevedibilmente, con la xenofilia.

Infine, Wilson non risparmia critiche all'attuale stato della disciplina. Se da un lato celebra l'espansione dei *border studies* in Europa, dall'altro mette in guardia dai rischi legati ai finanziamenti istituzionali e, soprattutto, da un eccesso di teorizzazione. Su quest'ultimo versante, Wilson lancia un avvertimento che merita di essere preso sul serio: la tendenza degli ultimi decenni a teorizzare mobilità, ibridazione, dislocamento e disgiuntura come temi centrali ha portato molti studiosi a concentrarsi sui *borders* come zone di ambiguità e transizione. Il monito si rivolge contro la tendenza a privilegiare l'analisi del processo di *becoming* a scapito di ciò che i confini 'sono' materialmente: "the relative neglect of what is" (Wilson 2023, 13). La teoria, in sintesi, non può sostituire il lavoro sul campo, ma restare al servizio dell'empiria.

Nel complesso, *Borders, Boundaries, Frontiers* si raccomanda non soltanto agli antropologi e ai ricercatori di scienze sociali, ma anche a tutti coloro che riconoscono nei *borders* una categoria fondamentale per leggere il presente: la costruzione dell'identità, la mobilità dei soggetti, le retoriche della nazione e dell'alterità, il rapporto tra corpo e potere, tra luogo e appartenenza.

Le conclusioni a cui Wilson perviene sono coerenti con le premesse: i confini devono essere "rescaled and reconfigured" (Wilson 2023, 113), riposizionati dalla periferia al centro del paesaggio metaforico della nazione e dello Stato, e "perceived less as the epidermis and



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more the lifeblood of the body politic” (Wilson 2023, 113). Seppur spazi liminali (riprendendo la nozione classica di Arnold van Gennep), i *borders* non sono, a detta di Wilson, ontologicamente liminali, in quanto per molti *borderlanders* il confine non è il margine della loro esistenza, ma il suo centro. L’antropologia dei confini, afferma con chiarezza, deve ridedicarsi alla “chronicling of everyday patterns in the actions of border peoples” (Wilson 2023, 116), senza però trascurare le istituzioni e le strutture di potere più ampie. Solo così potrà contribuire in modo originale alla teoria sociale e alla storia della vita contemporanea. Il saggio non manca di indicare anche i propri limiti: la biopolitica, il genere e la condizione dei popoli indigeni vengono introdotti con densità concettuale, ma non sempre sviluppati con la stessa profondità degli altri nuclei tematici.

In definitiva, il merito principale di Wilson è di aver restituito la complessità del *border* senza sacrificarne la leggibilità, e di formare nel lettore non una risposta, ma uno sguardo critico e consapevole. Con la promessa di ascolto e attenzione al singolare, riflesso del rispetto verso la complessità, l’autore ricorda che: “[...] every border also has its own peculiarities, its own character, its own history. The anthropology of borders, boundaries, and frontiers has provided, and will continue to offer, insights into the significance of these stories, experiences, and relationships” (Wilson 2023, 19).



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Alessia Perillo è Cultore della Materia in Letteratura Inglese presso l'Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" Chieti-Pescara, dove ha conseguito la Laurea Magistrale in Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne. La sua tesi di laurea, dedicata alle opere di Doris Lessing *Il quinto figlio* e *Ben nel mondo*, ha approfondito i temi della maternità, dell'alienazione e dell'identità genetica. I suoi interessi di ricerca si concentrano sulla rappresentazione della maternità come vincolo psicologico nella scrittura femminile. Collabora attivamente con riviste scientifiche sottoposte a *peer-review* in ambito umanistico, è membro del Comitato Organizzatore della Conferenza Internazionale su *Cognition and the Media* e ha partecipato a diverse iniziative di *public engagement* su letteratura e creatività.

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Claudia Fauzia, Valentina Amenta, *Femminismo terrone. Per un'alleanza dei margini*

(Edizioni Tlon, 2024)

Recensione di Chiara Maria Frandina

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Femminismo terrone. Per un'alleanza dei margini, pubblicato da Claudia Fauzia e Valentina Amenta per Edizioni Tlon nel 2024, nasce dall'esigenza di collocare il meridionalismo all'interno della prospettiva femminista intersezionale. Il meridionalismo a cui fanno riferimento le due autrici è ben lontano da nostalgie neoborboniche tipiche degli anni 90' che inscrivendosi in una prospettiva decoloniale e femminista convoglia i propri sforzi nella costruzione di "un futuro "pluriversale" attraverso l'alleanza tra Sud" (16).

Nell'introduzione *Cu mancia fa muddichi* (in italiano: "chi mangia fa briciole"), emerge, attraverso la "cruciale e rivoluzionaria" esperienza del femminismo delle due scrittrici, l'urgenza di restituire la "voce corale dell3 terron3" (5) in quanto soggetti politici. Il saggio inaugura così il concetto di "femminismo terrone", emerso dal fiorire di incontri e riflessioni "decoloniali, femministe e queer sul Meridione" (7), di cui la presente opera è manifesto.

Fauzia e Amenta intendono fare luce sulle discriminazioni sistematiche e strutturali perpetuate da un femminismo "animato da una presunta universalità di istanze" (4) che sembra ignorare le soggettività meridionali confinandole a una miope dimensione patriarcale e omolebobitrasfobica. Tale narrazione, spiegano le autrici, induce alla interiorizzazione della discriminazione antimeridionalista convincendo chi popola il Sud Italia della sua irrimediabile marginalità e della recalcitranza alle innovazioni. L'autopercezione di inferiorità, spiegano le studiose, induce all'annientamento della propria soggettività in virtù di un modello egemone da imitare poiché rappresentativo della norma e non dell'eccezione. Il femminismo terrone assume, dunque, le fattezze di una



rivoluzione “in grado di sfidare le convinzioni radicate riguardanti l’identità delle persone meridionali e il Sud nella sua complessità” (10).

Nel primo capitolo dell’opera, le scrittrici propongono un’analisi approfondita della Questione Meridionale, superando l’atavica dicotomia Sud e Nord, entro la quale il meridione viene tradizionalmente circoscritto. L’analisi, è condotta da una prospettiva femminista terrona che include e mette in relazione patriarcato, colonialismo e capitalismo definiti i “pilastri profondamente marci sui quali [essa] si fonda” (11).

Insita nella Questione Meridionale, spiegano le studiose, vi è “la presunzione che il Sud, per superare le sue problematiche [...] debba “civilizzarsi”” (12). Diventa, dunque, fondamentale interpretare la Questione da una prospettiva intersezionale e decoloniale, allorquando a questa situazione venga mostrata, come unica risoluzione del divario tra Sud e Nord e mezzo di validazione del Mezzogiorno, l’adesione a modelli specifici di progresso proposti da sistemi squisitamente capitalistici nordeuropei. In quest’ottica, gli intenti civilizzatori, individuati nel “Sé europeo” e incarnati dal soggetto egemonico per eccellenza, “l’uomo maschio eterosessuale e cisgenere, bianco, occidentale e abile” (14), sono i responsabili della produzione di conoscenza e modelli di riferimento culturale nel contesto eurocentrico, nonché della conseguente svalutazione delle soggettività in nome dell’universalità europea. Il progetto decoloniale femminista terrone, spiegano Fauzia e Amenta, discostandosi dal femminismo neoliberale bianco e borghese, sfida la “narrazione egemonica eurocentrica” (16) proponendone la decostruzione. In tal senso, esso auspica ad un’alleanza decoloniale tra i Sud del mondo finalizzata alla valorizzazione delle esperienze e dei saperi subalterni e alla costruzione di discorsi condivisi capaci di riflettere la complessità del mondo e offrirne nuove chiavi interpretative.

Le scrittrici, nel primo capitolo, pongono inoltre l’accento sul concetto di estrattivismo e sullo sfruttamento delle persone e dei territori. I risultati dell’intensa applicazione di tali modelli produttivi sono assolutamente evidenti nei territori e nei corpi del Mezzogiorno a dimostrazione che l’imposizione di modelli sviluppisti sia spesso incompatibile con le



specificità del Sud. Ogni tentativo di resistenza alle logiche di sviluppo del Nord è, tuttavia, stigmatizzato come espressione di inciviltà e indolenza. Nel corso degli ultimi decenni, si è sviluppata una narrazione ambivalente e per certi versi perversa: da un lato la lentezza del Sud viene romanticizzata ed esotizzata, contribuendo a promuovere un incontrollato turismo rapace; dall'altro alimenta il sentimento antimeridionalista che contrappone il Nord, metafora geografica dell'innovazione e lo sviluppo, al Sud tacciato di passività e immobilismo.

Il secondo capitolo riprende gli studi Gramsciani sulla subalternità del Meridione e sull'egemonia del Nord, chiarendo la complicità della cultura popolare, della politica e della scienza nel diffondere, tra le masse settentrionali, il sentimento antimeridionalista. Le autrici evidenziano come, a partire dall'osservazione delle dinamiche di oppressione del Nord sul Sud di Gramsci, sia stato possibile creare un modello relazionale sovrapponibile a quasi ogni contesto di subalternità. Ne è un esempio il saggio *Can the Subaltern Speak* di Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in cui la filosofa postcoloniale analizza la duplice oppressione vissuta dalle donne indiane oppresse dal patriarcato perpetrato dalle comunità locali e da quello dei "civilizzatori" britannici.

Gramsci individua quella che le autrici definiscono "matrice coloniale nella subalternità del Mezzogiorno" (36) rintracciabile nella storia dell'"invenzione del Sud" e strettamente legata sia alla costruzione dell'identità nazionale italiana sia alla più ampia contrapposizione tra Sud Europa e Nord Europa. Già nel 1748, in *Lo spirito delle leggi*, Montesquieu elaborava una teoria di tipo "climatico" sulla presunta debolezza di carattere e asservimento dei popoli che abitavano in area mediterranea. In questo quadro, il Risorgimento Italiano appare "l'occasione perfetta per riscattare l'Italia dallo stigma di essere considerata un paese meridionale" (37). L'emancipazione del Nord dal Meridione voleva dire celebrare la cultura e l'élite nordeuropea e relegare il Sud ad una dimensione di arretratezza e inciviltà. Nonostante l'unificazione italiana, il Mezzogiorno continuava a essere percepito un corpo estraneo da "addomesticare". In questa prospettiva, come



suggeriscono gli studi di Giuliani e Lombardi-Diop, ripresi in *Femminismo Terrone*, l'addomesticamento meridionale rappresenta "la prima esperienza di colonialismo interno in Italia" (37). Il Meridione, l'altro, doveva essere uniformato dal Sé egemonico.

Nel corso del capitolo viene inoltre analizzato il tema della rappresentazione delle soggettività del Mezzogiorno evidenziando come queste si interessino, nella loro carenza, a restituire un'immagine stereotipata che riduce le varie identità a figure monolitiche ed esotizzate. Il discorso delle rappresentazioni è argomentato su più linee temporali: la narrazione antimeridionale del periodo postunitario, appoggiata dal positivismo scientifico con Lombroso e Niceforo, viene messa in relazione alla contemporaneità.

Nel XX secolo, il Mezzogiorno viene osservato attraverso la prospettiva del *North gaze* che da un lato feticizza e dipinge il Sud come primitivo e pittoresco. A questo proposito, viene richiamata la diffusione dell'estetica della #vitalenta documentata da migliaia di foto ritraenti spiagge affollate, processioni e riti pasquali e scene di pesca o di convivialità. Dall'altro, invece, lo sguardo egemonico influenza la percezione degli utenti dei social network attraverso i meme e il *trash*, semplifica e distorce la cultura meridionale associandola a contenuti di dubbio gusto e volgari. Tuttavia, osservano intelligentemente le autrici, pratiche e ritualità religiose sono presenti anche nella cultura dell'Italia Settentrionale. È evidente come, a causa della gerarchizzazione delle culture e della tradizione, si guardi al Meridione con uno sguardo sprezzante riducendo la sua ricchezza culturale a caricature e "macchiette del Sud" (48) funzionali al mantenimento della narrazione egemonica.

Il terzo capitolo si concentra sulle figure di Maria Occhipinti, Franca Viola, Rosa Balestrieri e il Collettivo Femminista di Cinisi e Nino Gennaro, le cui storie sono esempi significativi e capaci di ricostruire una memoria femminista terrona collettiva. Fin dal principio, il capitolo si preoccupa di spiegare il concetto di "memoria", chiarendo come esso non vada inteso come archivio di ricordi ma come formazione culturale opposta alla memoria collettiva egemone.



La produzione del sapere, concordano Fauzia e Amenta, comporta l'esclusione delle identità "altre", fenomeno facilmente constatabile nei manuali di storia. Tuttavia, al di là di ciò viene considerata storia "ufficiale", esistono le contro-memorie. Queste, posizionate nelle appendici dei libri e ai margini dell'ufficialità, sono "le storie dei luoghi e delle persone che la storia ufficiale ha considerato insignificanti, [...] delle donne, delle persone LGBTQIA+, delle persone razzializzate, delle persone con disabilità, di soggettività la cui vita si dispiega in reconditi luoghi del Sud, segnati da limitazioni di classe e accenti troppo marcati" (66). Ascoltare e dare visibilità alla resistenza delle memorie, rappresenta la missione delle femministe terrone che, oltre alla ricostruzione della genealogia terrona, si afferma attraverso l'esercizio di gratitudine "verso tutte le froce, terrone e *male fimmine* che ci hanno preceduto" (67) e di cui questo capitolo è espressione.

Il quarto e ultimo capitolo si sviluppa attorno all'assunto secondo cui "la lingua che parliamo influenza il modo in cui esperiamo la realtà" (98). Infatti, secondo le autrici, non solo gli atti linguistici, ma anche il modo attraverso cui essi vengono veicolati concorre alla manipolazione della realtà circostante.

Fauzia e Amenta pongono al centro dell'analisi del capitolo la questione degli accenti, non limitandosi a descriverli come "modo di parlare" (98) bensì a "evocarne la dimensione simbolica" (98). L'accento "ci connota" (95) e porta con sé informazioni che non descrivono solo la provenienza geografica, inscrivendosi in dinamiche di riconoscimento sociale sulla base di quanto sia marcato un accento rispetto ad un altro.

Rinnegare le proprie tradizioni e il proprio accento, osservano le autrici, è un atto comune ai subalterni che, ricevendo validazione dalla comunità egemone, si privano della propria soggettività. La gerarchizzazione delle lingue è un processo che conduce alla scomparsa delle lingue regionali che di fatti sono sempre più sgradite e stigmatizzate.

A partire dalla fine del Duecento, in Italia si è affermato l'utilizzo del fiorentino, lingua di una delle più importanti potenze politiche europee dell'epoca. Nei secoli il modello linguistico del fiorentino è stato preservato e istituzionalizzato. Fauzia e Amenta,



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riprendendo il saggio di Spivak, spiegano come il subalterno, per poter interloquire con il potere, sia venuto meno alle proprie forme linguistiche in favore di quelle riconosciute e accettate dalle istituzioni. Le autrici definiscono la lingua egemone “lingua di sopravvivenza” che “distorta, queerizzata con le sfumature dei nostri accenti meridionali” (110) assume un ruolo più importante e non si riduce a un mero strumento di comunicazione del potere. Questa nuova forma linguistica non è addomesticabile e mescolandosi con la varietà delle lingue che incontra aderisce a nuove realtà.

In conclusione, *Femminismo terrone. Per un'alleanza dei margini*, di Claudia Fauzia e Valentina Amenta, fa luce su questioni spesso eluse e difficilmente affrontate nel dibattito contemporaneo. Con coraggio l'opera mette in discussione gli assi di riferimento culturali e identitari fondativi della nostra collettività e società, arrivando a destabilizzare l'identità stessa del lettore indipendentemente dal suo essere terrone o meno. Il saggio risulta incisivo poiché invita a una riflessione profonda che mette in discussione i processi attraverso i quali, per necessità o adesione, si rinuncia alla propria soggettività in favore di un'identità egemonica ed eteronormata. Fauzia e Amenta delineano e inaugurano un progetto politico e culturale che mira alla realizzazione di un avvenire plurale in cui le soggettività marginalizzate possano esprimere a pieno la propria identità.



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Chiara Maria Frandina si è laureata in Lingue e Letterature Moderne nel 2026 presso l'Università della Calabria, dove ha conseguito la laurea triennale in Lingue e Culture Moderne nel 2024. I suoi principali ambiti di ricerca riguardano i *Gender Studies* e i *Colonial e Postcolonial Studies*, con particolare attenzione alle dinamiche di rappresentazione e ai processi di costruzione dell'identità nei contesti postcoloniali. Negli ultimi tempi ha inoltre sviluppato un vivo interesse per le *Digital Humanities*, approfondendone gli strumenti e le metodologie applicate all'analisi testuale e allo studio dei fenomeni culturali e letterari del XVIII secolo. È stata insignita del premio "America Giovani" presso la Camera dei Deputati nel settembre del 2024. È membro del Comitato editoriale di *Margins/Mares/Margini*.

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Fabio Vittorini, *Queer Bodies: identità trans* nella letteratura e nei media. Da fine Ottocento agli anni Settanta (vol. I). Dagli anni Settanta a oggi (vol. II)* (Patron Editore, 2024)

Recensione di Eleonora Maio
(Università degli Studi di Palermo, IT)

Attraverso un'indagine che abbraccia centocinquant'anni di produzione narrativa e mediale, Fabio Vittorini, nel suo studio in due volumi *Queer Bodies* (2024), ricostruisce la genealogia delle rappresentazioni della varianza di genere nell'immaginario culturale occidentale moderno e contemporaneo. L'analisi si sviluppa attraverso capitoli organizzati secondo una scansione cronologica e si fonda su un corpus di notevole ampiezza e varietà – dalla letteratura al cinema, dalla fotografia al giornalismo, dalla saggistica al teatro, fino ai manga e alle serie televisive – entro il quale l'identità di genere emerge come “terreno di attraversamento”, “spazio di intersezione” o, ancora, di “dispersione” (10).

L'introduzione, comune ai due volumi, delinea il quadro teorico dello studio: ripercorrendo la formazione del discorso scientifico sulla sessualità, dalle prime classificazioni ottocentesche alle più recenti elaborazioni del lessico *queer*, l'autore mette in luce l'evoluzione dei modelli interpretativi delle identità di genere e l'orientamento anti-essenzialista che informa la sua riflessione sulle questioni identitarie. Su queste premesse si innesta l'analisi del secondo capitolo del primo volume, in cui Vittorini evidenzia come, tra la fine dell'Ottocento e i primi decenni del Novecento, l'intreccio tra trasformazioni legislative, sviluppo della sessuologia e diffusione delle teorie positiviste contribuisca a codificare il modo in cui la varianza

di genere viene concepita nel discorso scientifico e culturale dell'epoca. L'esame di trattazioni scientifiche, monografie medico-legali e resoconti di stampa mostra, infatti, come la nascente cultura medico-scientifica, seppur attraversata da posizioni più aperte e innovative, tenda a definire le soggettività non conformi come deviazioni biologiche, trasformando il corpo in oggetto di classificazione, diagnosi, controllo. Le rappresentazioni dell'esperienza trans sono poi esaminate, nel capitolo III, all'interno del contesto culturale compreso tra gli anni Venti e Trenta, segnato in Italia dal consolidamento del regime fascista e da un discorso pubblico improntato al controllo morale della sessualità. A partire da questo quadro, Vittorini si sofferma su opere letterarie che mettono in scena l'ambiguità di genere: tra queste figurano il racconto *Sarrasine* (1830) e il romanzo *Séraphîta* (1834) di Balzac, nonché capisaldi della narrativa modernista come *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) di Radclyffe Hall e *Orlando* (1928) di Virginia Woolf, che l'autore colloca tra i testi "destinati a rivoluzionare definitivamente la storia della narrativa trans*" (68). Accanto a questi titoli canonici, entrati nel circuito nazionale nonostante le restrizioni del contesto politico e culturale, Vittorini esamina materiali meno frequentati dalla critica, come *Lo strano caso del cavaliere d'Éon* (1935) di Cesare Giardini: prima attestazione italiana di una narrazione della transizione di genere, l'opera è presentata come ricostruzione storica per aggirare la censura fascista.

L'analisi prosegue nei capitoli IV e V, dedicati alla fase compresa tra il secondo dopoguerra e l'inizio degli anni Sessanta. Nel capitolo IV Vittorini inquadra il riemergere delle narrazioni trans nel contesto della ricostruzione postbellica: in questo periodo, l'espansione della cultura di massa e la crescente circolazione di studi sulla sessualità – tra cui il *Rapporto Kinsey* e gli studi clinici freudiani – riaprono, in Italia, uno spazio di discussione su temi rimasti a lungo marginalizzati. L'esame di testi narrativi, saggi, prodotti mediali e articoli della stampa dell'epoca mostra come tali questioni vengano affrontate in forme spesso ambivalenti, oscillando tra

interrogazione critica e riproduzione di stereotipi culturali: è a quest'ultima tendenza che rinvia *La pelle* (1949) di Curzio Malaparte, romanzo in cui la centralità del corpo e il motivo della metamorfosi delineano una rappresentazione simbolica della crisi dell'identità nel dopoguerra. Il capitolo V sposta invece l'attenzione sul cinema e sulla cultura popolare della fine degli anni Cinquanta, analizzando il motivo dello sdoppiamento identitario attraverso il romanzo *Psycho* (1959) di Robert Bloch e la sua celebre trasposizione cinematografica diretta da Alfred Hitchcock nel 1960. Attraverso la figura di Norman Bates, Vittorini mostra come il dispositivo narrativo della "personalità multipla" diventi uno dei modelli più influenti attraverso cui il cinema del secondo Novecento mette in scena le tensioni tra identità, corpo e ruolo sociale. A questo nodo interpretativo torna il capitolo VII, che ne segue gli sviluppi nella produzione cinematografica successiva: *Psycho* inaugura, infatti, un ampio filone in cui thriller e horror si intrecciano e il travestimento, insieme alle forme di non conformità di genere, viene inscritto entro un paradigma patologizzante, spesso ricondotto al trauma infantile o alla scissione della personalità. Vittorini prende in esame film come *Homicidal* (1961), *Miss Leslie's Dolls* (1972), *Private Parts* (1972), e le pellicole ispirate al caso reale di Ed Gein, quali *Deranged* (1974) e *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), mostrando come queste opere contribuiscano a consolidare immagini stereotipate destinate a influenzare a lungo la rappresentazione della varianza di genere sul grande schermo.

Il ruolo del cinema popolare e sensazionalistico nell'Italia del boom economico è invece al centro del capitolo VI, nel quale l'autore mostra come produzioni cinematografiche, cronaca scandalistica e spettacolarizzazione mediatica contribuiscano a rendere visibili figure e narrazioni legate all'esperienza trans. Tra gli esempi discussi figura *La dolce vita* (1960) di Federico Fellini: nella celebre sequenza dell'orgia a Fregene, che suscitò grande scalpore nell'opinione pubblica dell'epoca, compare il travestito interpretato da Dominot, segnalando l'emergere, seppure ancora

filtrato da stereotipi e reazioni stigmatizzanti, di soggettività trans nella rappresentazione mediatica nazionale. Il capitolo VIII si concentra poi sulle forme di radicalizzazione narrativa che prendono forma nel clima politico e culturale successivo al '68: Vittorini collega questo nuovo immaginario al contesto delle lotte di liberazione e delle prime mobilitazioni trans negli Stati Uniti, mostrando come la rappresentazione cinematografica oscilli tra tensione eversiva e provocazione sensazionalistica. In questo quadro, il romanzo *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) di Gore Vidal, insieme al film omonimo del 1970, occupa una posizione centrale, ma il capitolo ricostruisce anche un ventaglio eterogeneo di sperimentazioni ricondotte al fenomeno della *transploitation*, in cui il corpo trans viene alternativamente investito di valenze utopiche, grottesche o erotiche. Come mostra il capitolo IX, a questa fase di spettacolarizzazione segue l'emergere di un diverso orientamento rappresentativo, in cui cinema e narrativa si avvicinano a registri più realistici e melodrammatici, affrontando la disforia e i percorsi di transizione entro forme quali la fiction sociale e il racconto di formazione, spesso ambientate nel nascente mondo *queer* urbano: tra gli esempi discussi figura il mediometraggio statunitense *The Queen* (1968) di Frank Simon, dedicato ai drag balls della scena LGBTQ+ newyorkese.

Nei capitoli X, XI e XII l'indagine si concentra sulle trasformazioni della rappresentazione della varianza di genere nel periodo compreso tra la fine degli anni Sessanta e il decennio successivo, mettendo in luce l'emergere di forme autobiografiche e di elaborazione politica dell'esperienza trans. Il capitolo X analizza il clima culturale italiano successivo al '68, segnato dalla tensione tra le spinte alla liberalizzazione dei costumi e la persistente influenza dei modelli morali radicati nel discorso pubblico e nel magistero cattolico. Vittorini indaga questo scenario attraverso prodotti della cultura di massa e dello spettacolo, dalla commedia cinematografica italiana – con film come *Sessomatto* (1973) di Dino Risi – alle produzioni europee che affrontano la non conformità di genere in chiave satirica o provocatoria, come *La Cage*

aux folles (1978) di Édouard Molinaro. A questi esempi si affiancano quelli provenienti dalla cultura musicale, come le canzoni di Charles Aznavour e Renato Zero, che contribuiscono a diffondere nell'immaginario popolare figure legate al travestitismo. Il capitolo XI prende in esame l'emergere di una scrittura autobiografica capace di sottrarre l'esperienza trans al filtro della cronaca sensazionalistica e del discorso medico, consentendo alle soggettività *queer* di conquistare uno spazio discorsivo autonomo: emblematica, nel contesto nazionale, è la pubblicazione di *Io, un travestito* (1970) di Roberto Franciolini, prima autobiografia trans apparsa in Italia, mentre, nello stesso periodo, si sviluppano anche forme di documentazione visiva, quali il reportage fotografico *I travestiti* (1972) di Lisetta Carmi. Il capitolo conclusivo del primo volume legge queste rappresentazioni sullo sfondo delle trasformazioni politiche degli anni Settanta, segnate dalla nascita dei primi movimenti di liberazione omosessuale: la fondazione nel 1971 del FUORI! (Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano), in dialogo con le reti internazionali del *Gay Liberation Front*, apre infatti uno spazio nuovo di elaborazione teorica e militante in cui anche la questione trans entra nel dibattito politico e culturale.

Nel secondo volume Vittorini estende l'indagine dagli anni Settanta fino agli scenari culturali più recenti. Un'attenzione particolare è riservata alle forme audiovisive: i capitoli II, IV, V, IX, XIII, XIV nel loro insieme, delineano l'evoluzione delle rappresentazioni cinematografiche e televisive della varianza di genere dal tardo Novecento alla contemporaneità. Il capitolo II prende in esame il cinema europeo nel contesto della cultura post-sessantottina, attraverso pellicole come *Köçek* (1975) di Atıf Yılmaz, *Le locataire* (1976) di Roman Polanski e *Cambio de sexo* (1977) di Vicente Aranda, nelle quali identità in trasformazione si muovono in racconti che combinano dramma psicologico e cinema d'autore. Negli anni Ottanta tale immaginario si ridefinisce nel quadro del clima di stigmatizzazione legato all'emergenza HIV/AIDS: come mostra il capitolo IV, il cinema horror e *slasher* statunitense continua a rielaborare il



paradigma inaugurato da *Psycho*, associando non conformità di genere e devianza psichica in film quali *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) o *Hide and Go Shriek* (1988). Parallelamente, il capitolo V evidenzia come nello stesso decennio Hollywood recuperi il motivo del travestimento all'interno della commedia *mainstream*, nel contesto di un immaginario postmoderno orientato all'intrattenimento: film come *Tootsie* e *Victor/Victoria* (1982) trasformano la confusione dei ruoli di genere in dispositivo comico che, pur aprendo uno spazio di riflessione sulle relazioni tra i sessi, tende a neutralizzarne la portata sovversiva riconducendola entro forme narrative rassicuranti. Con il capitolo IX l'analisi segue poi le trasformazioni del panorama cinematografico tra gli anni Novanta e i primi anni Duemila, in un contesto segnato dall'affermazione del neoliberismo globale, dalla crescente visibilità dei movimenti LGBTQ+ e dall'espansione dei media digitali, che favoriscono una progressiva integrazione delle soggettività *queer* nell'immaginario *mainstream*: film come *The Crying Game* (1992) o *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995) testimoniano l'affermarsi di rappresentazioni più articolate dell'esperienza trans all'interno di generi popolari come il road movie o la commedia. L'attenzione si sposta quindi, nel capitolo XIII, sulla produzione audiovisiva italiana più recente, nella quale la presenza delle persone trans nei media cresce parallelamente alla diffusione dei reality show e alla logica del "capitalismo rainbow": accanto alla visibilità televisiva, il capitolo esamina produzioni documentarie come *C'è un soffio di vita soltanto*, dedicato a Lucy Salani, e opere di finzione che affrontano il tema della varianza di genere attraverso storie di formazione, come quella della giovane Adriana/Andrea nel film *L'immensità* (2022) di Emanuele Crialese. Il capitolo XIV amplia poi lo sguardo al panorama audiovisivo globale contemporaneo, nel contesto dei recenti cambiamenti culturali e scientifici – tra i quali la ridefinizione diagnostica della disforia di genere nel DSM-5 (2013) – mostrando come cinema e serialità televisiva internazionale abbiano ridefinito l'immaginario collettivo legato alle identità di

genere. Tra le tendenze più rilevanti messe in luce da Vittorini si distingue la diffusione di narrazioni incentrate sull'esperienza della disforia adolescenziale e sul conflitto tra individualità e contesto familiare o sociale, come testimoniano film quali *Gun Hill Road* (2011), *3 Generations* (2015), *Tomboy* (2011), *Just Charlie* (2017), *Girl* (2018) e *Lola vers la mer* (2019). In modo analogo, la serialità televisiva internazionale, da *Transparent* a *Orange Is the New Black*, da *Sense8* a *Pose*, amplia lo spazio dedicato alle soggettività queer, rappresentando non solo i percorsi individuali di transizione, ma anche le dimensioni comunitarie e politiche dell'esperienza trans.

Accanto alle forme audiovisive, Vittorini allarga lo sguardo anche ad ambiti della cultura popolare e performativa, come mostrano i capitoli VI e VII. Il capitolo VI esamina la crescente visibilità della varianza di genere nel clima culturale degli anni Ottanta, quando sottoculture inizialmente marginali iniziano a influenzare il mainstream attraverso la musica pop, la moda e le estetiche androgine diffuse da figure come Boy George o Pete Burns, in un clima segnato, al contempo, dall'attivismo dei movimenti LGBTQ+ e dall'emergenza HIV/AIDS. Il capitolo VII sposta, invece, l'attenzione sulla cultura visiva seriale – in particolare anime, manga e fumetto – evidenziando come negli anni Ottanta e nei primi anni Novanta i linguaggi grafici offrano nuovi spazi di sperimentazione per la narrativa trans: opere come *La principessa Zaffiro* di Osamu Tezuka e *Lady Oscar – Le rose di Versailles* di Riyoko Ikeda mettono in scena identità costruite attraverso travestimenti e ruoli sociali imposti, mentre anche autori italiani come Magnus e Andrea Pazienza introducono nel fumetto nazionale immaginari legati alla messa in discussione dei ruoli e delle identità di genere.

Altro nucleo centrale del secondo volume è la narrativa: i capitoli III, VIII, X, XI e XII sviluppano, infatti, un ampio percorso che attraversa diversi momenti della produzione letteraria compresa tra la fine del Novecento e il presente. Il capitolo III si apre con l'analisi delle memorie di *Herculine Barbin*, pubblicate a Parigi nel 1978 con

un'introduzione di Michel Foucault e tradotte in italiano l'anno successivo, che Vittorini interpreta come un documento cruciale per comprendere la complessità delle identità di genere non riconducibili al modello binario. L'indagine sulla narrativa trans prosegue nel capitolo VIII all'interno del contesto italiano segnato dall'approvazione della legge 164 del 1982 sulla rettificazione di attribuzione di sesso e dalle tensioni nel dibattito pubblico suscitate dalla condanna cattolica dell'omosessualità ribadita nella *Lettera ai Vescovi* del 1986. In questo scenario il romanzo diventa uno spazio privilegiato di riflessione sulla trasformazione del corpo e dell'identità: tra gli esempi discussi Vittorini richiama *Cima delle nobildonne* (1985) di Stefano D'Arrigo, in cui il tema della varianza di genere si intreccia con una complessa sperimentazione linguistica e metanarrativa. L'autore analizza, inoltre, opere internazionali come *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) di Angela Carter, romanzo nel quale la metamorfosi del protagonista Evelyn in Eva assume una forte valenza simbolica e mitopoietica, in un intreccio tra riferimenti psicoanalitici, alchemici e mitologici che mettono in discussione la rigidità del binarismo di genere.

Questa riflessione si amplia nel capitolo X, che prende le mosse dal quadro teorico delineato negli anni Novanta dall'emergere dei *transgender studies*: richiamando il ruolo fondativo del *Posttranssexual Manifesto* di Sandy Stone e la progressiva pluralizzazione delle articolazioni identitarie – quali *non-binary*, *gender fluid*, *gender non-conforming*, *genderqueer* – nel lessico contemporaneo, Vittorini esamina opere della narrativa globale che utilizzano la metamorfosi corporea come dispositivo critico. Tra queste figurano *Cock and Bull* (1992) di Will Self, *novelettes* in cui trasformazioni anatomiche paradossali sono impiegate in chiave grottesca per interrogare la costruzione culturale delle differenze sessuali o, ancora, il dramma *Cleansed* (1998) di Sarah Kane, che mette in scena corpi sottoposti a trasformazioni radicali in uno spazio dominato da violenza e controllo: come osserva l'autore, in queste rappresentazioni "la dimensione trans* diventa polo di irradiazione di una

complessità identitaria e narrativa compiutamente in linea con l'episteme metamoderna" (194).

Se il capitolo XI mostra come la narrativa trans italiana tra anni Novanta e primi Duemila resti in larga misura ancora legata al modello autobiografico e testimoniale sviluppatosi nei decenni precedenti, il capitolo XII evidenzia, invece, la progressiva pluralizzazione delle modalità di rappresentazione della varianza di genere nella letteratura del XXI secolo. In questo contesto, Vittorini analizza opere come *Italia De Profundis* (2008) di Giuseppe Genna, in cui la transizione non è più soltanto oggetto di un racconto individuale ma assume una valenza simbolica più ampia, diventando figura della crisi del soggetto contemporaneo e del rapporto tra individuo e nazione, o, ancora, la raccolta poetica *Dolore minimo* (2018) di Giovanna Cristina Vivinetto, in cui le esperienze della transizione, del corpo e della disforia trovano espressione in forma lirica. L'analisi si estende infine al panorama internazionale, con riferimenti a opere come *Frankissstein* (2019) di Jeanette Winterson, che rielabora l'immaginario frankensteiniano alla luce delle teorie postumane e cyberfemministe, mettendo in relazione identità di genere, intelligenza artificiale e trasformazione tecnologica del corpo.

Nella conclusione dei due volumi Vittorini interpreta l'emergere della narrativa trans negli ultimi centocinquanta anni come l'esito di un progressivo affrancamento dalle letture medicalizzanti e sensazionalistiche che hanno a lungo dominato il discorso medico, giuridico e mediatico. Se nell'introduzione l'autore definisce il corpo *queer* come un corpo "molteplice, complesso, eccentrico" (38), capace di oltrepassare le categorie normative, nelle pagine finali questa prospettiva viene ripresa per evidenziare come le forme della sua rappresentazione concorrano a mettere in crisi l'idea di identità come essenza stabile, orientando la riflessione verso una concezione relazionale, fluida e performativa del soggetto e ampliando così le possibilità di comprensione dell'esperienza umana oltre i confini del pensiero binario.

Nel complesso, i due volumi di *Queer Bodies* offrono una ricostruzione di straordinaria ampiezza delle narrazioni della varianza di genere nella cultura occidentale. La fitta costellazione di fonti letterarie, grafiche e audiovisive presa in esame, insieme a un impianto metodologico di taglio interdisciplinare che mette in dialogo studi letterari, *media studies*, *cultural studies*, *queer studies*, consente di leggere queste produzioni come configurazioni storiche e discorsive in continuo mutamento. Oltre a restituire con notevole finezza lo *Zeitgeist* delle diverse stagioni storiche analizzate, lo studio ha anche il merito di recuperare, accanto ai titoli canonici, una vasta gamma di opere rimaste ai margini della storia letteraria e mediale, contribuendo a ricostruire una genealogia più complessa e articolata delle narrazioni legate all'identità di genere. Il dialogo costante tra contesto italiano e panorama internazionale si rivela, inoltre, particolarmente efficace nel mettere in luce come la narrativa dell'esperienza trans si sviluppi attraverso processi di circolazione, traduzione e contaminazione tra diversi sistemi culturali, consentendo di delineare la formazione di un immaginario transnazionale della varianza di genere. *Queer Bodies* si configura, così, come uno studio di ampio respiro, capace di coniugare rigore concettuale e apertura critica: l'opera propone un modello di analisi attento alla complessità e alla pluralità delle esperienze, offrendo un contributo fondamentale non solo agli studi *trans* e *queer*, ma anche alla riflessione contemporanea sulle forme narrative e mediali.

Nota bio-bibliografica

Eleonora Maio ha conseguito il dottorato di ricerca in Studi Umanistici presso l'Università degli Studi di Palermo, con una tesi in letteratura inglese e *life writing studies* dedicata all'analisi della trilogia auto/biografica della scrittrice britannica contemporanea Sally Bayley. Nel 2024 è stata Visiting Doctoral Researcher alla Faculty of English Language and Literature dell'Università di Oxford e Honorary Visiting Doctoral Student presso l'Oxford Centre for Life-Writing. È docente di ruolo nella scuola secondaria di secondo grado e membro dell'Associazione Italiana di Anglistica.

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Susan Caperna Lloyd:
An Artist Across Media, a Life Across Continents

An Interview by Elisabetta Marino
(Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata, IT)

Born in California, and currently based in Oregon, Susan Caperna Lloyd has developed a multifaceted career, distinguishing herself as a filmmaker and documentarian, photographer, and author of narratives across genres, blending travel writing and memoir. Her life experiences have taken her across diverse cultures and continents, from the Philippines to Italy, Spain, India, Mexico, and Japan. In 2021, her archive – comprising more than 18,000 items – was acquired by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, an honor that attests to her outstanding and widely recognized talent.



Susan Caperna Lloyd in Gujarat (India).

EM: When did you feel your first calling toward art?

SCL: My mother was a painter and had art materials around for us kids all the time. When I was about 12 years old and growing up with western U.S. history around me, I made an oil painting of a girl in a long pioneer dress. I accidentally spilled turpentine all over it and the painting was completely distorted. I was upset and wanted to abandon it, but Mom said, “No. Go with it, see where the streaks take you”. I did. The girl, now blurry, fuzzy, and mysterious, became the painting’s title: *Blue Girl from a Dream*. I then won 1st Place at the Oregon State Fair for it. That’s when I learned to let the paint (or a photograph, or any art form) take you where it wants to. An important lesson from Mother. I learned that, in making real art, I needed to observe the materials and even the ideas and see where they might lead me.

EM: When did you first begin exploring your own roots and feel the urge to delve more deeply into them?

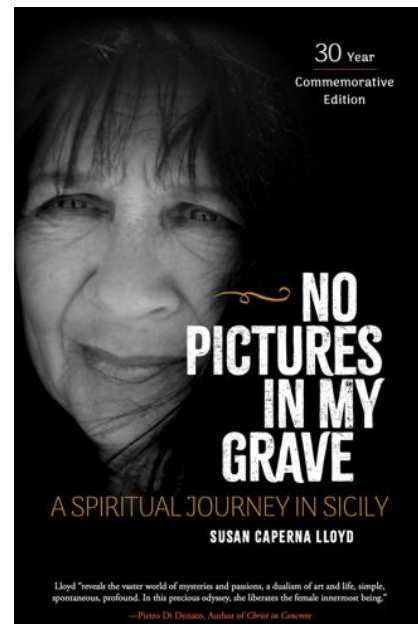
SCL: The first exploration of my roots was probably through my grandmother, Carolina Caperna, who’d emigrated to the U.S. with my father and his siblings in 1922. She came to visit us in Oregon from New Jersey every few years. It was a difficult trip for her by train because she was afraid of flying. She was a big, strong woman, 6 feet tall. I was taken with her *tarantella* dancing, the Italian food she made, Italian string games she taught us. There was something unique and exciting about her. I loved to hear her speak Italian with my father. I had grown up in a Norwegian-populated fishing town on the Oregon coast. We were Catholics and there were no Italians in town. I always felt out of place. I then delved more deeply into my Italian heritage when I visited Italy for the first time in 1979. Going to Sicily for Holy Week and encountering the Madonna of Sorrows in the Procession of the Mysteries in Trapani, I connected deeply to this ritual. Here was a

mournful Madonna who was ‘searching’ for her son on Good Friday. I related this Madonna’s quest to my own search for where I belonged. This led to my many long-term trips to Sicily through the years and participation in the procession. I call Trapani my ancestral home.

EM: Can you tell us more about your grandmother, who was one of the sources of inspiration behind *No Pictures in My Grave: A Spiritual Journey in Sicily* (1992), your celebrated travel memoir?

SCL: In Sicily I identified the Madonna with my grandmother, Carolina. Carolina was always sad and I’d see her holding back tears when she visited us in Oregon, especially when she had to leave. She felt cut off from family, both from us in Oregon and her left-behind family in Italy. I thought of my father’s story about her last words in New Jersey when she died: “Mother, I am coming home”. She’d always wanted to return home but never did. I knew that she hadn’t wanted to go to the U.S., an adventure her husband Tony wanted to take. Even my father, on the boat arriving at Ellis Island, tried to throw his family’s bag of luggage into the water. Did he, too, not want to leave Italy behind?

With Grandmother Carolina’s emigration to the U.S., I thought about how women often sacrificed themselves and were not in decision-making roles. Carolina’s strength in making the journey to the U.S. did inspire me – yet I did not want to suffer like she did – I wanted to lead and make decisions for myself.





EM: That leads us to female empowerment and ancestral mothers, which are recurring themes in your work. Could you expand on their significance?

SCL: While in Sicily at the Procession of the Mysteries, I realized why I felt so strongly about the relationship between my grandmother and the Madonna. It was the 'search' the Madonna made in the procession; it was as if she searched for 'home' in this yearning for reunification with her son – a lot like my grandmother who had to leave her mother behind in Italy. It was the search I was also making. The Madonna was empowered: carried last in the procession, she was victorious because she held up the procession at its end. She went through the night, alone. Like her, I wanted to be strong and independent and not follow behind like the mourning women who walked behind the Madonna. I wanted to be like the Madonna in my own journey and *help carry* her statue in the procession until the end. Women weren't allowed to do this. But I persevered and carried the Madonna, the first outside woman to do so, and joined the world of men, dancing in camaraderie and companionship. They were symbolic brothers. A family. In doing so, I felt I had come 'home'. I was strong, like the ancient Greek deity on Sicily, Demeter – a Black Goddess symbolic of the underworld journey– who went into the unknown to search and find her daughter, Persephone.

I have always ended up with strong women around me. In India I was inspired by the Hindu deity, Kali, at her annual *puja* in Kolkata. I related to this angry goddess because of my own anger after my sister's untimely and tragic death. Kali's powerful expression of anger validated my own and that which many women feel but repress. Also in India, I studied and learned to dance with the famed cobra dancer, Gulabo Saper, who was buried alive when she was born as newborn girls were not welcome among her ethnic tribespeople. Yet she survived (her father dug her up!) to become India's national treasure. She taught me to dance the power of the cobra. As well, in Saintes Maries de la



Mere, France, I was energized by the Dark Goddess, Sara la Kali, who is carried out of her subterranean grotto beneath the church every year, triumphantly restoring Roma belief that she is the daughter of Christ! I tell the story of these powerful women in my newest book, *Dance It Up! A Journey to Find the End of Grief* (Ovunque Siamo Press, 2026). Another strong role model is my friend, Jean Houston (of Sicilian ancestry who recently died in May 2026), and is the founder of the Human Potential Movement. Jean was a renowned global leader in helping others find their power, to believe in oneself, and to find pathways to self-realization through mythology, Eastern religions, and connections to ancient and indigenous cultures.

Perhaps my most unusual example of female empowerment is Lucy Reyes, a folk-Catholic healer in the Philippines who, for 15 years, was nailed to a cross on Good Friday in Bulacan. The nails into her hands and feet drew no blood and she became somewhat of a saint figure. I spent weeks with her in the 1980's and saw her heal her



Susan Caperna Lloyd, *Lucy Reyes on Cross*.

villagers with her hands when I documented her last nailing. She is a powerful matriarch in rituals usually enacted by men and is the subject of my 2nd book, *The Crucifixion of Lucy Reyes: Holy Week Folk Rituals of Sacrifice, Fertility and Power* (Ovunque Siamo Press, 2024). Lucy performed this ritual to renew her power to heal, personifying the sacrifice of Christ who, in the form of the Christ Child, healed her of a life-threatening illness when she was young. Her strength to undergo this ritual and defy tradition impressed me. If I were to become sick, I would go to her myself.



My biggest example of female empowerment is my mother, Gail Caperna, who always did things her own way and taught me what art is and can be, and to think outside the box.

EM: In *Dance It Up! A Journey to Find the End of Grief*, dance plays a pivotal role, starting with the title itself. Could you tell us more about its significance?

SCL: The title comes from a lama's words to me in Darjeeling, India, where I'd traveled to process my sister's tragic death. Prior to this, I'd entered the world of dance in Spain. There I'd studied flamenco dance, fulfilling a promise I'd made to my sister before she died and where we planned to go together. Angela was a dancer, but I was not. But I'd agreed to try. Going alone to Spain in her memory had been cathartic: flamenco, with its fierce rhythms and the singers' anguished cries, was a way to express my anger, grief, and guilt over her death when therapy and constant talking back home had not alleviated my pain. But flamenco dance, as taught to foreigners, was difficult with its prescribed forms and counting – yet a *natural* expression of the marginalized Gitanos' *own* history of anger, sadness and grief. I wanted to find another way to dance my anger out that was free and more organic. Propelled by shocking details discovered after Angela's death, I traveled to India and met the lama who told me I must *Dance It Up!*

This was a different way of looking at dance. He said I must awaken the *kundalini* to express my sorrow, guilt, and anger. It came from the spine. From something deep within. I learned that expressing these emotions was something much like Kali, who I'd seen in Kolkata, was propelled by Shiva's cobra entangling them in dance.

Following the lama's edict, I met the cobra dancer, Gulabo Sapera, in Rajasthan. With her I learned to truly *dance*. To move without rules or prescribed forms. To awaken the kundalini. Just as the cobra uncoils and strikes with immense transformative power,



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he moves his energy *up* – from the spine and through the *chakras*. To dance *as a cobra* gave physical form to my anger. Of striking, but then retreating, and yet to return – the symbol of the ouroboros.



Susan Caperna Lloyd, *Gulabo Sopera*.

EM: You have a remarkable ability to connect cultures and explore new avenues of communication. This is even more evident in *Dance It Up*. Could you tell us more about this aspect of your work?

SCL: I think that connecting anything might have to do with my photography work when, early on, I wondered and worked with ideas of what happened *between* the frames of analog film. What happened in the interim, before I took the next shot? Why did I choose to take another photograph and snap the shutter again? What is the backstory? The connections. The in between story?

Connecting cultures probably also has to do with my curiosity. If I meet someone, I want to know all about their life. My mother was like this. But I was often annoyed with her. In Cuautla, Mexico one time with my mother at a commemorative celebration for the



folk hero Emiliano Zapata, I saw her talking with an elderly woman afterwards. I thought, “Oh no, there she goes again”. It turned out that the woman was Ana Maria Zapata, daughter of Zapata, which led to my making a documentary film, *The Last Zapatista* (1995). Since then, I have become a great ‘talker’ no matter where I am.

As well, and because of heavy reading – another habit from Mother – I could not, say, embark on my film about Zapata before reading about sugar cane. Or find out if he was related to the Aztecs. Or his relationship to other folk heroes like Che Guevara. My motivation is to know as much as I can, and tell a *full* story and that people, events, or cultures don’t exist in vacuums. I have been fortunate to travel a lot and remember Mother’s many trips to see Indian ruins in the U.S. west while bringing us kids along. Then, with my husband, Tom, and throughout our marriage with his addiction to travel like mine, I have met many fascinating people and seen much of the world.

EM: Could you tell us about your most recent projects and what you are currently working on?

SCL: With my younger son in the Foreign Service, I’ve visited him for long periods of time in the last few years and explored both the Balkans and Indonesia. A memoir is now evolving about my experiences in the Balkans, especially centering around Ismail Kadare’s book, *The General of the Dead Army*. This travel brought me back to my Italian roots when I found an Italian WW2 Army helmet among a street seller’s wares in Northern Macedonia. With helmet in hand, and in my memoir, I follow and narrate the quest of the book’s general (based on fact), and my own quest in search of the graves of Italian soldiers killed in Albania during WW2. This saga is an enlightening piece of Italian history which I hadn’t known about. The general could not identify (nor could I) the Italian soldiers’ graves and remains which are mixed in with German or even Greek

soldiers. Many remains were not returned to Italy and still lie somewhere in Albania. It is a story of *home* – or not returning to it – which much of my work has been about.

Other current projects relate to my recent trip to Indonesia to visit our younger son in Jakarta. I documented many indigenous, animist cultures on various islands on the archipelago. The Marapu culture on Sumba has elements of fertility rites with the annual gathering of *nyale* worms which come in from the sea to bring fortune to the rice planting season and has similarities to aspects in pre-Christian Holy Week rites I've documented in *The Crucifixion of Lucy Reyes*. I am fascinated by the Sumba family tombs, sitting right in front of their thatched homes as they strive to keep their deceased close to them.

The animist Toraja culture on Sulawesi stands out regarding their death and funeral traditions. Their customs of delaying funerals until family can join, the sacrifice of buffalo so their souls can guide the dead to Toraja 'heaven' then placing the tombs in rock-cut cliffs so the deceased can be taken out and 'visited' once a year, are intriguing. I plan a follow-up trip to Sumba and Tana Toraja to continue my research. Again, with the Sumbanese and the Torajans, the theme is familiar: a search for the meaning of family and home.

EM: What advice would you give to budding artists and to the younger generation in general?

SCL: I'd tell a budding artist to find a master or mentor to work with. Not a master of only painting, photography, film or other media, but also a master of *ideas*. This could be anyone – someone who can recommend books to read: history, anthropology, religion, literature, poetry, science. Ideally, a master would have knowledge of *many* of the arts



including music, architecture or even dance, and how they are interrelated. For example, in a Color class in school, it was exciting to learn Scriabin's Theory, that specific musical keys were associated with particular colors. I then began hearing music in the colors of my subjects and became aware of sounds which led me to photographic ideas.

No matter the medium, study *light*. Especially natural light, as it reveals subject. Go out and simply look at light. Early morning or late afternoon light creates shadows on subjects which creates form. Study Caravaggio. Or the interplay of light on architect, Frank Gehry's, Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. Edward Weston's black and white photographs of a green pepper. Without light, we have nothing.

Aspiring artists should always question what they are trying to *say*. Beware of praise. Graduate school seminars were good for me in this way – constantly defending why I took a photograph. How did I feel when I took it and what did it *mean*? Was I copying someone else's work? Did I study the subject long enough to *know* it and then achieve the maximum the camera and film allowed? A photographer, or any artist, must thoroughly know the materials they are working with and why they are making art.

I worry about AI and that budding artists will rely on technology to edit, improve, or even create 'art' for them. How could this be called original? If you want to paint and call a painting your own, why would you want a machine to do it for you?

My last advice would be to develop good working habits. Work every day if only for a few devoted hours. Even if you're tired!

EM: Thank you so much, Susan! We look forward to your next artistic ventures!



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Susan Caperna Lloyd, *Brahmin*.

Bio-bibliographical notes

Susan Caperna Lloyd has a B.S. degree in Art Education and English, and a Master of Fine Arts, both from the University of Oregon. She devotes most of her time to writing, research traveling, and producing documentary films. Her work has appeared in many magazines, journals, and international exhibits, with her 30-year collection (photography, film, and writing) recently purchased by the Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Her documentary films have won numerous awards, including Blue Ribbons at the American Film Festival, the National Educational Video Festival, and Best of Festival at the UCLA Vitas Film Festival. Her numerous, cross-cultural documentaries range from *Processione: A Sicilian Easter*, to *Between Two Worlds: A Japanese Pilgrimage*, and *The Last Zapatista*, a study of the Mexican revolutionary hero, Emiliano Zapata. Along with *The Crucifixion of Lucy Reyes: Holy Week Folk Rituals of Sacrifice, Fertility and Power*, a photographic study from Spain to the Philippines, and her memoir about family loss, *Dance It Up! Travels from Spain to India to Find the End of Grief*, she is currently working on a book about Italy's invasion of Albania and Greece during WWII. Susan, a wanderer by nature, splits her time between Oregon, the U.S. East Coast, and many global destinations.

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Elisabetta Marino is Full Professor of English Literature at the University of Rome Tor Vergata. 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 edited/co-edited fifteen collections of essays and a Special Forum of *Journal of Transnational American Studies* (2012). She co-edited two special issues of *De-Genere. Journal of Postcolonial, Literary and Gender Studies* (2022; 2026), and she acted as guest editor for a special issue of *Journal of American Studies of Turkey (JAST)* focused on Italian American material culture (released in 2023). She has translated *Parkwater* by Ellen Wood, for the first time in Italy.

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